

# Can't Judge a Book by Its Murder

Amy Lillard



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*To Linda and Mary Beth, thanks for being such faithful readers, beautiful neighbors, and always having a smile for me. I appreciate you both more than you will know!*

# 1



THIS WAS THE LAST THING SHE NEEDED.

Arlo Stanley hurried around the building, barely missing the crumbling spot at the edge of the street. Her foot twisted, and a sharp pain shot from her toes up to her ankle. This was not the day to break in new shoes. And heels at that. Now she had a bum ankle to add to the equation. But she had already been dressed for work when the police called.

A dead body! Right there on the sidewalk! Directly in front of her bookstore!

Things like this didn't happen in their little town. Just. Didn't. Happen.

She could hardly grasp it. Yes, people died, but not on Main Street. At least not as long as she had lived in Sugar Springs. It was unthinkable.

And to make matters worse, this weekend was important to the residents of Sugar Springs and all the Main Street merchants. This weekend was the Tenth Annual All-School Class Reunion. Not many people usually came out for that sort of thing, just a few locals and whoever happened to be in the

area. But this year they had a special guest, the most famous person ever to leave Sugar Springs, Mississippi: Wallace J. Harrison. Known as Wally to those who had graduated with him, he was an upcoming star in the mystery-suspense genre with ten consecutive weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Wally was a national sensation. And he was back in town.

Arlo had managed to convince Wally's assistant that he should do a signing at her newly opened bookstore. She was even going to host a special Sunday opening for the event. Now the store was currently sectioned off with bright-yellow police tape.

She picked up her pace, mincing along and trying not to grimace in pain. She needed to get to her shop as quickly as possible, but City Ordinance 52-B stated that all shop employees had to park in the alley behind their stores to allow for ample parking in the front for their paying customers. Joni, the town's petite meter maid—sorry, “traffic specialist”—was something of a stickler when it came to Main Street. So Arlo's slightly dented, vintage VW Rabbit was parked in the alley behind her shop.

Arlo groaned when she saw the crowd of people in front of her store. It might be 9:00 a.m. on Friday, but everyone was already out and about. No one was looking at the new display she had created of Wally's book along with choice murder weapons, making her window resemble an extra-large game of *Clue*. They were staring at the body. The one she could just see through their shuffling feet. Not quite a body, more a tangle of arms and legs, grotesquely twisted as if this poor soul had jumped from the third-story rooftop and fallen to the sidewalk below. Not just a death, but a possible suicide.

Arlo stumbled. A body. A real live dead body. On the

sidewalk in front of her store. Goose bumps skittered across her skin. This was nothing like watching crime TV or reading about a death in the latest mystery. This was something altogether different.

There was one resident who wouldn't get to engage in the weekend festivities. Though she didn't know who it was. When the police had called, dispatch hadn't told her the identity of the person, only that it was a man and she needed to get down there fast. But Sugar Springs wasn't a big place. There wasn't any doubt Arlo would know the person who lay there on the sidewalk. Maybe she had even sold them a book. The thought was sad and sobering.

Yet she couldn't continue to stand there. She had to be professional, move forward, find out why this person felt the need to fling himself from the roof. See what needed to be done next. Keeping focus would help her handle the ordeal. At least she hoped it would.

Arlo tugged on the tails of her button-down shirt and smoothed her palms over the sides of her gray dress slacks. She pushed her waist-length, chocolate-brown hair over her shoulders and straightened her back. One deep breath in and she started forward.

"Excuse me." She nudged past Dan the grocer, Phil who owned the video store next door, Joyce the florist from across the street, and Delores the gum-smacking clerk from the jewelry store down the way. Arlo didn't bother with the niceties; she simply pushed through. She had to talk to Mads, the chief of police. She had to have him clear up this...mess? Disaster? *Crime scene*.

"Mads." She greeted him on a rush of air, then stopped when she got a good look at the body. "Is that...?"

He nodded, his normally stern face grim.

"But..." The one word was all she could manage. She looked back to the twisted form.

Wally Harrison lay dead at their feet.

.....

Arlo's ears began to hum as Chief Matthew "Mads" Keller shooed everyone away from the body. "Go on now," he said.

Mads, so nicknamed from his high school football days, crossed his arms so everyone would know he wasn't budging. Most turned and trudged back to their stores, spinning around once or twice as if to make sure the scene was still the same, that their eyes weren't playing tricks on them.

"Do you think he jumped?" Jason Rogers, Mads's first officer, nudged the body with the toe of one boot.

