

COPYCAT KILLING

A MAGICAL CATS MYSTERY

SOFIE KELLY



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

**Praise for
the Magical Cat Mysteries**

Sleight of Paw

“This series is a winner.”

—Gumsh

“If you are a fan of mysteries and cats, you need to be reading this series now!”

—Cozy Mystery Book Review

“Kelly’s appealing cozy features likable, relatable characters set in an amiable location. The author continues to build on the promise of her debut novel, carefully developing her characters and their relationships.”

—*Romantic Tim*

Curiosity Thrilled the Cat

“A great cozy that will quickly have you anxiously waiting for the next release so you can spend more time with the people of Mayville Heights.”

—Mysteries and My Musings Blo

“If you love mystery and magic, this is the book for you!”

—Debbie’s Book B

“This start of a new series offers an engaging cast of human characters and two appealing, magically inclined felines. Kathleen is a likable, believable heroine and the magical cats are amusing.”

—*Romantic Tim*

Also by Sofie Kelly

Curiosity Thrilled the Cat
Sleight of Paw

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

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I'd never heard a cat laugh before—I didn't think they could—but that's what Owen was clearly doing. He was behind the big chair in the living room, laughing. It sounded a little like hacking up a fur ball if you could somehow add merriment to the sound.

I leaned over the back of the chair. "Okay, cut it out," I said. "You're being mean."

He looked up at me and it seemed as though the expression in his golden eyes was a mix of faux-innocence and mirth. "It's not funny," I hissed.

Okay, so it was kind of funny. Owen's brother, Hercules, was sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor, wearing boots. Specifically, black-and-white boots to match his black-and-white fur, in a kitty paw print design with a fleece lining and antislip sole. They were a gift from my friend, Maggie.

"Stick a paw in it," I said to Owen. "You're not helping."

I went back into the kitchen. Hercules gave me a look that was part acute embarrassment and part annoyance.

"They are kind of cute," I said. "You have to admit it was a very nice gesture on Maggie's part." That got me a glare that was all venom.

"I'll take them off." I crouched down in front of him. He held up one booted paw and I undid the strap. "You're just not a clothes person," I told him. "You're more of an *au naturel* cat."

I heard a noise behind me in the doorway. "And Owen is very sorry he laughed at you. Aren't you, Owen?" I added a little extra emphasis to the last words. After a moment's silence there was a soft "meow" from the other side of the room.

I took the second boot off and Hercules shook one paw and then the other. I stroked the fur on the top of his head. "Maggie was just trying to help," I said. "She knows you don't like getting your feet wet."

Hercules was a total wuss about wet feet. He didn't like going out in the rain. He didn't like going out in the snow. He didn't like walking across the grass in heavy dew. Maggie had seen the cat boots online and ordered them. I didn't know how I was going to explain to her that boots just weren't his thing.

I stood up, went over to the cupboard to get a handful of kitty crackers and made a little pile on the floor in front of Herc. "Here," I said. "These'll help." Then I scooped up Owen. I could tell from the way his tail was twitching that he'd been thinking of swiping a cracker.

"Leave your brother alone," I warned, carrying him upstairs with me. "Or I'll put those boots on you and I'll tell Maggie you like them."

He made grumbly noises in his throat. I set him on the floor and he disappeared into my closet to sulk. I pulled on an extra pair of heavy socks, brushed my hair back into a low ponytail and stuffed my wallet in my pocket.

Hercules had eaten the crackers and was carefully grooming his front paws. "I'm going to meet Maggie," I told him, pulling my sweatshirt over my head. "I'll figure out something to tell her."

I locked the kitchen door behind me and walked around the side of the house to the truck. My truck. Sometimes I still got the urge to clap my hands and squeal when I saw it. It had started out as a loaner from Harry Taylor, Senior, and when I'd managed to retrieve some papers about Harry's daughter's adoption, he'd insisted on giving me the truck.

I'd moved to Mayville Heights about a year ago to become head librarian and to oversee the renovations to the library building. Now we were just a few months away from celebrating the library's centennial. When I moved, I'd sold my car. I'd sold just about everything. Coming to the town was a new beginning for me, a chance to take a break from my flamboyant family, and to regroup because Andrew—handsome, charming Andrew—the man I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with, had gotten drunk after we'd had a fight and ended up married to a waitress from a fifties diner.

Mayville was small enough that I could walk everywhere I wanted to go. But it was nice not to have to carry two bags of groceries up the hill. And with all the rain we'd had in the past week, and all the flooding, I never would have been able to get to the library—or a lot of other places—without the old truck.

The morning sky was dull, and the air was damp. We'd had a week of off and on rain—mostly on—and the downtown was at serious risk of major flooding. The retaining wall between Old Main Street and the river was strong, but it had been reinforced with sandbags just in case. We'd spent hours two nights ago moving those bags into place along a human chain of volunteers.

This was the second day the library was closed. The building was on higher ground, a rise where the street turned, and the pump Oren Kenyon had installed in the basement was handling what little water had come in, but both the parking lot and the street were flooded.

Maggie was waiting for me on the sidewalk in front of the artists' co-op building. The old stone basement had several feet of water in it, and we'd spent most of the previous day moving things from the first floor store into the second floor tai chi studio, in case the water got any higher. There were still a couple of her large collage panels that needed to be carried upstairs.

"Hi," I said. "How late did you stay here last night?" There were dark circles under her green eyes.

"Not that late," she said, as she unlocked the front door.

