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Allison BRENNAN

LOVE IS MURDER



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Allison Brennan

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Dear Reader:

Love Is Murder takes place a year before the events in Love Me to Death, the first Lucy Kincaid novel. I hope you enjoy reading this adventure with Lucy and her brother Patrick as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Special thanks to Dr. D. P. Lyle for help on medical questions, and my pal Toni McGee Causey for a quick, early read. My husband, Dan, was particularly helpful this time around with brainstorming. And as always, thank you to the Ballantine and Writers House team.

*Happy Reading,
Allison Brennan*

Twenty-four-year-old Lucy Kincaid had certainly needed a break, but snow skiing hadn't turned out to be quite as much fun as her brother Patrick had promised. In fact, Lucy had spent more time *in* the snow than *on* the snow. Snowsuit notwithstanding, she was cold, wet, and miserable.

"I told you I didn't know how to ski." Lucy shivered in the passenger seat of Patrick's truck. She put her hands directly in front of the heater vent.

"You just need more practice. We'll try again tomorrow."

"No."

"Wimp."

"Is it wimpy to not want to freeze my ass off?"

For just a second, Patrick took his eyes off the curvy mountain road. "Since when have you been a quitter?"

"It happened the thousandth time I hit the snow."

Patrick laughed. "You weren't all that bad."

"It's no fun to fail."

"You're just cranky because everything usually comes so easy to you."

"Not true," Lucy protested, knowing her brother was right.

Patrick grinned.

"You think this is funny?" she asked.

"I think you're scared."

"I'm *not* scared."

"Are too."

"God, you're a brat."

Lucy stared out the passenger window as they carefully made their way back down to the lodge where they were staying for the four-day weekend. The winding mountain road was treacherous in parts, and the increasing wind coupled with the falling snow didn't help. She found it strange that less than two hours ago, they were skiing under bright blue skies dotted with white clouds, but during the thirty minutes they'd sat at the coffee shop at the base of the ski lifts, the sky had darkened, as if a gray, fluffy blanket had been laid over the mountains. The snow flurries had begun blowing almost as soon as Patrick started the ignition.

"I'm glad we didn't take the snowmobiles this morning," Lucy said. "We'd be coming back in this."

"We're almost there." Patrick's expression had grown from light to concerned as he slowed. He'd already kicked the SUV into four-wheel drive.

The drive to the Delarosa Mountain Retreat yesterday afternoon had been lovely, with striking scenery and crisp fresh air. Lucy loved the outdoors, though she preferred it at least forty degrees warmer. Now, unfamiliar with the treacherous road, she was as tense as Patrick, and wondering why the weather report had told them a "mild" storm system would be passing overnight, when it was four in the afternoon and this was no "mild" storm. With every passing minute, the snow increased and Lucy suspected a blizzard would be in full force before sundown.

She trusted Patrick to get them safely back to the lodge and hoped that though fierce right now, the storm would quickly pass.

She closed her eyes, considering Patrick's comments about how she didn't take failure well. Maybe he was half-right. She was more than a little irritated that she'd failed her first day of skiing because anything athletic usually came easy to her. In fact, most things came easier to her than others. She studied in school, but never as much as her peers. She'd been an honor student, received two bachelor's degrees and a master's from Georgetown, and spoke four languages fluently. And because her mother had nearly drowned when she escaped Cuba, Rosa Kincaid made sure every one of her seven children could swim. Lucy ended up being on the swim team in high school and college and had been scouted for the Olympics, but she couldn't commit the time and energy such an opportunity required. After she'd been attacked on the day of her high school graduation, her priorities had changed dramatically.

Lucy came from a military and law enforcement family. Her father was a retired colonel, her oldest brother Jack, retired army. She had a cop for a sister, a private investigator for a brother, and another brother who was a forensic psychiatrist. They'd all married into law enforcement in one way or another. Patrick was a former e-crimes cop, and now worked for a private security company with Jack. Joining the FBI seemed not only natural, but what Lucy was supposed to do. She had everything planned—she would submit her application this summer. It could take up to a year to go through the testing and review process. In the meantime, she had plenty of work with her new DC medical examiner's internship and volunteering at a victim's rights group.

While she was in great shape from running and swimming, being fit didn't seem to matter when she couldn't find her balance on those damn skies. She opened her eyes to see if the landscape had changed. The snow continued to stream down at a forty-five degree angle, the wind rocking the sturdy truck.

It didn't look like they'd get another opportunity to ski this weekend. Secretly she was pleased. She didn't like being so cold her teeth chattered, though at the same time she wanted a second chance. She didn't want to return home a failure at the one new thing she tried and didn't get immediately.

A bright green flash to her right, up the mountainside, caught Lucy's eye. She leaned forward and immediately recognized that a person was rolling rapidly down the steep, tree-dotted slope. As she said, "Patrick! Someone's in trouble!" she saw the tumbling figure smash into one of the trunks. The person grabbed the tree and tried to stand, but that only sent him falling again, a streak of pink behind him.

"I see him." Patrick stopped the truck as quickly as he dared on the icy road. Turning on his emergency lights, they both got out of the car. The icy, damp air hit Lucy's lungs before it registered on her skin. She trudged to the back of the SUV and grabbed the first aid kit, then followed her brother, fighting the wind-driven snow.

Above them, the man grabbed at a sapling, caught it, and stopped. He was still twenty feet from the road.

"That's Steve," Lucy said, recognizing the lodge owner's twenty-year-old son now that they were closer. It seemed to be getting darker by the second, the blinking lights in the front and rear of the car turning the snow alternately red and yellow.

Patrick called out, "Lie on your back and slide!"

At first Lucy didn't think Steve had heard, but then he turned around and laid back. The snow was stained red where his head had rested. She couldn't see an injury, but as she watched, blood seeped from his scalp.

