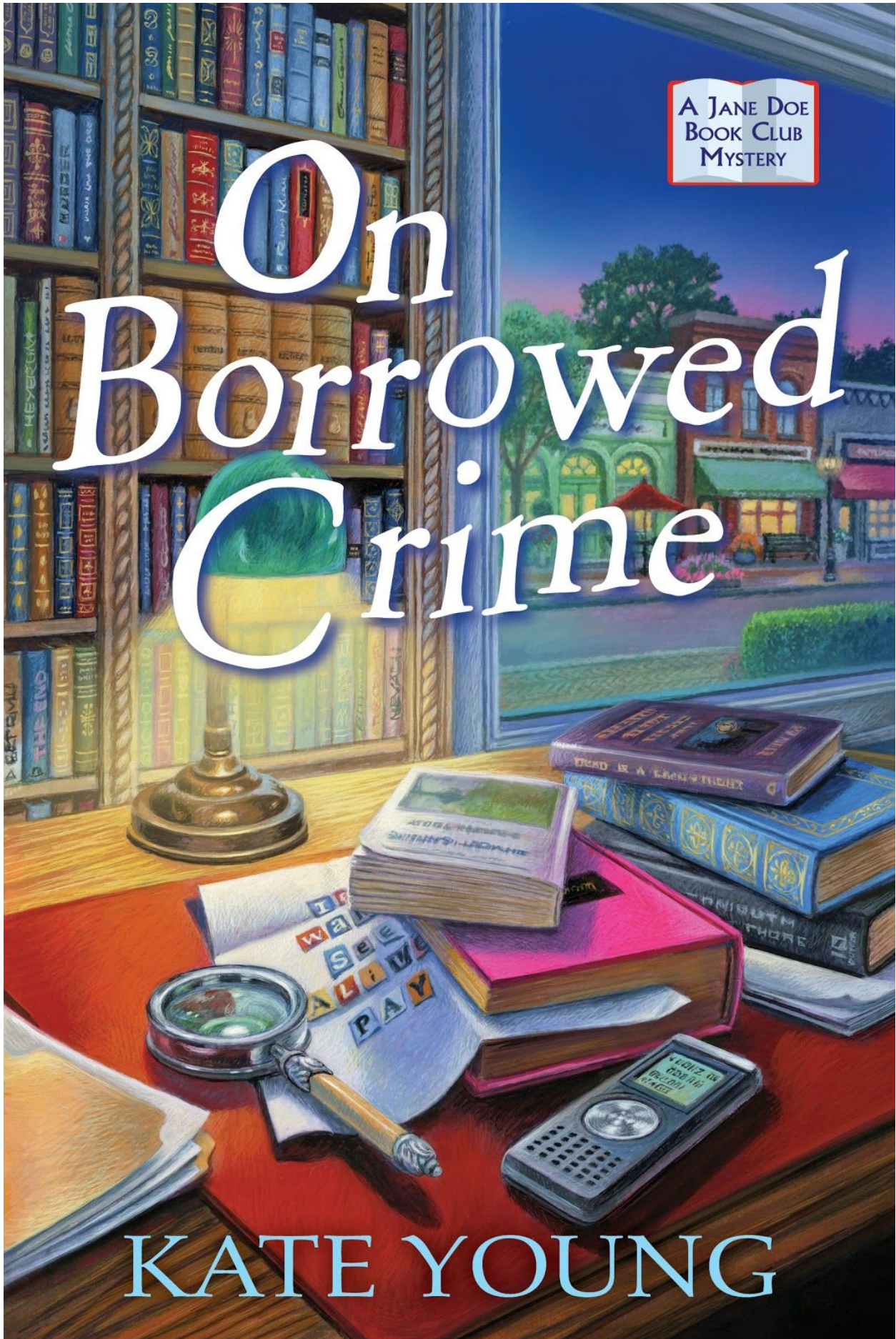


A JANE DOE  
BOOK CLUB  
MYSTERY

# On Borrowed Crime



KATE YOUNG

## CHAPTER 1

The white wrap-around dress would have me in hot water if my mother heard I'd committed the heinous crime of wearing white after Labor Day. In the Moody household, September marked the arrival of fall fashions, and my mother always said here in the deep south, everyone who was anyone heeded that rule. Nevertheless, my uncle Calvin instructed me on the phone last night to wear something professional to work this morning, and it was the only dress left in my closet since my best friend and next-door neighbor had borrowed half my wardrobe for her cruise. There were more important things than adhering to society's whims, like being on time for work.

Stuck three cars behind the train track as the locomotive moved at a speed of poured molasses, I feared I'd be late. Cousins Investigative Services was a new venture for me. My uncle had needed a receptionist/secretary after Harriet Wiseman took maternity leave to have baby number three. I'd leapt at the opportunity. Much to the chagrin of Mother and Daddy, who always envisioned me married and raising a couple of children by now. I liked men. I liked men *a lot*. I just hadn't found one I wanted to keep forever. And if not married, and despite the fact I'd studied psychology, Mother would rather see me behind the makeup counter at Belk or helping out with one of her many charities. She thought working around her brother, who'd been a detective for sixteen years before retiring and opening his private investigation firm, would only

further enhance my fascination with murder and true crime. Mother believed the Jane Does, my mystery book club, to be abhorrent and a complete waste of my time.

Here in Sweet Mountain, forty-five minutes north of Atlanta, old southern families resided. Our tea was sweet, our accents were sweeter, and our ladies were expected to be the same. Murder didn't quite fit in.

The railroad crossing gate lifted, and I thanked my lucky stars. I depressed the accelerator in my late model cherry red Maxima. Bessie shimmied forward a couple of yards then made a little clunking sound, followed by a groan, and hissed to a stop in finale.

"Not now, please." I attempted to start the engine again. The car made a tick tick tick sound and then smoke billowed from under the hood. Those rude folks behind me laid on their horns. After I turned on my flashers, I rolled down my window and waved for them to go around. As if it were necessary, anyone with eyes could see the vehicle wasn't going anywhere. When the lane cleared, I got out, slung my bag over my shoulder, and tiptoed in my sling-back pumps off the tracks and crossed the street to the gas station. My cell buzzed inside my carryall. It was Uncle Calvin.