"Would you stop violating my crime scene?" Mads growled.

Jason held up both hands and backed away. "Sorry, big-city cop."

Mads rolled his eyes.

Arlo rocked in place, staring in horror. Wally Harrison was dead. In front of her store. And dead.

"Well?" Jason asked.

Mads squatted down next to the body and used the end of his pen to lift the baseball cap from in front of Wally's face.

"The Yankees," Jason scoffed. "Of course he liked the Yankees. He left here and got all big-time on us. Too good to root for the Braves."

Mads let the cap fall back into place. Arlo knew he

wanted to say something to Jason, but he was too controlled for that. One day though...one day he was going to blow. She hoped she was around to see it.

People continued to walk past, pretending to be shopping as usual, but slowing down to take in as much of the scene as they could.

The crime scene. In front of her store.

She had to get ahold of herself.

"Did he?" she finally asked. "Kill himself?"

It was a stupid question. Why would a man like Wally Harrison kill himself? He had a successful life. He was raking in the dough from his book; he was handsome. Once upon a time, he had been everything in their small town. He wasn't the geek who made it big. He was the golden boy, the one that got away. The one who would put Sugar Springs on the map if he ever admitted to being born there.

Well, Mads could have had that kind of life too, if he hadn't blown out his knee in the first game of the AFC playoffs his third season in the NFL. After that, he became a cop in Memphis and eventually made his way back home to Sugar Springs.

"Looks that way," Mads said on a breath of a sigh.

"Arlo."

She turned at the sound of her name. Chloe Carter stood in the doorway of the store they shared. Her face was a contorted mask of disbelief and horror with a little disgust thrown in for variety. After all, there was a strange past between Chloe and Wally, but that was a long time ago.

"Have you been in there all morning?" Arlo asked.

Chloe ran the "more" of Arlo and Chloe's Books & More, which included a coffee bar, cake counter, unique gifts, and

fine chocolates. She had, on occasion, been known to offer flowers, but that had given Joyce at Blooming Blooms an apoplexy and so Chloe had dropped the idea before the roses even wilted.

Chloe nodded, but before she could say anything, a loud voice rang out, bouncing off the Civil War-era brick that lined Main Street.

*"Bozhe miy!"* Inna Kolisnychenko, Wally's trophy assistant approached from the end of the block. Her thick Ukrainian accent added a hard edge to every word she said. "What is going on here?"

"Ms. Kolisnychenko." Mads stood and Arlo could tell by the look on his face that he would rather be anywhere but there, anywhere but telling this woman that her employer was dead—most likely by his own hand. Arlo had to give Mads points for correctly pronouncing Inna's name though.

"Is that—?" She stopped, almost as if posing, as she stared at the body on the sidewalk, one hand on her hip as she bit her lip in confusion. She was a study in beauty.

Inna was statuesque, with dark hair and a pouty mouth, like a Ukrainian Jane Russell, but she carried herself more like a half-asleep Marilyn Monroe. Though she was much taller than most men, including her boss, she had a tendency to make them want to take care of her. There was something a little helpless about her. At least that's what Arlo thought Inna wanted people to see. Arlo wasn't sold on Inna's presentation, though she wasn't certain why.

Inna wore her deep-plum-colored wrap dress like an Amazonian queen. She had paired it with platform stilettos that gave her another four and a half inches easy. In those shoes, she was nearly as tall as Mads. Her exotic blue eyes

seemed almost impossible in her face, as if they could see straight through to a person's secrets, to their soul.

She was more than beautiful, a fact Inna already knew. And anyone who knew Wally knew Inna, the trophy assistant. Too beautiful to be much more than arm candy, Inna probably pulled in more in a week than Arlo had all last year.

The strange thing was Daisy, Wally's wife, was even more stunning than Inna, leaving the average person to wonder why Wally was fooling around. And the average person did know about his affair...or *affairs*, plural. He had all but admitted his dallying with Inna on *Good Morning America*. Everyone knew that she was nothing more than ornamentation. That much was obvious in her lack of skills, other than the savvy way she tucked her hair behind her left ear.

Wally's wife, on the other hand...

"Oh. My. Gawd." Daisy James-Harrison stood at the end of the block, fingers pressed to her mouth, but not so hard as to smudge her lipstick. Her kelly-green dress set off her blond hair and brown eyes to utter perfection.

Then Arlo remembered why the woman was there. Daisy was going to inspect the store and give Arlo the final instructions on how Wally liked his book signings set up. A job that Inna should be performing. But now...