I followed her inside. Mags and I had met at her tai chi class and bonded over our love of the cheesy reality show, *Gotta Dance*. She had the tall, lean build of a runner or a dancer, but she was an artist, a tai chi instructor, and she ran the co-op store.

"Why do you have two paper clips in your hair?" I asked.

Maggie put a hand up to her head. "That's what I did with them," she said, pulling the two clips out of her short, blond curls. "I was doing some paperwork over at the studio."

The two collage panels were up on a table, carefully wrapped and padded. We carried them up the steps without any problems.

I was about to suggest we walk over to Eric's Place for coffee and one of his blueberry muffins when we heard someone banging on the front door.

"Kathleen, please tell me that isn't who I think it is," Maggie said. Before I could ask whom she meant, she was on her way downstairs.

Jaeger Merrill was outside, his back to the door. Maggie let out a soft sigh and went to unlock it. He turned at the sound.

"Good morning," she said.

Jaeger stepped inside. "The window in my studio is leaking," he said. "The side of the cabinet where I keep my tools was damp. Some of those things can't be replaced easily, Maggie." There were two deep frown lines between his eyebrows.

Jaeger was a mask-maker. He could turn what other people saw as junk into art. I'd seen him at the re-purpose store out by the highway, and a few days ago he'd been scrounging in a dumpster that was in the front yard of a house being renovated halfway down the hill from my little house. Jaeger sold both his masks and some of the elaborate preliminary sketches he made for them in the store.

"Ruby told me," Maggie said. "Someone's coming to take a look at it this morning."

“I wanted to get some work done and instead I had to waste a lot of time sticking my stuff in boxes. Again.” He dragged his fingers back through his blond hair. A couple of weeks ago he’d cut off a good six inches. It made him look more serious, less bohemian. “The building needs a manager.”

“River Arts does have a manager,” I said. “The town owns the building.”

“Too much bureaucracy and too little money,” Jaeger said derisively. “The center should have a corporate sponsor. So should the store.”

Maggie placed a loosely closed fist against her breastbone and took a slow, deep breath. I knew that was her way of staying calm and in control. “The artists own and run the store,” she said. “So they can make the decisions.”

He gave his head a slight shake. “Like I said before, what the hell does the average artist know about running a business?”

Maggie was the current president of the co-op board. I thought about how hard she’d worked to promote the artwork and the artists at the shop in just the year I’d known her.

“I’m sorry about the leak,” she said. “There isn’t anything anyone can do about all the rain. Everyone is frustrated and tired, Jaeger.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “This is a ridiculous way to run a business,” he started.

“The weather and how we run the co-op are two different things,” Maggie said. Her tone hadn’t changed at all but there was something just a little intimidating about the way she stood there so perfectly straight and still. “If you have problems with River Arts, go to the town office, call public works, call the mayor. Save everything else for the meeting.”

She tipped her head to the side and looked at him. If it had been an old Western, this would have been the point where the audience did a collective “Ohhh.” Maggie could outstare anyone, even my Owen and Hercules, who were masters of the unblinking glare.

Jaeger’s mouth opened and closed. He shook his head. “This is stupid,” he muttered. He pushed past us and headed upstairs.

“What was that?” I asked once he was out of sight.

Maggie gave me a wry smile. “Mostly Jaeger being Jaeger. You know he’s been pushing for the co-op to find a patron almost since he first got here?”

I nodded.

“With the flooding and having to move everything in the store, he’s just gotten worse. There are days I regret welcoming him into the co-op and helping him get that part-time job at Eric’s.” She let out a breath, put one hand on the back of her head and stretched. Then she looked at me. “I should check the basement.”

“Okay,” I said. I followed her through the empty store to the back storage room. She flipped the light switch and unlocked the door. Three steps from the top of the basement stairs she stopped, sucking in a sharp breath.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Is he dead?” Maggie asked in a tight voice.

I leaned around her to get a better look at the body. “Yeah, he’s dead.”

“Are you sure?”

I moved past her on the steps so I could see better. The corpse of a large, gray rodent was floating on its back, near the stair railing, in the four feet of muddy, smelly water that filled the basement at the moment. “He’s not doing the backstroke, Maggie,” I said. “He’s dead.”

She shivered and pulled a hand back over her hair. “I’m not touching him.”

“I’ll get it,” I said. It wouldn’t be the oddest thing I’d ever done in the name of friendship. I grabbed the yellow plastic snow shovel that was hanging on a nail to the right of the cellar door and went down a couple more steps so I could scoop up the dead rat. Behind me I heard Maggie make a faint squeaky

noise in her throat, probably afraid that it had just been floating, eyes closed in the filthy water, like some rodent spa-goer, and was now going to roll over and run up the steps.

It didn't.

I tightened up on the shovel handle and turned, swinging it in front of me. "I'm coming up," I warned. Maggie took a step backward. I grabbed the railing and something sliced into my thumb. "Ow!" I yelled, yanking my hand back. There was blood welling from a gash on the fleshy pad of my thumb.

The end of the shovel dipped like a teeter-totter, the plastic blade banging hard on the wooden step. The rat corpse somersaulted into the air like a high diver coming off a tower. I swiped my bleeding hand on the leg of my jeans and lunged with the shovel, but the rat had gotten a surprising amount of height and distance. It arced through the air and landed with a soggy splat on Maggie's foot.

She shrieked and jerked backward, banging into the door frame.

I scrambled up the stairs. "I got it. I got it," I said. "It's okay." I scooped up the dead rodent and squeezed past Mags, keeping the shovel low to the ground.