I blurted without preamble, "I'm so sorry. My car broke down on Old Mill Road. Don't fire me." I wasn't sure why I'd added the last bit, but I'd felt remiss not to.

"Calm down, Lyla. I'm calling to tell you the meeting's been moved to the Lee, Martin, and Harvey law offices. You wouldn't make it to Atlanta with the morning traffic being what it is." I heard his blinker. "It's not a problem, and now I know you're having car trouble, I'll forward the office's calls to your cell."

“Oh.” I walked up under the Fast Trip’s awning and stood beside the door. “Okay then.”

“Do you want me to call roadside assistance for ya?”

The wind whipped around, and I held my dress against my bare legs with my spare hand. “No. That’s okay. This is an important meeting. I’ve got it. Break a leg.”

He chuckled at my comment and disconnected the call. This account would be a real win if we could get them to sign on. My uncle was a utilitarian sort of man. He was plain speaking without an ounce of finesse, which suited his profession. And he was excellent at his job. But I hoped that, with my attention to detail, analytical brain, added sparkle and penchant for charm, I could help land more clients. After all, I firmly believed in taking advantage of what the good Lord gave you. And he gave me an ample portion of the gift of gab, a curious mentality, along with a great head of copper-colored hair and porcelain skin that I took excellent care of. Mother taught me well.

After I phoned Triple A, I went inside to get myself a fountain drink and maybe a doughnut. A doughnut should be out of the question since I’d needed to lose a few pounds before the holidays, where I historically put on anywhere from five to eight, but, after seeing Bessie, my cherry red beauty bite the dust, I needed some therapy. Sugar was my crutch.

With powdered sugar on my fingertips and my large drink, I walked outside to check and see if help had arrived. A car whizzed around the corner and slammed on the brakes a few inches from me. My drink slipped from my fingers and splashed on the hood of the black BMW sedan and splattered all over my dress. An unladylike word left my lips at the sight of my ruined garment. Covered in bright blue splotches, I looked like I’d been in a paint gun war. When I lifted

my gaze to meet the culprit's behind the wheel, ready to give them a piece of my mind, my jaw dropped. In the driver's seat, blubbering her eyes out, sat Carol Timms, a member of the Jane Doe book club. And in the passenger seat I spied an unrecognizable individual with a camo baseball cap pulled down over their eyes. Before I could say a howdy-do and inquire to her state, Carol backed up and sped off from the gas station.

After I thanked the Triple A driver, I hopped out of the front seat of the tow truck and walked up the bricked driveway of Mother and Daddy's grandiose home. I grew up on a street of pre-civil war plantation-style houses. The structures were designed to handle Georgia's hot, humid weather with large, deep front porches that boasted comfortable rocking chairs and whirling ceiling fans. Front porch sittin' fostered a sense of community. Having a glass of iced tea and chatting with a neighbor made a hot humid evening more bearable. But if you asked my daddy, he called the monstrosity a money pit and a heating and cooling nightmare. Daddy liked to complain. Especially when Mother was around to hear him.

Mother came waltzing out of the front door and stood next to one of the white pillars that framed the grand front oak doors. "Lyla Jane Moody! Land sakes alive, what happened to you, child?"

"Bessie broke down. Your house is the closest." I mounted the bricked steps.

Mother's face held both shock and horror at the sight of me. "Are you wearing white?"

I fought an eye roll. Mother wouldn't abide such a gesture, finding it highly unbecoming.

She clucked her tongue as Gran joined us on the front porch.

“My, my, looks like you had quite a mornin’.” Gran was smiling. “Something interesting always happens when my little Lyla is around.” Gran had moved in with us when I was thirteen after my grandfather suffered a heart attack. She’d been a coconspirator in all my endeavors and remained one of my best friends. These days she was slipping a little. Symptomatic of aging, Daddy said.

“Daisy, don’t encourage her.” My mother fiddled with her pearls, a nervous habit of hers.

Gran winked at me. Where Mother always dressed in what most folks referred to as their Sunday best, Gran preferred to be comfortable and casual. Daddy inherited her laid-back personality and charming wit.

“Young lady, you and I need to have a serious conversation.” Mother’s stern face, with an undertone of pity in her eyes, gave me no desire to hear anything she had to say.

My ego had already taken a major blow and hearing how disappointed she was in me wasn’t going to improve my mood.

“Come on inside, sugar, and we’ll get you a change of clothes. I ordered you the new Sue Grafton mystery.”

“*Y Is For Yesterday?*” I gave Gran a little smile as she nodded. I’d been dying to buy a copy and suggest it to the book club.

“I got same day delivery too. You’ve got to love this online shopping.” Gran had managed to figure out how to use her new smart phone Daddy bought her.

“My soul, she doesn’t need to read that sort of novel. You know how impressionable she is. She’ll never stop going to the dead club.” Mother rubbed her index finger between her creased brows.

“The Jane Does,” I corrected Mother, which she didn’t seem to appreciate. She opened her mouth, I assumed to lecture me on my manners, when Gran jumped in.

“Better get this girl out of these wet clothes. And aren’t you going to be late for the hospital fundraising meeting?” Gran shook her head at Mother in a chastising sort of way. It wasn’t that I enjoyed distressing my mother. It was simply that being true to who I was and perusing my interests conflicted with what she found suitable.

“My stars.” Mother glanced at her watch. “Young lady, our discussion will have to wait.”

Gran looped her arm through mine and directed me into the house.

The first floor of my parents’ house had high ceilings, an enormous foyer, a sweeping open stairway, a grand dining room, and a formal living room we never used. The chef’s dream of a kitchen was located at the back of the house, where wonderful meals were made by caterers. Adjacent to the kitchen was the place everyone gathered, the great room. The floor-to-ceiling windows brought in abundant light. Off to the left of the great room Daddy had converted the library into his home office. The second floor held six bedrooms, each with an en suite. The house, furnished in custom designed furniture to mirror something out of *Southern Living Magazine*, pleased my mother.

There wasn't a speck of dust in Mother's house, unlike my townhome. She had a cleaning service come in three times a week. *Cleanliness is next to Godliness* I'd heard all my life.