"Let go!" Patrick commanded.

Steve complied and slid down the snow, hitting the harder slush on the roadside. He tried to stand, but stumbled and fell, unmoving.

Patrick reached him first. "Lucy, get the first aid kit—it's in the back."

"Got it." She knelt next to Steve and unlatched the red emergency kit.

"What happened?" Patrick asked Steve, brushing the snow from his face.

"I'm okay," he said.

"We saw you hit your head on that tree up there. Lie still a minute." Patrick began inspecting the young man's body for breaks. "Tell me if it hurts anywhere."

The cold could send him into shock, especially if he had internal damage. Lucy wanted to get Steve inside as quickly as possible, but they had to make sure moving him wouldn't make any injuries worse.

"I'm fine," Steve repeated.

"Can you move your legs and arms?"

"It's just my head."

Lucy had the gauze and tape out. She handed a thick bandage to Patrick, who pressed it on Steve's still-bleeding wound. "Head injuries can be serious," Patrick said. "You need to lie still for a moment. I'll tape this up, then we'll get you in the truck."

Lucy handed Patrick pieces of tape and he affixed the bandage. Steve didn't protest. Other than the gash on his head from hitting the tree, he only had a couple minor scratches on his face. His body was well protected with a GORE-TEX jacket and pants over layers of clothing.

"I'm freezing my ass off," Steve said. "Let me up."

Patrick helped Steve sit up, watching his eyes carefully. "Just hold it right here for a minute. Are you dizzy?"

"I was just stupid."

"What were you doing going up that slope?" Lucy said. "It's too steep."

"I didn't walk up the slope," he said, as if she were an idiot for asking. "I slipped at the top."

"So you decided to take the fastest way down to the road?" Patrick joked, helping Steve with his feet.

"Ha, ha." Steve rolled his eyes, trying to pretend he wasn't in pain, but his hand clutched his stomach.

Lucy said, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he snapped. "Are you going to give me a ride or do I have to walk?"

Patrick helped Steve to the truck, and Lucy put the supplies back. She made sure the heater was at maximum, and handed Steve a blanket while Patrick started back up the mountain.

"I don't need it," he said.

"Humor me." Lucy smiled. Steve probably felt stupid and clumsy, which contributed to his foul attitude. He grumbled, but took the blanket and closed his eyes.

They'd only met Steve briefly yesterday afternoon when they first arrived at the Delarosa Mountain Retreat. He was young, didn't talk much, and seemed conscientious in his

considerable duties running the lodge. It didn't seem likely that he'd make a dumb mistake like getting too close to an unstable ledge.

"Steve," Lucy said, "what were you doing up there?"

"I was coming back from checking on our outlying cabins—we close them in the winter and checking for animal tracks. We have been having some problems with four-legged predators, and I wanted to make sure they hadn't returned. I knew the storm was going to get bad as soon as the sky turned, so I took a shortcut. Stupid."

"Why didn't you take a snowmobile?" Patrick asked.

"They were all out when I left, and I can't get to two of the cabins with my truck. I do that all the time," he said defensively. "I just lost my balance. And my favorite skis."

He didn't open his eyes, and Lucy couldn't tell if he was telling the truth.

She said, "I checked the weather report this morning. They said light snowfall overnight, clear tomorrow. I can't believe they were so wrong."

Steve laughed once. "Weather systems change often, especially in the winter. I've lived here my entire life and when I saw the report this morning I knew the system was going to shift as soon as the wind shifted. Weather reports are more reliable now with satellites and historical data all computerized, but minor changes in one location can have a chain effect, especially in the mountains."

"How long do you think it'll last?" Patrick asked.

Steve looked out the window. "I think we're in for the weekend."

"What?" Lucy exclaimed.

"We can get you off the mountain if you want, but tonight is going to be a blizzard and I don't advise it."

"I'm not going anywhere tonight," Lucy said.

Patrick grinned. "What did you do, Luce? Send a prayer up for a blizzard to get you out of learning to ski?"

"On the contrary, I decided that I was going to learn how to ski if it was the last thing I did—just to prove to you that I'm not scared of failure."

"I shouldn't have said scared. You're not scared of failure, you're just pissed off. You don't like it when you can't do something your first time out. And you just said *learn how to ski* meaning you have no intention of failing."

"Why would I try if I expected to fail?"

"Indeed. I rest my case."

Lucy was confused and sighed heavily. "Brothers."

Patrick drove across the pressed gravel road that was now covered with a thick layer of snow, but the lights lining the lodge's entrance helped guide him to the barn, which had been converted into a large garage. Steve jumped out of the truck and opened the barn door. Patrick drove in and parked where he had earlier, next to the Delarosa truck. Patrick got out and helped Steve close the doors against the fierce wind.

"I need to gather up supplies and check the generators," Steve said. "You should get inside before the storm gets worse."

"With that bump on your head, you shouldn't be out walking around," Lucy said.

"I don't have a choice. I'm not risking damage because I slacked off."

"I'll help you," Patrick said.

“I don’t need any help.”

“Then I’ll tell your stepmother that you whacked your head. Based on her mother-hen attitude, I don’t think she’ll let you leave your room.”

“What do you care?” he asked petulantly.

“I’ve been the recipient of a nasty head injury,” Patrick said. “I know how unpredictable they are.”

Lucy didn’t say anything. Her brother had been in a coma, thanks to the man who had kidnapped her nearly six years ago. She still felt a pang of guilt that Patrick had been so severely injured while trying to rescue her. She thanked God every day that he was alive, breathing, and awake. Since his recovery, they’d grown much closer than they’d been growing up. Their ten-year age difference had been huge when she was ten and Patrick was twenty; now at twenty-four and thirty-four, it didn’t matter much.

“Fine,” Steve said, “if you promise to not say anything to Grace. She’s a worrywart.”

“Promise.”