Out in the hallway I looked around. Okay, so what was I going to do? I couldn't exactly drop the rat in the metal garbage can in the corner.

Holding the shovel out in front of me, I cut through the empty store, opened the street door, and tossed the body of the rat out toward the street. It didn't do any elegant somersaults this time. It hit the sidewalk with the same wet splat as when it had landed on Maggie's foot. Except this time the rat rolled over, shook itself and scurried away. I said a word well-mannered librarians didn't normally use, and then realized that Ruby Blackthorne was standing by the streetlight. The rat had gone whizzing right by her head.

Crap on toast! "Ruby, I'm sorry," I said, holding the door for her as she came across the sidewalk.

She looked at me, still hanging on to the shovel. "Inventing a new sport?" she asked. "Because I don't think it's going to replace discus in the Olympics. And I'm pretty sure you just violated at least a couple of cruelty to animal laws."

"It was floating in the basement." I gestured behind me.

"And that was your version of rat CPR?"

I wasn't sure if she was joking or serious. Then I noticed just a hint of a smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. She was growing her usually spiked short hair and it stuck out from the sides of her head in two tiny pigtails, one pink and one turquoise, above her multipierced ears.

"I really thought it was dead," I said. "It was on its back in the water. It didn't move." I went to swipe my hand across my sweatshirt, which is when I realized my thumb was still bleeding.

"Hey, are you okay?" Ruby asked. "It didn't bite you, did it?"

I shook my head and felt in the pocket of my hoodie for a Kleenex. "No. I did that on the railing."

Maggie came out through the store then, holding a length of old pipe like a club, scanning the space as though the rat might come walking by. It didn't seem like a good plan to tell her it was possible it could.

"It's okay, Mags," I said. "It's gone." That much was true. "I put it outside." Also true.

She looked around again, and then tucked the piece of pipe between her knees.

I shot Ruby a warning look, hoping she remembered how Maggie felt about small, furry things.

"Is Jaeger still here?" Maggie asked, glancing at the stairs.

"I don't know," I said.

"I just saw him putting boxes in his car," Ruby offered. She rolled her eyes at Maggie. "So what was it this time? The we-need-a-corporate-sponsor speech? Or the we-need-to-expand-our-horizons rant?"

"The first one," Maggie said. "Plus he's upset because of that leaking window. He said the cabinet

where he keeps his tools got wet.”

“That’s funny,” Ruby said, “because that cabinet where he keeps his fancy Swedish power tools is across the room from the windows, by the door.”

Maggie pulled one hand back over her neck and grabbed the pipe again with the other. Then she noticed my thumb. “Did you do that on the railing?” She caught my wrist. “I think that needs stitches.”

“I don’t need stitches,” I said. “It isn’t even bleeding anymore. All I need is a Band-Aid.”

Maggie shook her head and mock-glared at me. “C’mon upstairs. I’ll fix it.”

Ruby and I followed her up the steps. Maggie knew I hated all things medical, especially hospitals. It went back to when I was a kid. Blame it on a weak stomach, a dark examining room, an artificial light and way too many cheese curls.

“What exactly is this corporate sponsor idea Jaeger has?” I asked Ruby, while Maggie cleaned my cut.

Ruby made a face. “He thinks we should find some big business to subsidize the co-op, kind of like a patron of the arts.” Ruby painted huge abstracts and also taught art. She looked at Maggie. “We still have the co-op meeting tomorrow, don’t we?”

Maggie nodded. “Uh huh. And I have a meeting at city hall this afternoon.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Maybe Jaeger will forget.”

“If you did have a sponsor, what’s in it for the business?” I asked. “I’m guessing something more than just goodwill.”

“The use of our artwork for commercial purposes, among other things,” Maggie said, fastening a big bandage around my thumb. “I’m not against that, necessarily. But I’m not about to give up the right to choose how my art is used. Jaeger thinks I’m wrong.” She looked at me. “How’s that?”

I wiggled my thumb and opened and closed my fingers a few times. “Perfect,” I said. “Thank you.”

“He’s an asshat,” Ruby said.

“A what?” I asked.

“Asshat,” she repeated. “You know, someone whose head is so far up his...you know...he’s wearing it for a hat.”

“Sounds uncomfortable,” Maggie said.

“Does Jaeger look familiar to either of you?” Ruby asked.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Uh uh,” Maggie said. “Why?”

“I can’t shake the feeling I’ve seen him somewhere before, especially since he cut his hair.”

“Maybe a workshop or an exhibit,” I said.

“No, I don’t think that’s it.” Ruby shook her head and all the little hoops in her left ear danced.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I just came to see if you guys wanted to go get something to eat at Eric’s.”

I glanced at my watch.

“Is this a cat morning?” Maggie asked.

“Uh huh.” I was one of several volunteers who helped take care of a feral cat colony out at Wister Hill, the old, abandoned Henderson estate just outside town.

“Going by yourself?” She was all innocent sweetness.

“Maybe,” I said. I knew where the conversation was headed.

For months, Maggie had been trying to play matchmaker between Marcus Gordon and me. Marcus was a police detective and we’d gotten off on the wrong foot the previous summer when he thought it was possible that I had killed conductor Gregor Easton, or at the very least been involved in some intimate hanky-panky with the man who was twice my age and a ... well ... pretentious creep.