Gran and I were in my old bedroom, where Mother still kept the clothes she continued to buy for me. Mother loved to shop. I'd given my grandmother the 4-1-1 on the events of my morning while I'd changed into a pair of tan slacks and a baby blue tunic that matched my eyes and slipped my feet into a pair of flat gray Mary Janes.

Gran had an odd expression as she stood behind me. In the reflection in the full-length mirror, her wrinkled lips puckered. I'd inherited my looks from her. Mother's side of the family were dark-haired. Mother's hair had been highlighted to caramel color, and her piercing emerald green eyes stood out on her pale face. In her youth, Mother had won the Miss Georgia Beauty pageant four years in a row.

"What is it?"

Secrets and Gran were an oxymoron. I loved that about her.

"Well," Gran got really close and lowered her tone, "you didn't hear this from me, but that Carol Timms has had several appointments with your daddy. Like several months of appointments. Bless her heart, she's been experiencing some, um, emotional problems." Gran's pleased-as-punch expression to be able to share a piece of juicy gossip almost made me smile.

Unbeknownst to my sweet nosy Gran, seeing a psychiatrist did not fall into gossip territory. We all had issues and these days; folks weren't ashamed to seek help. Progress I'd



say. Still, I wondered how Gran came to be privy to Carol's doctor visits. "Did this come from a reliable source? Not Sally Anne at your beauty parlor?"

"Came straight from the horse's mouth." Gran folded her bony arms across her chest.

"If by the horse you mean Daddy, I don't think so." Daddy never discussed his patients. It wouldn't matter if God himself had scheduled an appointment. Doctor patient confidentiality was serious business.

"James left his office unlocked and I might have had a peek at the file on his desk." Gran had the decency to blush a little.

Daddy would be livid if he found out. No one was allowed to go into his office without permission. He kept an extra set of files on his patients at home in case an emergency arose. While his practice had gone digital years ago, my old-fashioned daddy kept hard copies as well. If Gran found a folder on Carol out of the cabinet, it could only mean she was a new patient or she had more problems than Gran let on.

My phone rang, I held up my finger, and Gran nodded. "Cousins Investigative Services."

"I need to speak to Calvin," a gruff voice demanded.

"He's offsite at the moment. Can I take a message?" I rummaged through my bag for my tablet and stylus.

"Have him call Judge David Timms. My wife is missing."

My eyes went wide as I met my grandmother's curious cool blue gaze.

I put the stylus down on the ruffled-covered mattress of my old canopy bed. “Judge Timms, this is Lyla Moody. I just saw Carol at the Fast Trip about an hour ago.”

“Are you sure? I haven’t seen or heard from my wife in four days. Her purse, cell phone, keys, and car are here, along with all her clothes. She would never go anywhere without her purse.”

I swallowed hard. He was right. There wasn’t a southern woman anywhere that would leave their bag full of essentials behind.

The judge did sound distraught and completely truthful. But I was positive it had been Carol who nearly ran me over.

“Yes, sir. She was driving a black BMW and there was someone else in the car with her. She seemed upset.”

The line went dead silent.

“Judge Timms, are you there?”

Gran kept mouthing, “What’s going on?”

“I’m here. I’m going to need you to tell the police what you saw. I want everyone on this, including your uncle. Someone has abducted my wife.”

## CHAPTER 2

The Jane Does, the members of the Jane Doe Book Club, rotated around each member's home for our monthly meeting. A time or two we met at the local library when our numbers were higher and we had a special guest, usually a mystery author. Once, we hosted a retired special investigator from Atlanta who discussed the ins and outs of investigations in reference to John and Jane Does, a special interest to our group. True crime stories always intrigued the club.

Tonight, Valerie Heinz, a founding member, hosted us at her new craftsman-style house in Love Creek. The latest development in Sweet Mountain offered their residents a whole host of amenities. We were all sitting around in her living room, the night air circulating through the open French doors that led out to her backyard. The group totaled four tonight since Melanie was on vacation and the Lord only knew what was going on with Carol.

"Did David say anything else?" Val was going around refilling wineglasses.

When she made it around to me, I held mine up. "Nothing more than what I told you. He sounded shaken and deeply concerned. I left a message for the officer in charge of the investigation like he asked me to." I took a sip of merlot, allowing the subtle black cherry and plum flavors to dance on my tongue before swallowing. "I also gathered from his phone call that, for some reason, the police weren't doing enough. He wanted to enlist Calvin as well."

“Well, the police must have good reasons for not going all out. Like she obviously isn’t missing,” Patsy raised her manicured index finger as she sat down next to Amelia on the leather reclining sofa, after powdering her nose. She’d given birth to a set of twins three months ago and was constantly telling us how hard it was to lose her baby weight. I thought she looked beautiful. Motherhood suited her.

“Okay,” Patsy clasped her copy of *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie between her hands, “I’m so happy we decided to start adding in classics every other month. Because y’all, wow!”

“Wait a sec, Pats. But who was the guy in the car with Carol?” Amelia took a block of cheese from the tray on the coffee table.

Amelia Klein and her lovely husband were transplants. Born and raised in Maryland, Amelia had been thrilled to find our little group last year after her husband’s job brought them to the metro area. She told us the second she and her husband laid eyes on our sleepy little town it stole their hearts. They loved the historic downtown district, breathtaking mountain scenery, and our award-winning wineries and felt his commute to Atlanta would be worth it. I explained that, in fact, Sweet Mountain had now been deemed part of the heart of the North Georgia wine country. Amelia and I immediately connected, finding commonality in our nonconforming ways. She had tight, curly, silver hair she’d decided to never color, big chocolate brown eyes, and a flawless copper-colored complexion.

"I have no idea. And it might've been a woman." I placed my wineglass on the end table next to me, slipped off my Mary Janes, and rocked back in the recliner. "Y'all should have seen her mascara streaked face." My heart ached every time I thought of her distress.

"Carol has always been prone to dramatics." Val ate a Kalamata olive off a toothpick and placed her book on her lap.

"That's true." Patsy sat forward. "Remember when her stylist moved away? She balled her eyes out for three days. I mean, I understand how important it is to find someone you're comfortable with, but the way she carried on was ridiculous."