"Mrs. James-Harrison..." Arlo breathed, completely unsure of what she was going to say. She felt like she needed to say something, but what? No one had taught her anything about this in business school.

"Is that...?" Daisy looked hard at the man lying on the ground at the officer's feet.

Arlo bit her lip and turned to Mads.

He cleared his throat. "Yes. Uh..." Mads jerked his head

toward the woman, but Jason, as dense today as he ever was, didn't pick up on the gesture. Mads sighed, cast a backward glance at Daisy, then approached Inna. Arlo figured he was aware that Inna was inching closer to Wally's body. After all, there wasn't much that Mads missed.

"Is that my Wally?" Inna pronounced his name as if it began with a *V* instead of a *W*, her normally thick accent even more distinct as the truth set in.

Mads clasped Inna's elbow and tried to steer her away from the crime scene. "Jason," he called over one shoulder.

This time the officer picked up on the chief's hint and moved toward Daisy. With no one standing near the body, Wally Harrison was strangely exposed. Arlo couldn't help but stare.

She had seen Wally a thousand times during school, a hundred more these last few weeks. His face was on every publication that came across her desk. But he looked different in death. And it had nothing to do with the New York Yankees cap Jason so opposed. Yet it seemed strange to her as well. Maybe because every time she had seen him over these last so-successful weeks, he had been wearing a black turtleneck sweater—very cosmopolitan and utterly un-Mississippi, for a man at least. Still, he wouldn't have been wearing a turtleneck today. It was almost May and the heat was already starting to get to some folks. Hot enough that no one was going around in a snug black turtleneck like a sixties' beatnik.

Wally was wearing jeans, an army jacket with the collar turned up, and that baseball hat. It was nothing like what she had seen him wear during their high school years, and certainly not how he dressed in his countless interviews and

media photos. But she knew as well as anyone that most writers had a persona they showed to the public, an image they wanted to portray. So he wouldn't always dress that way. Case in point, today.

But it was more than his clothes. He had a bruised look as if he had landed face-first when he fell—or jumped—from the roof. Or maybe that was because he was dead. Did all dead bodies look like that? Why would he choose to throw himself off the building as his means of ending his life? Wasn't jumping a rare form of suicide? She had no idea.

She reined in her whirling thoughts and dragged her gaze from Wally. Looking at him wasn't helpful, so she focused on the building in front of her. Her store, like every other one on the street, was made from worn and weathered brick. It gave Main Street a soft yet dependable look. Most of these buildings had managed to remain standing even during the Civil War and the siege on neighboring Corinth. Two large plateglass windows flanked each side of the double doors. Those doors were possibly as old as the building itself and wore their thick layers of paint like badges of honor. There had been some debate between Arlo and Chloe as to whether or not to replace the doors for security reasons, but sentimentality had won out. Instead, they added new locks, another coat of paint, and relied on the honesty of small-town living to do the rest.

Through the windows she could see the reading area. Faulkner's cage still had the cover on, but she was certain the Amazon parrot was ready to be seen and fed. On the other side of the shop, the coffee bar waited for the doors to be opened and the customers to come in. Usually Chloe was bustling around getting things ready. But not today.

“Arlo.”

“Huh?” She dragged her attention from the shop, only briefly aware that the men had switched places. Jason was now talking to Inna and Mads had somehow managed to turn Daisy away from the grisly scene.

“Are you just going to stand there?” Chloe asked. Her voice was only a stage whisper. As if she didn’t want to be heard or noticed.

*Was she just going to stand there?*

Arlo gathered her thoughts and what she could of her composure, then headed into her store.

Chloe held one door open, then locked it as soon as it was closed again.

“Chloe?” Arlo whirled around to look at her best friend and business partner. Chloe’s normally wild blond curls seemed even more riotous today. Or was that the light in her green eyes? She looked so completely un-Chloe-like that Arlo almost laughed. Maybe she would have if Wally Harrison wasn’t lying dead on the sidewalk in front of her store.

“What’s wrong? I mean besides...” She trailed off as she waved a hand in the general direction of the crime scene outside.

Chloe practically wrung her hands, then rushed over to the sink. She pulled the two oversize coffee mugs from the drainer and started to wash them.

“Aren’t those...clean?” Arlo asked. She barely got the words out before Chloe shook her head.

“No. I guess I forgot them last night.”