But last winter Marcus had rescued me when I was left dazed, wandering through the woods in the

bitter cold after an explosion. And we'd gotten closer since then; though not close enough to suit Maggie. She was indirectly responsible for our friend Roma's relationship with hockey player Eddie Sweeney and it had just made her worse where Marcus and I were concerned. Maggie believed in happily ever after and she had no problem in giving it a nudge, or even a big shove.

"Meeting anyone out there?" she continued.

"Don't start," I warned.

"Start what?"

Ruby grinned. She'd heard us do this before.

"Start on Marcus and I getting together. We're friends. That's all. He's not my type. He doesn't—

—even have a library card," Maggie finished. "Is that the only thing you can find wrong with him?"

Okay, so I had probably used that excuse too much. I thought about Marcus for a moment. He was tall, with dark wavy hair, blue eyes and a gorgeous smile that he didn't use nearly often enough. He was kind to animals, children and old people.

I caught myself and shook my head. I was supposed to be thinking of what was wrong with the man, not what was right. Maggie was smirking at me like she could read my mind. I stuck out my tongue at her.

"So how about breakfast?" Ruby said.

Maggie nodded. "Sounds good to me."

"I have to get out to Wisteria Hill," I said. "But I'll drive you two over and get a cup of coffee to go."

Maggie picked up the length of pipe again.

"Are you taking that with you?" I asked.

"Would it look stupid?"

"Well, not exactly stupid," I said. "More like you're about to start looting and pillaging."

"You know, I really do believe every creature has a right to exist. It's just"—she blew out a breath—"I don't want some of them for roommates." She set the piece of piping on the floor against the wall at the bottom of the stairs.

Maggie locked the building, and then we piled in the truck and headed for Eric's Place farther up Old Main Street. Even though I knew the town pretty well now, I still found the whole Main Street versus Old Main Street thing kind of confusing.

"Is it ever going to stop raining?" Ruby asked, looking skyward as we got closer to the café.

"There's more rain in the forecast," I said.

"It could be wrong."

"It could." I rubbed my left wrist. It had been aching for days and not just from slinging sandbags. I'd broken it the previous summer and now it was pretty good at predicting bad weather. Maybe the fact that it didn't hurt so much today meant the forecast was wrong.

The restaurant was warm and dry and smelled like coffee instead of wet feet. Eric's wife, Susan, worked for me at the library and I knew he had a heavy-duty sump pump in the basement.

I crossed to the counter. "Hi Kathleen," Eric said with a smile. "What can I get you?"

"Just a large coffee to go, thanks," I said.

He reached for a take-out cup, poured the coffee and added just the right amount of cream and sugar. He noticed Maggie's overly large bandage on my left thumb as he passed over the cup. "That doesn't look good," he said. "How did you do that?"

"She was scooping up dead things with a shovel and throwing them at me," Maggie said, behind me.

"New hobby?" Eric asked dryly.

"More like side job," Ruby said with a grin. "Rodent wrangler."

Eric nodded. "Yeah, the rain's driving them out of their hiding places."

~~Maggie put her hands over her ears and started humming off-key.~~

"Maggie has a hear no rodents, see no rodents, speak of no rodents policy," I said.

"We tried that with the twins when they went through their streaker stage," Eric said.

I handed him the money for my coffee.

"How'd that work?" Ruby asked.

"About as well as you'd expect. They may be four, but they have the tactical skills of Hannibal getting those elephants across the Alps. They always managed to be stark naked at the most embarrassing moment."

He handed me my change. "Thanks, Eric," I said.

Maggie dropped her hands. "Have fun with...the cats," she said. Her lips were twitching as she tried not to smirk at me.

"Nothing's going to happen out there," I hissed at her. "Nothing."

Of course I was wrong.

I made it out to Wisteria Hill before Marcus did. I drank the last of my coffee, got out of the truck and stretched, bracing my hands against the left front fender.

I had felt kind of strange about accepting the truck from Old Harry just for saving a few papers. Then a couple of weeks ago his son, Harry Junior, aka Young Harry, had come into the library to tell me they'd found the old man's daughter. I think I'd been almost as happy as he was.

I heard Marcus before I saw his SUV. The runoff from all the rain had left the driveway looking more like two trenches in the gravel and mud, and he eased his way slowly around the last curve. I patted the side of the old, brown Ford, grateful for its big, thick-treaded tires and good springs.

Marcus had brought two jugs of clean water and I had the food for the cats. "Hi," he said with a smile as he got out of the car. "Can I really see a tiny bit of blue sky or is that just an optical illusion?"

I smiled back at him. "I'm not sure about the blue sky, but my wrist feels pretty good so it's a possibility. I should tell you, though, the forecast I saw this morning was for more rain."

"I have more faith in your wrist's forecasting ability than I do in any weather report," he said. We started up the path to the old carriage house where Wisteria Hill's feral cat colony slept and ate. "Have you been downtown this morning?" he asked.

I nodded. "There's still a lot of water everywhere. We did get everything moved up out of the store into the tai chi studio, but there's at least four feet of water in the co-op basement, and I sort of threw a rat at Maggie."

"You were aiming at somebody else?" he asked, completely straight-faced.

"No," I said. "It was floating in the basement. I thought it was dead."

Marcus stopped and looked over his shoulder at me. "You thought it was dead? So you picked up a live rat and threw it at Maggie?"

"No...well...sort of." I could feel my face getting red. "It was more like I dropped it on her."

He was looking at me with what I thought of as his policeman look, basically no expression at all, barely even a blink. Then a lock of his dark, wavy hair fell into his eyes and broke his concentration.

"There was more to it than that."

He turned and started up the path again. "I'm listening."