"Still." I shook my head. "Now I'm aware her husband hasn't seen her for four days, I feel sort of responsible for not throwing myself on the hood of the car and rescuing her. What if I witnessed her abduction and all I was worried about was my dress?"

"Don't be so hard on yourself." Val leaned over and patted my knee. "She's probably sowing some wild oats or something. It's no secret her marriage isn't the best." Val let out a little sigh. "I love Carol, y'all know I do, but she adores attention of any kind. Like the time we had Melanie's birthday party and she threw a hissy fit due to the lack of vegetarian options."

"Carol's a vegetarian?" Amelia refilled her glass. "She never said anything to me. I had her and the judge over last week, and she ate meatloaf with us without saying a single word."

"She isn't." Val rolled her eyes. "She went on a fad diet hoping to lose fifteen pounds in a week. It lasted three days, if I recall correctly."

"Well, I'm concerned, y'all. It isn't like Carol to run off. And even if she's having an affair, like Val suggests, she wouldn't miss tonight's meeting. She loves our book club," I said.

"I agree with Lyla." Amelia nodded. "And I bet if Melanie were here, she would too."

Melanie would. Amelia was right.

"I'm sure she'll turn up." Patsy shifted in her seat, looking uncomfortable. "Speaking of Melanie, when does she get back?"

"Tonight, I think. She's having a great time. She read our club pick on a white sandy beach. She said it really added to the experience."

"I bet it did." Patsy's head bobbed up and down.

"She said it was a perfect trip with the exception that the airline lost her luggage during a connecting flight."

Everyone appeared horrified. That was a traveler's worst nightmare. I hoped they recovered it because that suitcase contained *my* belongings. Money wasn't flowing for me at the moment, and, with my car in the shop, I couldn't afford new clothes. I hated to ask Mother and Daddy for another loan, I'd already had to raid my old closet.

"I think I saw something about that on Facebook. But, on a positive note, she'll have an excuse to buy a whole new wardrobe." Patsy grinned, and I could tell she really wanted to lighten the mood and move on to our club's pick.

I didn't want to upset my friends further, but something needed to be done. "Back to Carol. I'm unable to shake this bad feeling. She didn't seem, I don't know, right to me."

"Well, I for one, think she's fine." Patsy crossed her legs. "And since Lyla insist on discussing this as if it were a real case, allow me to reference all the cases we've studied where

the person was reported missing only to be discovered they were never really missing in the first place. They simply didn't want to be found."

I let Patsy's reference sink in for a moment. Carol and I were friends, but I supposed that'd only been a recent development, the closeness anyway. Since she joined the Jane Does. If she needed to get away, wouldn't she have felt comfortable confiding in me? I didn't know.

"But remember the docuseries we watched last month. The one where foul play was involved on murder mountain and the police didn't have the manpower or the cooperation of the civilians," Amelia pointed out. "It took a few of the neighbors to speak up for them to get anywhere."

"Yeah, I'm with Amelia. I can't shake the uneasiness about the situation. And if y'all had seen her, you'd understand.

"To be on the safe side, I'll call her and get to the bottom of things." Val twisted her long black hair up in a bun.

Unusual silence filled the space. The tension in the room was palpable. I didn't want to point out, for the second time, Carol had left her phone behind.

"Do y'all want to put a pin in this month's discussion? To wait on Carol," Val offered,

Patsy made a pouty face. "How about we just postpone it till next week. We could still vote on the next read. I'm eager to dig into a new story, even if this one left me with a little bit of a book hangover."

"Sounds good to me." I stretched my neck. Patsy was right about the book hangover. Mysteries didn't get any better than the ones penned from the queen of mystery herself.

Amelia chewed on her bottom lip. "Um, you guys don't think this has something to do with the email Carol sent?"

"What email?" Glances were exchanged around the room.

"You mean, none of you guys have read it yet? I thought it would be part of this meeting's discussion. That Carol herself would lead it. She mentioned to me that she'd be emailing me and asked me to print it for the group. She, um, didn't want the judge to see them."

Everyone began digging through their bags for their phones.

"I've kind of had my hands full with the twins, so I haven't."

Amelia pulled a folder from her bag, and I sat forward. "Now, I'm concerned. At first I thought she didn't want to involve her husband because he made fun of our club and didn't care for her interest in crime." She let out a loud sigh. "In hindsight," Amelia gripped the papers, "she wasn't quite herself. She'd had several glasses of wine, more than usual, and to Val's point regarding their marriage, she and the judge didn't seem to be on the best terms. He kept making snide remarks during dinner."

"Like what?" Patsy scooted closer to Amelia.

"I shouldn't be gossiping." Amelia covered her face with her hands.

"You're not. We're all friends. Carol would tell us herself if she were here." Patsy encouraged with the truth. "And now I feel bad. I want to help her too."

Carol shared everything, even things we would rather she didn't.



Amelia dropped her hands. “Okay, but I’m only confiding in the group because I agree with you, she’d tell you guys herself. I mean, she cc’d all of us on this email.”

Everyone nodded as if to say, go on. I scanned the terse email that read, *I think I know who this Jane Doe is*. There were links to a Facebook page and attachments.

“A lot happened at my house. She was already in a bad mood because the judge scolded her during dinner saying she was a poor representation of what a southern lady ought to be. And he used finger quotes when he said lady.”

We each sucked in a breath.

*Poor Carol.*

“Appalling is what it was, though I think he was joking. I mean, he laughed and all.”

“How on this earth can Carol stand him? I understand he’s accustomed to everyone bowing to his whims in his courtroom, but rudeness like that is inexcusable.” Patsy shook her head with wide eyes. “What else did he say?”

“He peppered in his digs throughout the meal. Called her the mouth of the south and that’d she’d make a whore blush with her language. Things like that. We were so uncomfortable.”

We all nodded sympathetically. Maybe Carol just needed some time. Especially having to deal with that jerk day in and day out.

“David’s all talk. Carol knows that. Not that I’m happy about him defaming her character in such a manner.” Val sipped from her glass, looking irritated. “He thinks he’s a big shot. And

he's a mere small-time court judge in our little ole town. Carol gives it right back. She does have a mouth on her, not to mention she's stubborn when she gets something in her head." Val sounded as if she more than approved of Carol's ability to hold her own.