Chloe never forgot anything. She was too laid-back and too utterly Zen to forget, unlike Arlo who needed a daily

reminder to remember to put on her shoes. At least that's what Helen, Arlo's one-time guardian, said. Helen was the reason Arlo had been able to stay in Sugar Springs when her family was ready to move on.

"Courtney closed last night."

Chloe pushed her hair back from her face, but it sprang forward once again. "Did she?" She gave a nervous laugh.

Arlo narrowed her gaze and looked around the room. Something was up. But what? Dishes in the drainer, not actually forgotten, meant they had been used that morning. And that meant...

"He was here, wasn't he?"

Chloe laughed again, but the sound was choked. "He? Who he?"

Arlo propped one hip against the back of the couch that faced the reading area. Behind her she heard Faulkner flap his wings. The bird gave a small reminder squawk that no one had taken the cover off his cage. "You know who he."

"Why would who he, uh, he be here?" She grabbed a clean rag from the stack next to the sink and turned on the water.

"Maybe to relive old times?"

"What old times?"

"I don't know. How about that time up at Pickwick...?"

Chloe closed her eyes and held up her hand to stay that memory. "Please." Her fingers trembled.

"All right." Arlo straightened and grabbed Chloe by one string-bracelet-covered wrist. "Let's go." She herded her friend past the open-faced bookshelves with their sturdy oak ladders, then up the wide plank staircase to the loft above. There was more seating there, along with café-style

tables and chairs, but more important, Arlo didn't have to see what was going on outside her store. Not for a while anyway. Hopefully long enough for Chloe to tell whatever story she was hiding.

She nudged Chloe into a deep armchair, then pulled her hair over her shoulder and sank down into the opposite one. "Wally was here. Don't try to deny that. What did he want?"

Chloe shrugged. "He said he wanted to talk," she sputtered. "Ten years later and *now* he wants to talk?"

"Why did you let him in?" Arlo asked. She waved a hand and shook her head, as if that would erase her words. "Never mind. Stupid question." She leaned forward and clasped Chloe's hands into her own. "Tell me what happened." She wasn't sure she wanted to know all of it. But Chloe was her best friend and she had to give her the chance to say her piece.

Chloe took a deep, shuddering breath. "He came by to talk." She snorted. "Talk. Imagine. And just like that, I got sucked up again." She sniffed and looked up at the ceiling, a ploy, Arlo was sure, to keep the tears from falling.

"And you thought 'what's the harm?'"

"Exactly."

"So you made the two of you a cup of coffee."

"I made him a coffee."

Of course. Chloe made the best coffee drinks this side of the Mississippi but only drank tea. "Was the shop open?"

"Not yet. It was barely six."

Arlo blinked. Had he been lying out there for hours? It was unthinkable.

Each morning Chloe came into the store at five. She baked for two hours, then opened the shop for the rest of

the Main Street vendors to stop by for a pastry and a fresh cup of coffee.

"He said he wanted to see Jayden." The words fell between them like a wet bag of cement.

"He what?" Arlo had to whisper the words to keep from yelling them.

"Wally *is* his father."

Arlo *pf*fted. "Who gave up his rights." Wally might be Jayden's father, but he had never been a father to the boy. It had always been only Chloe, right from the start.

Chloe shook her head sadly. "He's got attorneys working on the contract, trying to find loopholes. Good attorneys."

Better than she could afford. But Arlo hated to see Chloe give up without a fight.

Now Wally was dead. There would be no custody battle. A detail she felt sure she needed to keep to herself.

"How did he get onto the roof?" Arlo asked.

Chloe pulled her fingers from Arlo's grasp and stood. "How am I supposed to know? Through Phil's I guess." She propped her hands on the back of her hips and stretched, a gesture Arlo had seen her perform countless times over the years. Then Chloe shook out her short blond curls and sniffed once again. The action held a note of finality. "I guess there's no going back now."

"I suppose not." Death tended to do that to relationships. But Chloe and Wally's had been poison from the start. It needed ending. Maybe now Chloe could get on with her life, though Arlo knew if she said anything, Chloe would swear that she hadn't been waiting for Wally for the last ten years. Just as she had waited for him all prom night.

"Phil's, huh?" Arlo said after a few moments. Wally came

by the bookstore, then left after...well, Arlo didn't want to speculate about that in too much detail. And he went to Phil's video store for...what?

Phil's was what a sane person would call a throwback sort of place. Yes, they rented a few DVDs and there were still a couple of VHSs hanging around on some of the back shelves. Mostly he rented video games to the younger teens while the rest of Main Street wondered how he stayed in business.