I explained about scooping up the rat with the snow shovel, how it accidentally landed on Maggie's foot and then came to life when I flung it out onto the sidewalk. I left out the part about it whizzing by Ruby's head.

Marcus stopped in front of the side door to the old building. "That was littering," he said, pulling the wooden door open. The wood had swollen with all the rain and it would come open only about halfway.

"I wasn't going to leave it on the sidewalk," I said, starting to feel defensive. "I just wanted to get the thing out of the building. If it hadn't walked away, I would have done...something."

Then he laughed. "It's okay, Kathleen. I'm kidding," he said, reaching out to touch my shoulder.

How did I miss that? Maybe because I was tired. Maybe because he made me crazy.

I pictured a red balloon coming out of the top of my head—an acting exercise my mother liked to use. Then I imagined it getting bigger and bigger, inflating with all my frustration and exhaustion. Marcus squeezed through the doorway and I followed him, sliding a hand over the top of my head and

sending that imaginary balloon up into the cloudy, gray sky. It was better than whacking him with a bag of cat food.

We set out the food and water and retreated back to the door again. The cats made their way out to eat, one by one, led by Lucy, the little calico cat who was the matriarch of the group. Both Marcus and I looked them over for any signs of illness or injury.

“They all look okay,” Marcus said quietly by my ear. He was close behind me, warm and smelling like soap and coffee.

I tipped my head back, studying the weathered boards over my head. “I don’t see any leaks anywhere in here,” I said, “except for that one in the corner we already knew about.” I pointed to the front left corner of the old building where the boards were watermarked.

“I’ll take a look outside when we’re done,” he said. “If there’s no more rain, we should be okay.”
Big if.

When the cats had finished eating and moved away, we gathered the dishes and cleaned up the feeding station. Marcus refilled the water bowls and then took a look at the leak in the corner. There was no water coming in now and the wet areas on the floor and wall were actually starting to dry out.

Once we were outside he handed me the empty jugs. “I just want to walk around and see how the roof looks from the outside,” he said. “Wait for me?”

“Sure,” I said. He started around the back of the carriage house and I went to the truck and stowed everything on the floor on the passenger side.

I could hear the sound of rushing water. There was a stream back behind the carriage house, skirting a rise where the trees began. With all this rain it had to be swollen with water. If it overflowed, it could flood the carriage house, I realized.

I looked around for Marcus, but he still must have been on the other side of the building. I locked the truck again and started across the grass toward the trees. The ground was so soaked with water I left a small puddle with each step I took and I was glad I’d worn my rubber boots.

Climbing up the bank my feet slid, trying to get a grip on the wet ground. The water sounded even louder at the top of the bank. I eased my way through the dripping trees, trying not to skid on the leaves and mud under my boots.

The stream cut through a gully on the far side of the woods. The water was several feet higher than usual, maybe halfway up the side of the gully, splashing up onto the bank on either side. It looked cold and angry. The carriage house wasn’t in any danger for now. But if we got more rain...

I headed back, sliding from one tree to the next. The mix of leaves, pine needles and mud underfoot was as slick as ice and I wasn’t very good on ice. At the base of an old oak tree, near the edge of the embankment, I caught sight of a bit of purple, out of place in the old leaves and needles. I worked my way over, hooked one arm around the tree trunk and bent down to pick the thing up.

It looked like a tiny purple Afro wig, maybe an inch across, with a metal centerpiece. I exhaled in frustration. It wasn’t the first time I’d found someone’s trash thrown out here.

I could hear Marcus calling me. I stuffed the purple puff in the front pocket of my sweatshirt and took a step closer to the edge of the terraced hill. He was by the back of the carriage house.

I waved an arm. “I’m here,” I yelled. At the same moment I felt something shift under my feet. It was as though a giant hand had grabbed the ground and was trying to pull it out from beneath me.

I put out a hand and then the entire slope dropped out from underneath me. One moment I was on the slick, grass-covered hill and the next there was nothing. I reached out, but all I caught was handfuls of air.

The momentum threw me forward. I went down, down, down, thrown forward and sideways at the same time so I couldn’t get a sense of which way was up. There was a shower of earth and rocks around me and I folded my arms over my head on instinct.

My left foot twisted underneath me and caught on something—a tree root maybe—and for a second it felt as though my whole leg would come out of its socket. Then whatever part of the ground that had grabbed me let go. I pitched forward, or maybe it was backward, I don't know, ending up finally against solid ground, on my right side in the wet earth, under the sheared side of the embankment.

I couldn't breathe. Gasping and wheezing, I struggled to sit up. I could see Marcus running toward me even as my vision began to go dark from the edges in.

I.

Couldn't.

Breathe.

My chest felt like an elephant was sitting on it. I pulled at the front of my sweatshirt, desperate to suck in air.

Marcus dropped to his knees beside me in the mud. His arm went around my shoulder, his hand against the side of my face as he pushed me forward, stopping me from getting up. "Easy, easy," he said over and over.

I slumped against him, eyes closed, concentrating only on not passing out. I caught a breath. And then another one. Then I started to cough. There was dirt in the back of my throat and in my mouth, gritty on my teeth and tongue. I hacked and wheezed, my chest burning.

Marcus moved his hand to my shoulder, keeping me tight against him, not that my shaking body could have moved if I'd tried. "It's okay, just breathe," he said, his face gray with concern. "I've got you."

I coughed until my throat was raw and finally I could breathe more or less okay. I leaned against Marcus, his arm still tight around my shoulders, and swiped the dirt away from my mouth with one hand.