Carol did get a little loose-lipped when she'd had a few. Still, that gave him no right to berate her in such a fashion. And I had to agree with Val on one point, the man did seem to think too much of himself.

"Oddly, now that I think about it, I might've been more upset about it than she was. Carol rolled her eyes at him but didn't seem all that bothered. I asked her if she was okay later, when we were alone, and she said he was an idiot. Nothing he said mattered to her anymore. But why I'm really worried is what's in this email." She took a breath. "Here, the copies will make it easier to read."

With her dark brows furrowed, she handed out stapled printouts entitled, "Do You Know This Jane Doe?" Everyone sat up straighter after digesting the material.

The article was compelling, describing a woman with long spiraled black hair swept away from her dark face as they made a figurative account of her last day. The writer did a splendid job of humanizing the Jane Doe, whose identity had been stripped away by years of exposure to nature's elements. There were three other similar articles and, by the end, I was both intrigued and shaken.

"All these bodies were located up I-85." I was aghast as I thumbed through the papers.

Amelia nodded. "And there are about thirty Jane Doe cases to date that have gone cold. They call the area that runs along the interstate, mostly near the northern tip of the state, the

dumping grounds. Carol said she recognized something linked to this one.” She pointed to the case that described the woman with spiraled hair.

“We should definitely look into this,” I said. “If Carol knew the Jane, maybe we all do. Or those of us who grew up here.”

“I don’t like this one bit.” Patsy flipped through the pages. Her face paled.

Val’s wide-eyed gaze roamed the room. “It’s one thing when we’re reading a mystery or watching those docuseries about cold cases. It’s a whole other thing when it’s right here in our backyard.”

We all nodded.

“True, but maybe we could help. You know, do some good with what we’ve learned. No matter what’s going on with Carol, she planned on introducing this in tonight’s meeting.” I fiddled with the printouts on my lap. “We can wait on her before really digging in though.”

I continued to scan the pages. “Wow. It makes sense. There are so many rural areas with vegetation off eighty-five. And if no one reports the victims as missing, the bodies could only be found by happenstance.” As I flipped to the last page, I picked up my wineglass. So many cold cases. I wondered if Uncle Calvin would be interested in delving into any of these. But, with the requirement of being pro bono, I highly doubted it.

“I Googled and found an old news broadcast where the investigator in charge of these cast-offs,” Amelia showed us her palms, “their words, not mine, pleaded with the public for help.”

“That’s probably the reason they’ve taken to social media. How better to reach large masses of people? I mean, it’s what I’d do.”

“What is Carol thinking? My God, that’s nuts.” Patsy cast a shocked glance my way. “I’m sorry, but it is. I understand why you would be interested, Lyla. Since you started working for your uncle and all.” She redirected her attention toward Amelia. “You, of all people, can’t seriously be suggesting you agree with Carol and want us to actually investigate these crimes?” Patsy appeared appalled. “Like Val said, it’s one thing having a bit of fun guessing whodunit with these well-known cases and fiction.” She continued to shake her head as if it would shake the notion right out of the room.

“We understand, Patsy. No one will force you to take part in anything you’re uncomfortable with.” Val sounded sympathetic to our friend’s plight.

Amelia sighed and sat back against the overstuffed sofa, her lips thinned to a flat line.

“Does anyone mind if we move on?” Patsy asked sweetly.

We all agreed to take a step back and wait until we found out more. It was highly possible that, with our heads filled with all those murders and mysteries, we might be overreacting.

When no one added more, Val said, “It’s either Patsy or Lyla’s turn to suggest our next read.”

Patsy looked relieved, and I felt bad. The twins kept her up late and her hormones were still in overdrive. It wasn’t fair to stress her out when she came out for a little girl talk and book discussion. Amelia seemed to be on the same page as me when she sat back and put her folder back into her bag.

“You go ahead, Patsy.” I forced a smile.

We voted and *Turn Of The Key* by Ruth Ware became our next read ending our meeting. I drove home in Mother's Cadillac, with plush leather seats that felt like a hug, with a sense of foreboding. Preoccupied, I hadn't minded not suggesting the last book in The Kinsey Millhone series to my club. I hoped Carol would return home. The situation was disconcerting, to say the least. Our club started out with more than a dozen members. Then life got in the way and the group dwindled to half that. The intimate crowd gave us a sense of closeness.

I pulled up to the gated complex, punched in the code, and pulled through, waving at the security guard as I drove by. I swayed to Beethoven's "Für Elise" as I pulled into the small space in front of my house. Each of the town houses had a designated parking space. I cast a glance at Melanie's vacant space.

To my left sat a moving van. The movers were unloading into a neighboring town house. The building cattycornered to Mel's and mine.

I had a smile pasted on my face to greet my new neighbors. Moodys prided ourselves on common politeness. I'd have to get a welcome basket together and take it over. I'd probably wait until Mel got back and we could go over together.

A man with dark brown wavy hair came out of the town house to hold the door open for the movers. My advance slowed as I got closer and recognition hit. He saw me at the exact same time and smiled. *Smiled!*

"Evening, neighbor."

I nearly choked. "Kevin, what on earth are you doing here? You can't possibly be moving in near me."

Before Kevin and I broke up six months ago, he and I been an item for about a year. Most of the time we fought like cats and dogs. But when it was good, it was *mind-blowing*.

“It’s a free country. Besides, Ellen and I needed a fresh start. Her lease was up at her apartment, and she fell in love with it here, with the swimming pools, tennis courts, and gym.”

My gorgeous dark-haired, hour-glassed-shaped, thrice-divorced cousin walked out of the house and snuggled up next to Kevin. “Hi, Lyla. Do you want to come in and see the lovely housewarming gift Val gave us?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Val should have forewarned me about this invasion. I was just with her, for heaven’s sake.

“A little birdie told me you had an embarrassing encounter at the Fast Trip this morning,” Ellen grated on, “and you were wearing white and everything.” She smirked the same annoying *whatcha going to do about it* smirk she had as a child. The one I always lost my temper with and smacked her for. Ellen was one of those people who always managed to push my buttons and draw out the rebellious child, who I believed laid dormant within each of us.