Lucy didn’t think that was a good idea, and she was surprised that Patrick agreed to it.

“It might be kind of hard to hide that bandage,” Lucy said.

“I’ll take care of it. We need to get this done before full dark.”

“I’m dressed for it,” Patrick said. He nodded to Lucy with a look that said he’d keep an eye on Steve, and she felt marginally better heading inside to the lodge.

“I have plenty of extra snowshoes,” Steve said. “Lucy, stick to the path—there is ground lighting that shouldn’t be buried by the snow yet. It’ll land you right at the porch.” He handed her a pair of snowshoes.

“I’ve never walked in these.”

“It’s not hard, and if you go out in those boots you’ll sink farther and it’ll take you longer to get to the house.”

She strapped on the snowshoes and left the barn. Steve was right, it wasn’t difficult, she just had to lift her feet up completely and take wide, deliberate steps. She could see the house only fifty yards away, though visibility was definitely worsening. The wind was at her side, wanting to knock her over, but she kept an even pace.

By the time she reached the porch several minutes later, she was winded from the exertion but exhilarated.

The lodge was a larger replica of the Ponderosa, the home of the Cartwrights of *Bonanza* fame. But the main floor was eight stairs up from the walk, and Lucy had to take the snowshoes off to climb the stairs. She opened the door, the wonderful aroma of simmering stew reminding her that she was starving. Falling down a lot apparently worked up a huge appetite.

The interior, while bigger than the Cartwrights’ fictional home, was decorated in the same Gold Rush-era style with simple wood furniture and old rugs. Clean and polished, there were no contemporary touches aside from electricity and indoor plumbing. The Delarosa Mountain Retreat was technology free: no television, no computers, no cellphone reception.

Lucy wasn’t so sure how she felt about that, but they’d be here for just three days. Maybe it was time to unplug and really, what was a few days? They’d be out of here no later than noon on Monday. In fact, only twenty minutes down the mountain there was a ridge where they’d noted they had cellphone reception, and fifteen minutes farther there was the sma

town of Kit Carson, with a restaurant, grocery, and gas station, plus a few dozen residents. Not that Lucy was planning on going to any of them and pleading like an addict, *“Please, can I log on to the Internet for just five minutes? I’ll pay you.”*

Lucy started up the stairs to her room when Grace Delarosa, Steve’s stepmother, stepped into the foyer. Her face fell when she saw Lucy. “I thought you were Steve. He was supposed to be back by now.”

“He and Patrick went to bring in supplies and check the generators.”

“Was he okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“He hasn’t been himself lately. I’m worried about his health. He’s so much like his father, doesn’t want to go to the doctor. But I finally convinced him because he was getting dizzy so often, and while they couldn’t find anything wrong, when the doctor wanted to do more tests, he refused.”

Lucy thought about Steve’s tumble down the mountain. She bit back the truth, and said, “Patrick will keep an eye on him.”

Grace smiled tightly. “Thank you. We’re having dinner early. Appetizers are already in the dining room.”

“Great, I’ll change and be right down.”

She started up the stairs and heard Grace say, “What do you want now?”

Lucy glanced over her shoulder, startled, thinking that Grace was speaking to her, but as she saw was Grace turning the corner toward the office.

Lucy’s room was the first on the left at the top of the stairs. Patrick was directly across from her. There were six upstairs guest rooms in the lodge, two larger suites and four single rooms. Earlier, she’d learned that Grace and Steve lived in the small cottage behind the lodge and Grace’s sister, Beth, had taken the caretaker’s room downstairs, adjacent to the office and kitchen.

Lucy had met the three couples staying at the lodge when she and Patrick first arrived. Alan and Heather Larson were thirty-five-year-old workaholics from the Silicon Valley who had taken the snowmobiles to town in order to check their email. She’d almost laughed at the time, but now realized she’d been suffering the same technological withdrawal.

Kyle and Angie DeWitt were about Lucy’s age, and according to Beth they spend more time in bed than anywhere else. From their lovey-dovey display at the breakfast table, Lucy wasn’t surprised. She admitted to being a bit jealous of the newlyweds, as well as hopeful. Jealous that she didn’t have a close relationship like they did—she didn’t know if she was capable of that, for she certainly had never shown such outward affection for her longtime ex-boyfriend Cody. And hopeful that maybe there was someone out there for her who she could love as much as that person loved her.

But that was in the future. She wasn’t going to look for it. Sometimes she thought her life experiences had jaded her to unconditional love. Or worse, made her incapable of trusting someone enough to love.

She suspected someday she might be in a relationship more like the Larsons’. They obviously liked and respected each other and had a lot in common—work, intelligence, a dry sense of humor; they even looked alike, both tall brunettes, nice-looking but plain, wearing almost identical wire-rimmed glasses. Lucy could imagine herself marrying her best friend or

of comfort.

But Cody was your best friend, and you turned down his proposal.

Or maybe she'd fall in the camp of Trevor Marsh and his wife, Vanessa Russell-Marsh—complete opposites physically and in personality. Breakfast this morning had been interesting with Trevor's boisterous laugh and Vanessa's cool demeanor. While Vanessa was moderately beautiful, Trevor was a bit overweight and looked a little like a cherub. She was at least two inches taller than him and they seemed mismatched, though they had an obvious silent communication going on that suggested they'd known each other for a long time. Lucy had liked Trevor's lack of pretension.

If she wasn't so hungry, Lucy thought as she stripped off her damp clothes in exchange for a warmer—and dry—outfit, she would go right to bed. She was physically exhausted. But dinner first.

A scream pierced the second floor, a sound so anguished that Lucy immediately knew that someone was in pain.

But she feared it was much worse.