"Don't move," he said, shifting sideways to reach for his cell phone.

"I'm all right," I rasped.

"No you're not."

I tried to shift myself upright and sucked in a sharp breath against the stab of pain in my left hand as it pushed against a large rock, half exposed in the dirt.

I held up my hand, rolling it over to see Maggie's bandage had come off.

My breath caught in my chest again. I could hear Marcus talking to me but his voice sounded very far away and I couldn't make sense of the words.

The cut on my thumb had opened up again. Blood was dripping off the tip...down onto the top of a dirt-streaked skull, lying on the ground.

“You’re bleeding,” Marcus said, grabbing my arm.
I tried to gesture with my hand. “There’s a—”
“—I see it,” he interrupted.

The skull was lying on what seemed to be a corner of an old piece of canvas. I could see what looked like a clavicle and shoulder bones as well.

I was shaking. I closed my eyes for a moment in a silent prayer that whomever the remains had belonged to, the person had died after a long, happy life and had been, as Maggie would say, welcomed by the light.

Marcus reached over and unwound the black scarf I was wearing around my neck under my hoodie and wrapped it around my hand, pinning my bleeding thumb against my palm. “Can you stand up?” he asked. “We need to get out of the way just in case any more of that bank comes down.”

Slowly, I got my legs untangled and got to my feet. For a moment the world whirled dizzily around me. I held on to Marcus, my fingers digging into his arm, and the feeling passed.

My left ankle was stiff and it hurt enough that I grit my teeth together so I wouldn’t moan out loud. I put most of my weight on my other leg and leaned on Marcus as we made our way across the uneven ground toward the old house. I was covered with dirt and probably bruises as well, but nothing seemed to be broken and I hadn’t hit my head. My jeans and sweatshirt were wet and caked with mud, but the only thing that seemed to be bleeding was my thumb.

When we got to the carriage house I looked back over my shoulder. The entire embankment at the edge of the trees had collapsed. For a moment my legs went watery. Marcus’s arm tightened around my shoulders.

“You okay?” he asked, eyes narrowed with concern.

I nodded. “I am. Really.” How had I managed to end up with just a few bumps and scrapes? Even my bleeding hand had been injured somewhere else.

I could see that there had been some kind of stone retaining wall holding up the rise and reinforcing the slope. Could there maybe have been an old burial ground up on the hill? Was that where the skull had come from? No one had ever talked about a Henderson family cemetery out here. Then again, people didn’t really talk about Wisteria Hill much at all.

We made it to the main house and I sank onto the side stairs. Marcus took a couple of steps away from me and pulled out his cell phone, his entire demeanor shifting into police officer mode. I knew the authorities would have to figure out where the bones had come from.

I still had dirt and grit in my nose and mouth. I tried to take a deep breath and started coughing again. I leaned forward, arms on my knees, breathing slowly.

Marcus turned, snapping his phone closed. “Ambulance will be here in a few minutes.”

It took a second for me to realize he meant for me, not for the remains behind the carriage house. Hacking and wheezing I sucked in an uneven breath and then another. “I’m all right,” I said, hoarsely starting to get up and then flinching as I put my left hand down without thinking. Not only did the gash on my thumb hurt, it felt as though I’d done something to my wrist, too.

Marcus shook his head. “No, you’re not all right.” He gestured at the scarf-wrapped hand that I was hugging to my chest. “Your hand’s bleeding. So is your forehead. You’ve probably got a sprained

ankle and who knows how many other cuts and bruises. You fell a good ten feet, Kathleen. You need to be checked out.”

My hand went to my face out of reflex and I squeaked at the pain. The entire right side of my head hurt and there was blood and dirt on my fingers when I pulled my hand away. “Okay,” I said.

His eyes narrowed in surprise. “Okay? That’s it?”

I nodded. He’d probably expected me to argue. It was what we usually did; squabble like six-year-olds.

For a minute we just looked at each other in silence. Then Marcus glanced back toward the collapsed hill.

“Do you think there’s some kind of graveyard back there?” I asked, tipping my head to one side and trying to shake some of the dirt from my hair. For a moment the movement made the world spin again.

“I think there’s a pretty good chance.” He made a face and pointed at my hand. “Do you mind? Can I take a look at that?”

I held out my arm and he unwound one end of the scarf. Blood had soaked all the way through the material. “There was a smallpox epidemic in this area back in 1924,” he said. “I know there’ve been a couple of other unmarked grave sites from that time found in this part of the state.”

He inspected the cut, made a face and folded the fabric back around my hand. “It doesn’t seem to be bleeding anymore.” He squinted at my face and then reached over to brush dirt from my forehead.

I jerked back, involuntarily, and sucked in a sharp breath between my teeth.

He pulled his hand away. “Sorry. I’ll let the paramedics take care of that.”

“Could you pull my left boot off, please?” I asked. “It’s full of mud.” I’d been trying to toe off the heel with my other foot but it wasn’t working.

I held up my leg and Marcus grabbed the bottom of the rubber boot and pulled. It came off with a loud sucking sound and clumps of wet earth fell onto the grass. There was more dirt stuck to my sock. I shook my foot and sent a spray of it into the air.

Even in the heavy woolen sock I was wearing, my ankle looked swollen. Marcus set the boot down and reached for my foot. “Does this hurt?” he asked, gently bending it forward and back.

I winced. “A little.”

“How about this?” His fingers carefully probed my ankle. He had big, warm hands with strong fingers and a surprisingly gentle touch.