“I have no idea what you’re referring to.” My face blistered. “We...Welcome to the community.” Before I did something to disparage my character, I walked up the driveway, keeping my stroll even and confident as I moved onto my slabbed front stoop.

“Why thank you, cuz. Stop by anytime,” Ellen called across the parking lot.

There wasn’t anything to obstruct their view of me, and I wouldn’t make a scene. A piece of luggage leaned against my front door as I rammed the key into the lock and twisted. The airline must have delivered Mel’s bag to my house by mistake. I grabbed the handle and gave it

a tug, shocked with the weight of the thing. It took effort to roll the bag inside, and I closed the door on my humiliation.

*How could they do this to me?*

Kevin had an apartment. They could have lived there. Why move by me? And Mother must know about this. The devil's spawn was her sister's child, after all. Since, like myself, Ellen had been an only child, except her mother spoiled her rotten. Mine insisted I apologize for everything under the sun. Aunt Elizabeth believed her child could do no wrong. No wonder Ellen grew into a monstrous creature.

Well, I certainly wasn't moving. My fifteen-hundred-square-foot two-story cookie-cutter white-washed brick town house had an open floorplan, a living room, a kitchen, and a dining room, with a powder room on the first floor and two bedrooms and a full bath on the second floor. It wasn't my dream home or anything, but the house represented my independence. I'd made it my own with tasteful pieces I'd picked up here and there. My favorite acquisition stood next to the flat screen. The antique bookshelf displayed all my irreplaceable beauties. Just seeing the full mahogany shelves with true crime novels, mysteries, and thrillers usually brought me joy. Sadly, it didn't have the same effect tonight. After I placed the *Y is for Yesterday* on the shelf, organized in alphabetical order, I moved into the living room and slunk down into my cream-tufted group sofa. I pulled my cell phone out of my bag and scrolled through my favorites until the appropriate icon appeared.

"Lyla Jane." Mother always answered my calls that way.

"Mother. Guess who I ran into?"

“Ellen and Kevin.”

*She did know!* “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Lyla, my ears.” I could envision Mother massaging her ear as if I’d ruptured her eardrum.

I rubbed my forehead. “Sorry.” I lowered my tone. “But you can’t even imagine how blindsided I was when I came home tonight. They were unloading a moving van in the building near mine.”

“I made an attempt to discuss it with you this morning.” So that’s what she’d wanted to tell me. “However, I had no idea they’d be moving in that close to you. That is uncouth.” Mother started whispering something to Daddy. “Your father says they called him from the mechanic shop and the value of your car isn’t worth investing in the repairs.”

I’d specifically told them at our family mechanic shop to stop calling Daddy when I brought Bessie in.

“He’ll drive you over to the Chevrolet dealership to pick out a new one next week.”

Daddy only bought American-made cars and would insist I do the same.

“Tell him I appreciate it, but I can manage.” I loved my daddy to bits and knew he would give me the moon without a blink. But I needed to be my own person and stand on my own two feet.

“How are you going to manage on what Calvin pays you? You’ll never be able to make payments on anything decent.” Mother meant well.



“I can manage. And please don’t start in on my working for Uncle Calvin again. You’ve known for ages I’d work in the field in some capacity.”

“I’d hoped it was a phase.” Mother sighed.

“Well it isn’t. I enjoy it and I’m good at it. If I could just borrow your car for a few more days, that’d be great.” I got up and walked to the refrigerator, opening the door. There was half a gallon of skim milk, an old Chinese takeout container, some leftovers I’d brought home from Mother’s last week, and a couple containers of Greek yogurt. Something had most definitely spoiled. I retrieved a wild berry fruit on the bottom and checked the date. I had two days.

“I’m not going to harp.” Tonight, she meant. “You could do something more with your life is all I’m saying. And if living near your cousin and ex is too much, you can always come home. Go back to school and find another path. You might even meet a nice young man while you’re at it.” There it was. Mother always wanted me to move back home until I found a husband.

“I’m thirty-one. I can’t live at home. I love y’all, but I need my independence.” I stirred the yogurt.

Mother, Daddy, and Gran would be having coffee cake or pastry in the great room by now. Well, Mother wouldn’t touch hers, but Daddy and Gran would be enjoying theirs immensely. I frowned and glanced at my watery fat-free concoction. It was worth the sacrifice, but I’d surely be stopping off at Hugs with Mugs, my favorite coffee shop to purchase a yeasty sugar-covered treat asap. Everyone needed a splurge day. Mother’s stocked pantry was one of the things I missed most about living at home. I sure could use a hunk of chocolate cake right about now.

Mother sighed again. "I'm proud of your strong will and determination, honey. I just worry about you."

"No need to worry. I'm fine," I said to convince myself as much as her.

"Hold on a second." Another huff. "Your grandmother would like to speak to you. Where your persistence comes from isn't a mystery. I'll speak to you later, darlin'."

Gran ranted for a solid twenty minutes on the audacity of Ellen and her disgusting behavior. I could always count on Gran to be on my side, no matter what. Once we put the world to rights, I let her go with a promise I'd keep her apprised on what I found out about Carol. She'd heard from one of Carol's in-laws, a great-aunt or something, while at the senior center, that Carol had been spotted coming out of that cheap motel on the outskirts of town and driving a new car.

### CHAPTER 3

Morning brought cloudy skies, rumbling thunder, and Melanie Smart. She woke me up pounding on my front door at an ungodly hour. I tied my robe and swung open the door to see my best friend sunburned to the color of a lobster. Her blond hair was pulled into a bun on the top of her head and she wore a pink floral shirt with a giant teddy bear on it.

I met her bloodshot chocolate brown gaze. “Wow.”

She rushed past me and tossed her duffle bag onto the floor in front of the kitchen bar. “Don’t say a word. I’d hug you, but I stink, and I’ve had the worst night. My plane had mechanical difficulties. We were stuck in Newark for four hours. When we were finally called to board, I sat next to a woman with a screaming child with an ear infection, who threw up all over me and inside my Chanel bag.”