As soon as Lucy stepped out of her room, she realized that shouts were coming from Trevor and Vanessa's room. She ran down the hall to the last room on the right just as Kyle swung open his door across from the Marshes' room. He was bare chested, and Angie had on a short robe. Both looked stunned, but Kyle took action and ran into the Marshes' room ahead of Lucy.

"Vanessa," Trevor moaned his wife's name. Tears dampened his face as he shook the lifeless body on the bed. "Please wake up!"

Kyle froze inside the doorway. Lucy pushed him aside and went to Trevor's side. She didn't have to feel for a pulse; it was obvious that Vanessa had been dead for at least an hour. Her half-opened eyes were glassy and already had a thin, cloudy film over them, and her jaw and eyelids had already noticeably stiffened. Rigor mortis starts in the face and limbs and works inward.

"Trevor, put Vanessa down," Lucy said calmly.

"W-why?" he cried.

Lucy quickly assessed the large room. It was L-shaped, with a couch and desk in a small area directly in front of the entrance, and the bed in the larger area to the left. Clothes had been draped carefully over the sofa, as if someone was deciding what to wear: a simple black dress; jeans and a cashmere sweater; and a blue sweaterdress. Matching shoes were lined up beneath each outfit.

Vanessa was on the bed in a thick white terry bathrobe, similar to the one Lucy's sister-in-law had given her for Christmas last year. Vanessa's long, golden blonde hair was damp and a bit stringy, as if she had brushed it after getting out of the shower but it had nearly dried before she could style it.

A prescription bottle was on the nightstand, along with a glass of white wine. Lucy squatted to read the label without touching the bottle, remnants of her training with the Arlington County Sheriff's Office—not that this was anything but what it seemed.

The prescription was made out to Vanessa Russell for Seconal. Seconal was a common temporary sleep aid. The thirty-day prescription had been filled two months ago and appeared half-full—not uncommon, with the direction to use as needed for insomnia.

The DeWitts were still standing in the doorway when Grace came through saying, "Excuse me, please, excuse me."

Lucy looked up. "Grace—"

"Oh my God, what happened?"

"You need to call the police."

"Police? Why? Is she—"

"She's dead," Trevor moaned.

"But how?" asked Grace.

When Trevor didn't answer, Lucy did. "We don't know."

Trevor rocked Vanessa's body in his arms. "I don't understand. Why would she do this?"

"What happened?" Grace asked.

"It could have been an accidental overdose," said Lucy. "We don't know how many pills were in the bottle. It's an older prescription."

Grace frowned. "But—she took pills, right?"

Lucy couldn't say. On the surface it looked like Vanessa had taken sleeping pills—but there was no suicide note, no indication that she'd intended to harm herself. But if she wanted to take an afternoon nap, why take Seconal, which came with the warning to only take if you could sleep for eight hours because of possible side effects? Not that people followed the rules of their medications, but if Vanessa had been taking the drug for a while, she'd know its potential dangers.

That there was a nearly empty glass of wine was also disturbing, because anyone who regularly took sleeping pills knew alcohol enhanced the effect of the drugs, even with normal dosage.

Alan Larson popped his head into the room and Lucy said to Grace, "Get everyone out of here. Please," she added as an afterthought.

She wasn't a cop, but she'd been at enough crime scenes to know that contamination was a big problem. Not that this was a crime scene; it was technically an unattended death, but Lucy felt compelled to protect the body and the scene as much as possible before the police arrived.

Grace walked over to the guests and said, "Please go downstairs. Give us a moment." She closed the door over concerned protests.

"Trevor," Lucy said firmly, but with great deliberation and calm. "Trevor. Please." She waited until he looked at her before she continued. "You need to put your wife down."

Trevor stared at her. "Who are you?"

"Lucy Kincaid. We met last night, remember? At dinner, with my brother Patrick. You talked to him about how you grew up in Laguna Niguel. We're from San Diego originally. Do you remember?"

Trevor nodded. "Can you help Vanessa?"

"Trevor, Vanessa is dead. You need to put her down."

He blinked rapidly, then he looked at his wife as if he hadn't realized he was still holding her in his arms. He stared at his dead wife for several moments. Grace tried to talk, but Lucy silenced her.

"Oh, dear Lord," Trevor said laying Vanessa's body back on the bed. He stood and looked at her lifeless body, finally understanding there was no bringing her back.

"Grace, please take Trevor downstairs," Lucy said.

"You need to come, too," Grace said.

"I will. I want to cover the body." That wasn't the complete truth.

"We can wait."

"Trevor should go now." She looked at Grace pointedly, and she didn't know if the hostess understood, but she did walk Trevor out of the room.

"Let's get a cup of tea, all right?" Grace said as she led Trevor out to the hall. She shot Lucy a scowl, but didn't insist she join them.

Kyle DeWitt was still hanging out in the hall. Lucy said to him, "Please go to the barn and get my brother."

"Can he do anything?"

"He was a cop for nearly ten years, he'll know what we need to do since I don't think the police or an ambulance will be able to reach us tonight." Lucy also knew they had limited

options—they had to get the body someplace cold to slow decomposition. Otherwise, as the gases and bacteria broke down, there would be a horrid stench, especially in the warm lodge. If the authorities couldn't reach them by morning, they would have no choice but to move the body.

After Kyle left, Lucy closed the door and locked it before going back to Vanessa's body. Six years ago she couldn't have imagined viewing a dead body much less touching one, but between the sheriff's department and the morgue, Lucy had lost any squeamishness she might have had.

She hesitated before touching anything else in the room. She saw a pair of leather gloves on the dresser, which she remembered Vanessa had been wearing that morning. Lucy put them on, then inspected Vanessa's body. Touching her skin, she realized that rigor wasn't well developed. Lucy would guess from the facial muscles and thin, cloudy film over her eyes that Vanessa had been dead at least an hour, but because rigor was still limited to the outer extremities, she didn't believe she'd been dead longer than three hours. If she had more training, she might be able to pinpoint time of death more closely. The sooner a body was discovered, the more accurate the time of death could be determined, but coroners had more tools at their disposal, as well as more experience.