I was pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to be liking this so much. “It’s...um...it’s all right.” I pulled my foot back and reached for the discarded boot.

He handed it to me as the ambulance arrived, followed by the first police car. I recognized Ric, one of the two paramedics. He’d taken care of me the previous winter when I’d almost been blown to pieces in an explosion out on Hardwood Ridge. He remembered me as well.

“Ms. Paulson, what happened?” he asked, crouching down in front of me.

I explained about the hill collapsing, while his partner checked my pulse and looked into both my eyes. Once they decided I didn’t have any life-threatening injuries or broken bones, they began bandaging the cut on my hand and cleaning the various abrasions on my face.

“How’s your cat?” Ric asked as he carefully tweezered bits of gravel from my forehead. “Still sneaking into your truck to ride shotgun?”

I’d taken Owen with me the day of the explosion. Like me, he’d almost been caught in it. Everyone assumed he’d stowed away in the truck and I’d let the assumption stand.

Marcus knew the cat didn’t like to be touched by pretty much anyone other than me, but one of the police officers on the scene hadn’t taken his warning seriously. It was a wonder I hadn’t regained consciousness to find Owen shackled in a set of kitty-sized handcuffs for assaulting a police officer.

“Sometimes,” I said. “Mostly he’s just terrorizing the birds in the backyard.”

Ric grinned. “He hasn’t gone head-to-head with any more police officers?”

“Thankfully, no. But he does have a stare-down going with a golden Lab that lives up the street.”

I flinched as he pulled out a sliver of tree bark embedded in my skin.

“Sorry,” he said softly.

I looked over his shoulder, focusing on watching Marcus work to distract myself while Ric continued to gently clean my forehead.

Marcus was a good police officer—meticulous and very observant. I thought he was too rigid sometimes, and he tended to come across as cold when he was working on a case, something I knew firsthand because I’d gotten tied up in two of his past investigations.

He’d thought I had no business being involved in either one of them. The fact that I hadn’t wanted to be involved in a murder, or that he’d been investigating people I cared about—and the first time we met, me—didn’t seem to be a good enough reason.

I wasn’t a police officer. I wasn’t even a lawyer. I was a librarian. I knew about books, grant proposals and the Dewey decimal system. The thing was, because of my parents’ acting careers, I’d seen a lot of subterfuge and I was pretty good at spotting a liar. Plus I had Hercules and Owen who had the ability to stick their furry noses—literally—into places they probably had no business being. Of course, I couldn’t share that with Marcus, or anyone else for that matter.

I tried to imagine his reaction if I told him that my cats’ talents went beyond being able to hear a can of tuna being opened from a hundred feet away; that Hercules had the ability to walk through walls and Owen could disappear whenever it suited him, which was generally at the worst possible time for me. How could I explain it to anyone else when I didn’t even understand it all myself? At best, I’d end up somewhere having my head examined, at worst the cats would.

Ric was just putting a gauze bandage on my forehead when Officer Derek Craig came around the side of the carriage house. I’d met the young policeman for the first time the previous summer when I found conductor Gregor Easton’s body at the Stratton Theater. He’d been at the library several times in the past couple of months, checking out books on the law and law school. I wondered if he was thinking about a career change.

“Is Ms. Paulson okay to go home?” he asked the paramedics.

Ric nodded. “We’re done.” He turned his attention to me. His partner was already packing their things.

“I know,” I said, before he could start giving me his list of warnings. “I should see my family doctor. And if my head starts to hurt, or if I have problems with my vision or breathing, I should go to the emergency room right away.”

“Or if you feel nauseated or start vomiting,” he added. “In fact, you should make an appointment with your own doctor as soon as possible to get checked out. Just to be on the safe side.”

“I will,” I said. “Thank you.” I leaned around Ric to thank the other paramedic as well. Then I turned to Derek. “I’m okay. And my truck’s right there. I can get home.”

He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “Ma’am, Detective Gordon told me to drive you home. He also said I should use handcuffs if I had to. Do I have to?”

I didn’t want to leave my truck behind. On the other hand, Marcus wasn’t above having those handcuffs put on me.

I shook my head. “No you don’t have to. But do you have something to cover the seat?” There was mud on my boots, clumped on my clothes, even some still in my hair.

“Not a problem,” he said with a smile. “A little dirt won’t hurt anything. There’s been worse in the car.”

I got to my feet and brushed what dirt I could off my jeans and hooded sweatshirt. I looked around

for Marcus. He was at the far end of the field, bent down, clearly studying the bones that had been unearthed by the hill collapse. He turned and straightened up then, almost as if he could feel my eyes on him. I lifted a hand to let him know I was all right and I was going—more or less willingly—with Derek. He raised a hand in return.

I limped my way slowly over to the police cruiser. My ankle felt a little better now that it was wrapped with a support bandage. Derek hovered beside me and I had the sense that he could and would toss me over his shoulder and carry me the rest of the way if I stumbled. I scraped what mud I could off my boots before I got in the car. He reached across me and fastened the seat belt. I wasn't sure if he thought I was too banged up to do it myself, or that I might bolt for my truck when his back was turned.

We crept down the rutted driveway, bouncing over every bump. I knew I had to have a lot of bruises. I couldn't see and I felt every one of them with every lurch of the car.

At the bottom Derek turned to me. "Where are we headed?" he asked.

"Mountain Road," I said. "On the left-hand side, not that far from the top." I gave him the number.

He frowned. "Little white farmhouse?"