Both my hands went to my mouth.

“I know, it’s the only good thing I got out of my marriage. I could have cried.” She shook her head, despair written all over her face. “Then I had to change in the tiny airplane bathroom into the only thing I had in my carryon. This was meant to be a joke present for you.” She pulled at the hem of the ghastly floral shirt tied in little knots.

She threw herself down on my sofa. “Do you have my spare key? I don’t want to wade through vomit to find mine.”

“You poor thing,” I fussed. “Your hair looks damp. Is it raining?”

Her hand went to her hair. “Oh, yeah, um, a little.”

“Maybe we can clean your bag.”

She pointed to the once-gorgeous little bag covered in dried red and yellow chunks.

“I’m so sorry,” I breathed.

Melanie hung her head.

“I’ll go get your key. You want me to brew some coffee? I’d offer you breakfast, except I have nothing in the house.”

She waved off my offer, and I went upstairs to retrieve her spare key. When I came back down, she had dozed off. I wasn’t sure whether to wake her or not. The keys rattled and she startled awake with a snort.

“Sorry. Here you go.”

She yawned and took the keys from me. “Thanks. Don’t worry about waking me. I’ve got to get back on my work schedule anyway. I have to be back at the shop tomorrow.”

Melanie owned a specialty cookie store called Smart Cookie. She and her cousin opened it five years ago, and it had done very well. Everyone who worked there was either a Smart or related to a Smart. It was a real family business.

“Did I see Kevin’s car outside parked across from your mom’s car?”

I nodded. “I’m borrowing Mother’s car because mine bit the dust. For good this time.”

“Poor Bessie. She was a good car.”

I nodded, and we both gave her a moment of silence.

“And Kevin moved in practically next door to us.”

She bolted upright. “What?”

I ran my fingers through my tangled hair. “He and *Ellen* moved in last night.”

“Ellen, as in your cousin, the wicked witch of the west, Ellen?”

I started for the Keurig. “The same. I still don’t know how I’m going to react to this. It isn’t that I want Kevin back or anything. I just don’t want him with *her*. Or living so close to *me*.”

“Of course not.” After her divorce to the world’s biggest poser, Melanie prided herself on being able to spot a loser a mile away. “He has to be doing this to get your attention.” She joined me in the kitchen. My news seemed to energize her. “Ellen doesn’t hold a candle to you, and his desire to throw the relationship in your face is proof he isn’t over you. Living in a small town it’s hard enough to avoid exes, but this, well, this just takes the cake.”

“There’s a country song in there somewhere.” I closed the lid on the pod and opened the refrigerator to retrieve the almond milk creamer.

“What’s that smell? It isn’t me, is it?” Horrified, Melanie began sniffing herself.

“No. I need to clean the refrigerator out. Some leftovers are way past their prime.” I slid a mug in front of her and repeated the process for myself.

“Other than Kevin and Ellen lowering the standard of our community, what’s been going on? How did the club meeting go last night? Did y’all talk about the email Carol sent? That was some creepy stuff.” She fingered the printouts of the dumping grounds Amelia gave me and the map I’d printed out after I’d hung up with Gran last night. Dismayed, I’d needed something to take my mind off Kevin. It’d done the trick. I’d highlighted the interstate where the bodies had been discovered, and I wondered how many others had yet to be found.

We sipped our coffees and I filled her in on everything. Like myself, Melanie was both intrigued and uneasy.

“Do you think Calvin can help with these?” Melanie finished off her coffee.

My shoulders rose and fell. “His time needs to be invested on revenue-generating cases. I plan to ask, but I’m not holding out much hope.”

“We could do it. You have access to everything you need.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, Mel. He’s funny about his encrypted software.”

“Doesn’t hurt to ask.”

We moved on and discussed Carol at length, and Melanie agreed with Patsy that our friend was probably after attention. A half hour passed like a blink. It always did when Mel and I were together, and I needed to get ready for work.

“Want to go have Mexican food this evening? I’m dying for a margarita and chimichanga with extra guacamole.” Melanie hopped off the bar stool. “And don’t even say a word about calories. I’m declaring today an all-out splurge day. We both deserve it.”

“Sounds good.” I rinsed our mugs and put them in the dishwasher.

“That doesn’t smell like spoiled food to me.” Melanie picked up her duffle bag and paused close to the door. “It’s coming from this suitcase.”

“Really? Maybe something spilled on it in transit from the airport.”

Melanie glanced over at me. “I’m lost.”

“This is your luggage, isn’t it?” I pointed to the large navy soft-sided spinner suitcase. “They delivered it to my house by mistake.”

She shook her head. “It looks like mine. But older. I bet the stupid airline sent the wrong bag and, by the smell of it, the owners smuggled in some rancid cheese or something.”

Melanie leaned forward and lifted the tag on the top of the bag, pinching her nose. How in the world had I not realized this bag reeked last night? She dropped the

tag as if burned. "It says Carol Timms!" She bumped the bag as she leapt backward, and the suitcase toppled over with a loud thump. Two fingers popped out where the zipper hadn't been closed tight.

"Oh my God!" I fell back into a squeaking Melanie.

Melanie went pale as a ghost. Her eyes grew wide, and one of her mental patient giggles escaped her lips. "Call someone!"

"What if the person is alive? What if it's Carol?" The room began to spin a little, and I fought to gain my balance. "We have to help her."

With trembling fingers, I stooped down and unzipped the bag, hoping and praying that whoever was inside was still alive, knowing it wasn't possible. The smell of what could only be described as death overwhelmed me, and I covered my face with my arm. Never in a million years would I forget the scent or the way the woman lay crumpled inside. Rigor mortis froze her in a position no living person could manage. Carol Timms was undeniably dead.

Melanie giggled again then fainted, falling forward into me.

I rolled Mel off me and scrambled away from the body. Somehow, I managed to keep my thoughts coherent enough to locate my phone and dial 911. I hardly recognized my voice as I pleaded for the operator to send help. And I vaguely remembered calling Uncle Calvin after Mel came to.



Law enforcement in Sweet Mountain wasn't a large force, and I was familiar with most of them. Even more familiar with the chief of police who hadn't shown up. Men in blue and medical personnel filled my living spaces as Melanie and I sat at the dining room table, trying not to glance back at the covered body on the floor. Mel and I had already given our statements.