Lucy glanced at her watch. 5:24 P.M. Vanessa had died roughly between 2:30 and 4:30 in the afternoon. Lucy was confident that she'd been dead longer than an hour, but three hours was a guess, so she pushed her window to 1:30 P.M. Patrick had been an e-crimes cop and never liked forensics, but he also had a lot of training and might have more insight.

Lucy studied her surroundings, imagining the likely scenario that had led to Vanessa's death. Shower. Bathrobe. Pills. Lucy had a degree in criminal psychology, but had studied a variety of mental illnesses, including depression. Identifying a suicide was difficult, but there were reliable indicators. Lucy hadn't seen any of the standard signs of depression in Vanessa Russell-Marsh, though many clinically depressed people didn't show outward signs, especially if they were on meds. Vanessa had been the quietest at dinner, but introverts were uncomfortable in groups of strangers and, like Lucy and Patrick, the Marshes had arrived yesterday afternoon. Vanessa had seemed to have a quiet affection for her more extroverted husband, and had been polite if a bit standoffish.

Suicides sometimes made themselves attractive prior to killing themselves—showering, putting on makeup, dressing in their nicest clothes—so that their loved ones would see them at "their best." The shower itself didn't throw Lucy off—it was that Vanessa had showered but *not* dressed or made herself up.

And why here? If it was an accident, why would she take sleeping pills in the middle of the day? Especially Seconal. It made no sense, and made it appear more like a suicide than an accident. Yet, just because the bottle was there didn't mean Vanessa had ingested the pills. The bottle was half-filled and closed. But if she hadn't overdosed on sleeping pills, what had killed her?

Lucy continued her visual examination of the body. Vanessa's fingernails and toes were painted dark red, and it appeared fresh—no chips. Lucy couldn't remember if Vanessa had painted nails last night, or what color they were.

Her engagement ring was a huge marquise-cut diamond. Too ostentatious for Lucy, but it fit Vanessa and she could see Trevor giving it to her. Her wedding band, on the other hand,

looked like an antique, a thin, unpolished gold band with seven tiny diamonds embedded in an intricate pattern. It was dwarfed by the engagement ring, but Lucy thought it was the more interesting and attractive piece of jewelry.

What a waste, she thought. Vanessa was a beautiful woman, newly married to a man who appeared to adore her, and she was dead.

Always look from the inside out. Husbands, boyfriends, exes—nine times out of ten, when a woman is found murdered, it's someone she knows.

Lucy frowned. Murder was a far cry from an accident or suicide. But the idea stuck in Lucy's head that Vanessa hadn't died naturally or by her own hand. Lucy looked at the scene like a cop.

"It could be natural causes. She could have had an embolism or an aneurysm," she whispered to herself.

Lucy had only minimal medical training, some human biology classes that had enabled her to land the internship at the morgue, but she was more interested in the process than in the actual autopsies, despite her assistant pathologist certification. She had no idea how to inspect the body for signs of such natural causes of death, but it would be clear in an autopsy.

Maybe she was too suspicious. Did Lucy really expect the worst in every situation? She didn't want to think that she was such a negative person, but when she worked on a body in the morgue, she was most interested to learn the cause of death—natural, accident, or murder? At the sheriff's department, she'd worked closely with one longtime cop near retirement. Joe Marquez's philosophy was, "Everyone is guilty of something." Lucy hadn't believed it, but in Joe's life more often than not people lied, even if they weren't killers or rapists. Wives lied to protect their husbands; women lied about assaults out of fear; juveniles lied about minor crimes because they didn't want to get into trouble—and sometimes to see if they could get away with it. Fear of cops was a motivator for many, but Joe didn't have a lot of faith in people or the system. Had some of Joe's skepticism about the human condition rubbed off on her? Or was it her own past experiences that made her unusually suspicious?

She opened the bottom drawer of the dresser where in her room were extra sheets and blankets. They, too, were in here. She took out a top sheet and covered Vanessa's body. She said a quick prayer, and as she was about to cover her face she noticed something on the side of her neck.

Lucy carefully moved Vanessa's hair and turned her head slightly to get a better view. A tiny red pinprick on the side of Vanessa's neck looked suspiciously like a needle mark. She cursed herself for not having her cellphone with her to take a picture, but up here there was no reception so she'd left her phone in the car. She searched the room, looking for another camera. If the Marshes didn't have one, she'd ask the others, though she'd then have to explain why.

Vanessa's death now appeared much more like murder.

A loud knock on the door was followed by Patrick calling out, "Lucy! It's Patrick."

She again put the sheet over Vanessa's body in case anyone else was with him, and ran to the door, the digital camera she'd found in Vanessa's purse now strapped to her wrist. Kyle DeWitt was there, along with Steve. She didn't want anyone else in the room, and said, "Out of respect for the deceased, I think only Patrick should come in."

"What's going on?" Steve demanded. "Is Mrs. Marsh really dead?"

"Yes," she said. "Please—"

"Oh my God." Steve ran his hands through his mop of hair. He looked panicked. "This is terrible. What more could go wrong?"

The comment was cryptic, but Lucy didn't ask him to elaborate. She caught Patrick's eye and signaled to get rid of the other men. Patrick picked up on this and filled the doorway. "Steve," he said, "I need you to contact the sheriff's department."

"They won't be able to get up here—"

"Call them. You have a landline, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"I know, it might be down, so try now before the storm gets worse. Tell them we have a deceased female, cause unknown, and to send a unit and coroner as soon as possible. Get their contact name and number, and tell them that there's a retired police detective on scene."

"You?" Kyle said. "You're young to be retired."

"Long story." Patrick handed Steve one of his Rogan Caruso Kincaid business cards. "That's my contact information and P.I. license number. I'll call in as soon as I have something to report."