I nodded. "That's it."

We drove the rest of the way in silence. He pulled into the driveway and before I could tell him no to, he was out of the police car and around opening the passenger door for me.

"Thank you," I said, smiling up at him.

"You're welcome," he said with a dip of his head. I was at the back steps before I heard the car pull onto the street again. It was a safe bet that Marcus had told him to make sure I made it safely to the door.

I pulled off my muddy boots in the porch and unlocked the kitchen door. As if they had some kind of cat radar, Hercules and Owen both appeared in the living room doorway.

"It's not as bad as it looks," I said.

They exchanged glances, almost as though they were engaging in some kind of telepathic communication. Then Herc came across the floor to me. I pulled out a kitchen chair and dropped into it, biting off a groan when my right hip made contact with the seat. The little black-and-white cat sat in front of me, eyes narrowed, and looked me up and down.

"The bank behind the carriage house let go," I said, feeling a little foolish explaining myself to a cat. "I'm fine. Marcus called the paramedics, not that I needed them." I pulled my muddy sweatshirt over my head and dropped it on the floor.

Hercules recoiled and took a couple of steps backward. He sniffed the shirt, and then he sniffed at me, his face twisting in distaste at the odor.

"Yes, I know I don't smell very good," I said. "Kind of the same way someone did after they got into Rebecca's compost pile." I shot a quick glance at Owen.

Hercules came closer again. He stood on his back legs, put a paw on my knee and gently nudged my re-bandaged hand. "It's just a little cut," I said, reaching down to stroke his fur with my other hand. "I actually did that down at the store with Maggie."

At the sound of Maggie's name, Owen bounded over to me. "Maggie's fine," I reassured him. He had a major kitty crush on her. "So am I, so you can stop worrying." Sarcasm was wasted on Owen—he was already poking my sweatshirt with a paw.

Hercules suddenly dropped back onto all four feet, looked at the refrigerator door—where I'd stuck the Wisteria Hill feeding schedule—then turned back to me, tipping his head to one side and meowing quizzically. He might have been asking if we had any sardines in the fridge. Or it was possible he was asking if Marcus was okay. Improbable, but not impossible, since Hercules and Owen weren't exactly ordinary house cats.

“Yes, Marcus is fine too, and in case you were asking about sardines and not everyone’s favorite detective, no, there aren’t any open.”

The answer seemed to satisfy him. He turned to watch his brother still poking at my hoodie. I knew Herc had no intention of touching it. Not only did he dislike having wet paws, he didn’t like having dirty ones either. Owen had found the little purple thingie I’d picked up out at Wisteria Hill. He gave it a swipe with one paw and it slid over the floor like a curling rock, ending up at my feet.

I bent to pick the thing up before Owen sent it underneath the refrigerator. I still had no idea what it was. A wig for some kind of tiny forest sprite, perhaps? It wasn’t the oddest thing to be discarded out at the old estate. I knew that Harry Taylor and his younger brother, Larry, had found a full-sized, clay foot bathtub out there in the woods. Being practical guys, they’d loaded it in the back of Larry’s truck and it had eventually ended up in Larry’s bathroom—with the approval of Everett Henderson, of course.

My entire right side ached and I guessed I was probably turning into a giant bruise all over that part of my body. I needed coffee and a shower and a couple of aspirin.

I looked at the cats. “I don’t suppose you two know how to work the coffeemaker,” I said. Owen’s head immediately swung in my direction. He knew the word coffee generally meant I’d also be eating something he probably could wheedle a few bites of. “Yes, we’ll have something to eat, too,” I assured him.

I stood up, stretched and groaned a little, partly because everything hurt and partly for effect. Not only do cats not get sarcasm, they don’t get shameless bids for sympathy either. I set the tiny purple puff on top of the refrigerator, washed my hands, started the coffee and headed upstairs for the shower.

“Maggie and I didn’t talk about the boots,” I said over my shoulder to Hercules as I got to the living room doorway. He was zealously cleaning the bottom of his left paw and didn’t even look up. Even though I’d said Maggie’s name, neither did Owen.

“I distracted her,” I added.

Nothing, not even a tail twitch, or two.

I rubbed the back of my neck with one hand. “Yep, tossed a dead rat right at her. Of course, it turns out it wasn’t exactly dead.”

I would have sworn both cats did a double take. They bolted across the floor. Owen skidded to a stop just in front of me. Herc was a little more dignified. Throw the word rat into a sentence and suddenly they were interested.

They trailed me upstairs and sat just inside the bathroom door while I got cleaned up and told them what had happened at the co-op store and later at Wisteria Hill. I knew it was a little weird, okay, probably more than a little weird that I talked to the cats like they understood what I was saying, but I’d found it helped me to sort things out. There were times when it really did seem like they were following the conversation. And I told myself that talking to Owen and Hercules wasn’t as bad as walking around talking to myself.

Owen gave me the cold shoulder while I got dressed. Clearly in his kitty mind I had wronged Maggie. But he came around once I started spreading peanut butter on toast for a peanut butter and banana sandwich. I gave each cat a small bite, glad Roma wasn’t around to catch me. Then I pulled one of the other kitchen chairs closer so I could prop my left foot on it. I’d left the support bandage on in the shower, tying a plastic bag over it so it was only a bit wet on the top edge.

I poured a second cup of coffee and I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling the sensation of the earth dropping out from under me again. It was that same stomach-falling sensation as being on a roller coaster—without being belted in the seat—with the world flipping upside down at the same time and dirt flying everywhere.

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