"I can't believe this," Melanie whispered. "I'm sorry I passed out. I've never seen anything like that before. I'm usually so good in a crisis. You know, the solid one."

I reached over and hugged her. "Of course you are." She wasn't, but I let her have her fantasies. "It's like a nightmare. It still hasn't sunk in."

"I keep seeing her fingers sticking out..." She let out one of her disconcerting high-pitched giggles then slapped both hands over her mouth.

Officer Taylor narrowed his eyes in our direction.

"She isn't being disrespectful. She giggles when she's frightened." I'd hardly spoken to the man since our school days, and I didn't want him to get the wrong idea about my friend.

"I think I recall something about your nervous laugh from high school." Officer Taylor's gaze zeroed in on Mel, and she nodded.

"It's an affliction really." Mel cleared her throat.

I patted her shoulder, and Taylor's attention seemed to linger on her face.

After the body had been taken away, Melanie gave her account and was allowed to go to her apartment and shower and change. Calvin, Officer Taylor, and yours truly were left at my dining room table. Calvin sat back with his arms folded across his chest. His weathered face showed no emotion, but his green eyes were intense, full of warning.

The officer began questioning me about earlier, when Carol had been alive. I couldn't stop the tears as I gave the account in detail.

The heavysset man jotted everything down on his little pad. He scratched the top of his thinning round head with the back of the pen. "So, you didn't actually speak to Mrs. Timms?"

"No, sir. I didn't get a chance. She peeled out of the parking lot." I wiped my cheeks. "It was her, though. No doubt about it." I crossed my legs and laced my fingers together over my knee to keep my leg from shaking.

"Other than the camo hat, did the other person have any distinguishing marks? Hair peeking out from under the cap? Small or large person? Man or woman?"

I shook my head. "I think they were slumped down a little. Might have been tall trying to appear short. That's clearly speculation, of course. I didn't see any hair, but I was covered in cold blue raspberry slushy and didn't pay all that much attention until they were driving away. I couldn't see their face—" Suddenly, I recalled the person

adjusting the cap lower. I uncrossed my leg and scooted to the edge of my seat, placing my hands on the table. "They were light skinned. I remember their hand pulling the bill of the ballcap down. The fingers were thin and white-ish. Now that I think about it," I bit the inside of my cheek as I considered, "they were unnaturally white, like they were wearing gloves."

"Where did you go after that?"

A little taken off guard by the question, I stuttered. "I...I called a tow truck and they dropped me off at my mother's house." I shouldn't have been nervous. I'd studied enough homicide cases to know in the beginning everyone was a suspect. Especially the one who found the body. The authorities wouldn't be doing their job properly if they didn't investigate everyone.

"And then you spoke to Judge Timms?" The officer wiped his forehead. He had the look of a man sweating out a night of heavy drinking.

"Yes. Calvin had a meeting offsite, so the calls were forwarded to my cell. He expressed an interest in hiring us to locate his wife. He had apprehensions regarding the police taking the matter seriously. That's when I told him about seeing Carol and he asked me to report it to the police. I left a message with someone at the station."

"Why would you accept delivery of an unknown piece of luggage?" The officer sounded suspicious.

“Well, first of all, I was startled by my ex-boyfriend moving in practically next door to me. I’ll admit I wasn’t in my normal headspace. And it wasn’t as if a delivery man handed it over. It was waiting on my front stoop. Melanie had told me her luggage had been lost by the airline. Naturally, I assumed they’d gotten her address mixed up with mine. It happens all the time. The address mix-up, I mean. I’m six one six and she’s six one eight. She gets my packages, and I get hers.”

“I see.” He scribbled a few things down. “But you didn’t open it last night? Didn’t notice the odor?”

I fiddled with my hands under the table. Uncle Calvin reached under and gave my hand a quick reassuring squeeze. “I’m ashamed to admit I don’t always clean out my refrigerator in a timely manner. I figured something had spoiled. I planned to take care of it after work today. Then you know the rest. Melanie came in and we discovered Ca...” I couldn’t finish. Poor Carol. Who could do such a horrible thing to her? Why? And what was even a more terrifying question, why would they deliver her to me?

He got up and retrieved a bag marked evidence and placed it on the table in front of me. Inside were the sheets Carol had printed out and the map I’d marked last night. He didn’t say anything as he walked over to my bookshelf and took notice of the titles I stocked. Calvin gave me a pointed glare that told me to keep my mouth shut until a

question was asked. I obeyed and sat quiet as a mouse until the officer rejoined us at the table.

“Can you explain why you have these maps and images of skeletal remains?”

“I belong to a club called the Jane Doe Book Club. We read murder mysteries and watch films about them while trying to discover the culprit before the book or movie ends. We read both fiction and true crime novels. Carol emailed the members with these docs.”

“Melanie belong to the club as well?”

I nodded.

“An odd fascination with crime and death for such a pretty young woman like Miss Smart.” His eyes narrowed. “And for you.”

“Is there a question in there somewhere, Taylor?” Calvin asked in his laid-back sort of way that said, I don’t need to raise my voice to mean business.

“Cousins, I’ve allowed you to remain here out of professional courtesy. You interject again, and my courtesy won’t remain.”

“If your questions don’t end soon, I’ll have a lawyer here and your courtesy won’t be required.” The two men faced off in a silent staring contest.

Several long seconds passed.

Officer Taylor broke eye contact first. “You said Melanie Smart’s luggage went missing.”

I nodded.

“This her bag?”

“She told you it wasn’t. She has one like it but it’s newer.”

“Uh huh. I’m going to need contact information for everyone in your club.”

I looked over at Calvin never feeling more thankful for him in my life. His guidance was invaluable. He nodded and I pulled up my contacts list on my phone, jotted down the info on the officer’s pad and slid it back over to him.

“Do you have somewhere else you can stay?”

I nodded.

“I’ll need the address of where you’ll be and the keys to your town house.”

“Okay.” I’d taken a firm stand on not moving. Now, after seeing poor Carol deceased and in my personal space, Mother was going to get her wish.

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