"But what happened to her?" Kyle asked.

Lucy hesitated, then said, "I don't know."

Patrick glanced at her. Lucy was the world's worst liar, and Patrick realized the situation was serious. "Kyle, would you go downstairs and tell everyone to see what they can do to comfort Trevor? As soon as Lucy and I get a handle on this, we'll be down."

He closed the door before either Steve or Kyle could object, then turned to Lucy and said, "What's going on?"

"I found a needle mark on Vanessa's neck."

Patrick walked over to the body and was about to remove the sheet when he saw that Lucy was wearing gloves. "You do it."

"They're not latex, but it's better than nothing," she said.

"You must have been suspicious from the beginning to put them on."

"Well, a little. The lid is on the pill bottle."

"So?"

"Suicides aren't usually so tidy. She could have put it on, out of habit, but then there's the fact that she took a shower, but didn't dress. I just thought—be careful. All the training bears down on it into you."

"You can say that again."

She pulled down the sheet. "Do you see it?" She pointed to the mark.

"Yes, but you must have been looking to notice something so small. At first glance, it could

be a new pimple or minor skin blemish.”

“I saw it and—” She stopped and turned Vanessa’s head more to the right. “She’s had a face-lift. It’s good work, too—I didn’t notice the marks at first, but I wasn’t looking for them.”

Patrick stared. “I can barely see anything.”

“Like I said, excellent work. But right here under her ear—” She put her finger on the scar. “And there’s minimal tightness, so I think she already had good skin and complexion, not excessive sun exposure. She’s someone who has been well taken care of most of her life.”

“Someone killed her,” Patrick said flatly.

“I think so, but I couldn’t say definitively. We should secure her body and this room.”

“How long has she been dead?”

“One to four hours. Probably closer to three hours.”

“We need to question everyone. But Lucy—if the killer suspects that we’re onto the fact that Vanessa Marsh was killed, no one here is safe.”

“I understand.”

“I don’t think you do. Lucy, you’ve never been able to lie. Let me ask the questions, okay? I’m going to tell everyone that we need to move the body to a cold environment for health reasons.”

“That’s true.”

“Then you can say that.” Patrick rubbed her arm. “Then I’ll say we have no idea what happened, but it looks like an accidental overdose or possibly natural causes.”

“Before I saw the needle mark, I thought embolism or aneurysm.”

“Good—”

“But will anyone believe she took sleeping pills in the middle of the day and accidentally overdosed?”

“Not everyone thinks like a cop, Lucy. We need to search this room now, before we move the body. I’ll need help, Steve and Kyle.”

“Do you think Trevor killed her?”

“The husband is always the first suspect, and often guilty.”

“He just doesn’t seem—” She cut herself off. Killers didn’t always look the part. “I like him,” she said simply.

“So do I. But we’re cops in this scenario. You didn’t kill her and I didn’t kill her. Therefore right now we’re the only people we can trust. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“I’ll start here. You take the bathroom and their luggage.”

Lucy started in the bathroom. The shower floor was still damp, the hair dryer was plugged in. She put herself in Vanessa’s shoes—take a shower before dinner, dry her hair before dressing. She’d set out her clothes—another indication that she planned to go downstairs to eat. Vanessa’s makeup, jewelry box, and toiletries were organized neatly on the counter. She wouldn’t leave the hair dryer plugged in all day. She would have put it away. The meticulous way the bathroom was set up indicated that.

How did the killer get the needle into Vanessa without a struggle? It had to be someone she trusted to get that close. And what drug could have such an immediate effect that she would have no time to scream or fight back? It would have to have a paralyzing effect. Had she

been drugged while lying in bed? Then why had she lain down in the first place?

Maybe Trevor came in and suggested a midday lovemaking session. They got into the bed and during foreplay he injected her. Up close and personal. Intimate. Watched her die. Was she surprised? Did she beg for her life or demand to know why?

There were few convenient drugs that could kill instantly, but if Vanessa was incapacitated that would make it easier for killer.

Lucy stepped out of the bathroom and said, "Patrick, the wine by her bed. We need it for evidence."

"What are you thinking?"

"She was drugged before she was injected. There's no food in here, the wine is the only thing." She took a picture of the wineglass and pill bottle. She'd already photographed the body and the puncture wound. She wished Trevor hadn't moved the body, because lividity hadn't set in. She could guess, based on the slight discoloration along the right curve of Vanessa's waist, that she'd been lying on that side for over an hour when she died. Because Trevor had now laid her on her back, the blood and fluids would be pooling on her underside.

Still, Lucy had taken the pictures and hoped someone with more experience than her would be able to decipher them.

"If I ask Grace for plastic bags for evidence collection, she'll be tipped off that we think Vanessa was killed," said Patrick. "I think it's best we keep the likelihood of homicide to ourselves."

"I have some Ziploc bags," Lucy said.

He raised an eyebrow. "You normally carry evidence bags around with you?"

"I keep them for travel. Makeup, toothpaste, shampoo. I have some that haven't been used."

She opened the door and was startled when she saw lodge owner Grace and her sister Beth, in the hallway. Had they been listening at the door? Lucy didn't think so but she made no assumptions.

"I don't understand what's going on," Grace said. "Why did you and Patrick lock the door? What happened to Vanessa? Trevor is distraught—"

"I thought you were going to stay with him."

"Angie and Heather are with him in the library," Grace replied. "He didn't want tea. I gave him scotch. Steve told me you had him call the sheriff. What happened to Vanessa?"

"We don't know exactly," Lucy said, obfuscating.

Patrick walked up behind her. "Vanessa is dead, and the sheriff needs to be notified about any unattended death. I can't tell whether or not she died of natural causes. I don't know her medical history. I need to talk to her husband first, and then hopefully the sheriff can contact her immediate family and doctor and see if there was some other contributing factor to her death."

"Oh." Grace sighed and rubbed her face. "I'm sorry, it's just so distressing that someone died here at the lodge. Steve is really upset."

Lucy said, "Steve said something strange. He said, 'What more could go wrong?' Do you know what he meant?"

Grace shook her head, but Beth said, "Grace, we can't keep it secret." She put her arm

around her sister's shoulders. "There have been several mishaps since Leo died. One of our main generators broke down. It was under warranty, but it still required us to close for two weeks before it could be repaired. The root cellar was left open one night and most of our food was eaten by a bear. That cost us thousands, to repair the door and replace the stock. Steve had an accident last month, totaled his truck, and was lucky he wasn't injured. The boy has been working himself too hard, trying to make this place into everything his father wanted."

"Leo was special," Grace said. "He had a way about him."

Beth frowned. "He also left a lot of things undone, spent all his savings to keep the place up. We can't simply avoid the seriousness of the situation. And with Steve's illness—"

"Beth, please!" Grace rubbed her temples. "It's going to be fine."

"What about Steve's illness?" Patrick asked.

"He's been forgetting things," Beth said, ignoring Grace's plea. She lowered her voice. "We think he forgot to secure the root cellar. But he won't go back to the doctor, and we're both worried sick about him."

Patrick said, "We need to move the body."

"Why?" Grace asked.

Lucy said, "The warm house will accelerate the rate of decomposition, and the smell will spread. In addition, there are health issues to take into consideration, as all the bedrooms share ventilation."

"I didn't think about that," Grace said. "But where? How?"

"I'm going to ask Alan and Kyle to help me move Vanessa's body to the root cellar."

"But our food is down there!" Beth said.

"Can you bring up as much food as you can store inside? Anything that isn't canned or vacuum-sealed. Lucy and I will wrap the body securely, to minimize any contamination. And if you have any large plastic sheets, we could use them."

That would have dual purposes, Lucy thought. It would also preserve evidence on the body for the coroner and sheriff.

Beth paled, and Grace said, "I'll get it. The food we can't fit in the lodge, we'll bring to my house, Beth."

As they walked down the hall, Lucy overheard some of their conversation.

"You need to sell this place, Grace."

"It would destroy Steve. I can't."

Lucy hurried down to her room and retrieved her baggies—she had four that she hadn't used—and returned to Vanessa's room. "Let's use these judiciously."

"The wine. I want to save the glass as well—but we can put it in a paper bag."

"That I don't have, but there's stationery in every desk. We can wrap it in that."

"Good idea."

They preserved the wine and the glass, then finished searching the room. Lucy went through Vanessa's purse. She hadn't changed her driver's license, it was still under her maiden name of "Russell," but there was a copy of the marriage certificate. They'd been married in Phoenix, Arizona, last week. The best man was Nelson Russell—Vanessa's brother maybe?—and the maid of honor was Christina Morgan.

Lucy went through the camera one last time to make sure she had taken all the pictures she

thought the police would need. The body, the wine, the pills, the general layout of the room, close-ups of the possible lividity and the needle mark. She'd also taken pictures of Vanessa's hands and arms, which didn't indicate that she'd fought back—no obvious bruising, scratches, broken nails, or fibers. She scrolled through earlier pictures and noticed that Vanessa and Trevor had taken a lot of pictures of the grounds—the lodge, the barn, the surrounding woods. Some were dark and hadn't come out, but Lucy didn't delete any in case the police needed them as evidence. She didn't want any photos to be missing—each was digitally numbered.

The earliest pictures were of Vanessa and Trevor on their wedding day. They seemed happy. Trevor beamed at Vanessa. The wedding was lavish, at least from what Lucy could tell from the few pictures saved on the camera.

She set aside the camera. She looked through Vanessa's address book, then went through her receipts.

"Anything?" Patrick asked.

"Nothing that stands out to me."

"I'm going to ask that no one come in the room, and ask for all the keys, but that's no guarantee that there isn't an extra floating around."

"Grace probably has a master key as well."

"I wrapped her body in the sheet and top blanket," Patrick said. "When we get the plastic sheet, I'll have Alan and Kyle help with the body. You find Steve and ask what the sheriff said. Then we'll talk to her husband, Trevor. It's time for you to put that criminal psychology degree to work, sis."

While Patrick and the others took Vanessa's body to the root cellar, Lucy found Steve in the lodge's office. He sat slumped at the desk with his head in his hands.

"Hey," Lucy said softly, sitting across from him. "You okay?"

He shook his head. Though he had a lot of responsibility, he was still a young man, not even twenty-one, and this situation seemed to be taking its toll. He picked up a quart carton of orange juice that was on the desk next to him and took a long gulp. Drinking from the carton reminded Lucy of her brothers growing up. Her sister Carina would have a shit fit if she caught them, and always found an innovative way to get back at them. Once, Carina poured hot sauce in the orange juice. Patrick had been the brunt of that spicy etiquette corrective.

"Did you call to the sheriff?" Lucy asked.

Steve looked up. He tucked some papers under the desk calendar before saying, "Yes. There's no way they'll be here before noon tomorrow, and that's still contingent on the storm. They'll know more in the morning. They ran Patrick through their system, I guess, and said he should determine what's best to do with the body until they arrive."

"Patrick is taking care of it. We need to close off that room, however."

"Why?"

"Health reasons."

He didn't seem to find Lucy's answer odd. That she was becoming a better liar didn't please her.

"Who has keys?" she asked.

"The guests would have two. There's an extra here. I have a master key for every room."

"May I have it?"

"I won't go in."

"I know, but Patrick wants to control the keys."

Steve now looked at her suspiciously. "Why?"

"I'm just doing what my brother asked. I'm not a cop."

He pulled the key from his ring and handed it to her. He then reached over into one of the boxes and handed her an extra key. "I don't have the other two."

"We have Vanessa's, and Patrick will get Trevor's."

"Tell me what's going on."

"Anytime a healthy person dies, it's never a mistake to be extra cautious. But I'm certain the coroner will clear everything up as soon as the body gets examined." She then asked

"What other things have been going on around here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Upstairs you said—"

"Oh." He waved his hand in dismissal. "I was just feeling sorry for myself."

"This has been a hard year for you. When did your father die?"

"Last March. Nearly a year ago, but I still miss him so much." His voice cracked and he looked away. He took another pull on his orange juice.

"I know. I'm so sorry. Beth told me there had been some mechanical problems, with the generator, then the bear in the root cellar—"

“Grace thinks I left the door unlatched, but I didn’t. I’ve secured that root cellar ever night since I was eight.”

“How long have you been feeling dizzy?”

“That has nothing to do with anything.”

“Maybe, but I’m worried about you.”

“Why should you care? You don’t even know me.”

True, and Lucy didn’t have an answer. She was sticking her nose into other people’s business. “I have some medical training, and the dizziness and fatigue and imbalance could be a sign of something serious.”

“Look, I spent three days in the damn hospital in Jackson right before Christmas. They said my blood pressure was a little low, but not dangerously so, and they ran their battery of tests. Everything came back normal ’cept for borderline anemia. So I’m on an iron supplement. Grace shouldn’t be talking to everybody about my problems. It’s all under control.”

“You fell off a cliff today, Steve.”

“I just slipped.”

“For a kid who grew up in these mountains, I think you’d know better.”

“I can’t spend any more time in a hospital. Grace can’t run this place alone, and without at least some guests, we won’t survive the year. I don’t want us to sell the lodge. I can’t disappoint my dad like that. I didn’t think we’d ever be in this position. Dad always had an emergency fund, but—”

“But what?”

“It’s gone. Grace said he didn’t want to tell me that the lodge had been running in the red for the last few years, and he was using his savings to keep it afloat.” Steve put his head back down. “I can’t lose my home. It’ll be like losing Dad all over again.”

#

Looking for Patrick, instead Lucy found Heather Larson in the dining room. The vacationer from the Silicon Valley was loading food on a plate, but no one else was eating.

“I thought I’d bring Trevor something to eat, though I doubt he’ll touch it,” she said. “Still, he’ll need something to soak up all the scotch he’s drinking.”

Lucy winced. He’d be difficult to interview if he was falling down drunk.

“Did she kill herself?” Heather asked, just like everyone else had.

“We don’t know.”

“It’s so awful, either way, but I hope it was natural. For Trevor. He’s such a nice guy.”

Lucy had thought so, too, until his wife ended up murdered. “They both seemed nice, though Vanessa was quiet.”

“She was a bit weird. I never thought she’d kill herself though.”

“Weird? How?”

Heather shrugged. “Maybe I should say she was interested in strange things. Like this morning. Alan and I were up early to take a walk. She was standing by the barn taking pictures through the window.”

Lucy remembered some dark images on Vanessa’s camera, but she had assumed the camera had just gone off in her purse or something. She’d have to look more carefully at the detail.

“And then when I told her Alan and I were going to town, she asked me to mail something for her.”

“And why is that strange?”

“It was a postcard with a short message. ‘You are right. We win.’”

That was odd. “Who did she mail it to?”

Heather shrugged. “It went to Phoenix, but I didn’t pay attention to the name. I showed it to Alan, though. Maybe he remembers.”

A gust of wind burst through the house, and a door slammed shut. Lucy ran to the foyer and saw Patrick and the other two men covered with snow, their faces red. “That was miserable,” Alan said. Lucy didn’t know if he was talking about the weather or moving Vanessa’s dead body to the root cellar by the side of the house.

“Is it locked?” Lucy asked.

“No bears will get into that place,” Patrick assured her and showed her the key to the padlock. He pocketed it, then took off his jacket and hung it on a rack near the door.

“Alan,” Heather said, “do you remember that postcard Vanessa asked us to mail?”

“Of course.”

“Who did she mail it to?”

“Nelson Russell.”

Heather said, “There you go,” she said to Lucy. “Why do you want to know?”

Lucy shrugged. “Just curious.” She glanced at Patrick, nonverbally telling him she’d clue him in later. “Patrick, Trevor is drinking heavily. You might want to talk to him now.”

“I’m bringing him this food—” Heather began.

Lucy took the plate. “I’ll take it for you.”

“I am frozen solid,” Alan said to his wife. “Let’s go upstairs.”

Lucy followed Patrick into the library. Kyle joined them. Angie sat with Trevor, holding his hand while he sobbed. The room reeked of scotch. Angie looked to be at her wit’s end.

Lucy said to Kyle, “We’ll relieve Angie. She needs a break. You two should get some food and relax. It’s going to be a long night.”

“Good idea,” Kyle said, escorting his wife from the room.

Patrick shut and locked the door. He sat down across from Trevor. “I’m sorry for your loss Trevor.”

“Two years. We waited two years to get married. Two wasted years.”

“I know this is difficult. But—”

“We were both married before. But her ex-husband was an asshole and my ex-wife was just nuts. That we met up again after all those years—”

“Again?” Lucy asked.

“We dated back in high school, after my family moved to Phoenix from California. Vanessa and Nelson—her brother—became my closest friends. Then we went to different colleges, got married, all those things that people do. I always loved Vanessa, and when my divorce was final I moved back to Phoenix and we started seeing each other again. For two years. Taking it slow, because we wanted to make sure—” He coughed to cover up his distress.

“You come from a wealthy family?”

“We both do. Vanessa’s dad was in the construction business. He always did well, but in the eighties his business took off. He retired ten years ago, left it to Vanessa and her brother.”

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