"I guess. How else would he have gotten up on the roof?"

How else? Their building only housed the two stores. The top two floors of Phil's were used for storage. She supposed Wally could have jumped over from another building, but why would he have done that?

"What did you say to him?" Arlo asked.

"Nothing. Why?" The frown puckering Chloe's brow was made of innocent confusion.

Arlo cleared her throat. She wasn't sure how to say the words without restarting Chloe's waterworks. "He left here, went next door, then jumped—"

"From the roof?" Chloe shook her head. "Wally's not the jumping kind. He was pushed."

## 2



“PUSHED?” THE WORD ESCAPED ARLO LIKE AIR FROM A popped balloon. It exploded, filling the space between them. *Pushed* had intent. *Pushed* meant murder and if he was murdered, Chloe might very well be the last person to have seen him alive.

“He had to have been.” Chloe sniffed. “You know Wally.”

That she did. And despite the fact that Chloe felt there was enough good in the man to pine for him for the last ten years, Arlo knew how he really was. He was too self-absorbed and arrogant to jump from the roof or to kill himself in any manner. Maybe that was what was so strange about the scene out front. Why it looked so wrong. So fabricated.

“What?” Chloe asked.

Arlo shook her head.

“You know it’s true.”

“Yes,” Arlo whispered.

“You should tell Mads. He didn’t really know Wally when he lived here. I’m sure to him it looks like a regular ol’

jumping from the roof." She stopped, tilted her head to one side. "Is there such a thing?"

Arlo had the feeling her friend was slipping into shock. She was on her feet in an instant, guiding Chloe back to her seat. "I think you should sit down."

She went without protest.

Once again Arlo clasped her friend's hands in her own. Chloe's fingers were ice cold. "Let me make you some tea."

Chloe nodded obediently, another sign that something was wrong. Chloe had spent a year in Paris at a pastry school, though truth be known, Arlo suspected she had actually spent more time in England than France. There Chloe had learned the "proper way to make tea." She didn't miss an opportunity to remind Arlo of the fact. Until now.

Arlo released Chloe's hands and made her way back down the stairs to the main floor. She glanced up at the loft once more, then stuffed a tea bag into a mug, used the Keurig to heat water, and poured in the sugar and cream.

She stirred the brew and looked around for a moment. The bookstore had been a dream of hers for a while. Not just a bookstore, but her piece of Sugar Springs: roots, land, home. She had taken this desire and mixed it with her love of books. A few tweaks and a lot of paint later, Arlo and Chloe's Books & More was born.

"Arlo?" Chloe called.

"Coming." She tapped the spoon against the rim of the mug, then laid it on the counter. It wasn't like they would be opening today. She climbed the stairs to where Chloe waited.

Her friend smiled gratefully as she accepted the cup, then she took a tentative sip. No grimace followed, another

sign that Chloe was more affected by Wally's death than she was letting on. Usually she couldn't stand the tea Arlo made. "Are you going to tell Mads?"

*Go out there where the dead body still lay? No, thank you.* She had seen the county coroner's car pull up while she was making Chloe's tea. Maybe after they...removed him.

Her mouth grew dry. She should have made herself a drink when she was downstairs, but she really wanted something a bit stronger than Earl Grey. About ninety proof stronger.

"Later," she finally said. Mads would be around awhile. And how long before he came in to talk to the one person who might have witnessed it all?

"Chloe," Arlo started, broaching the subject carefully, "did you happen to...what I mean is, did you watch..." Arlo shook her head. The words were tripping her up. They all sounded harsh. "Did you see Wally...fall?"

Chloe took another sip of tea, cradling the cup in her hands. She shook her head. "I had gone to the back to get more flour. I heard this noise—" She choked on the words. Arlo could only imagine what the sound was like. "And when I came back out here, he was dead. I called Mads, then I locked the door till you came."

She had called Mads, but she hadn't called Arlo. Dispatch had. Well, if you could call Frances Jacobs dispatch. She answered the phones at the police station, played right field on the county softball team, and kept the deputies in line. The woman was seventy-five if she was a day, but she could still hit a mean line drive.

"You locked the door?"

Chloe nodded. "The killer is still out there."

If there was a killer. The evidence pointed toward Wally Harrison taking his own life. But evidence could be deceiving. They both knew Wally wasn't the type. Could he have really been pushed?

"Do you think it was a mob hit?" Chloe asked, then took another drink of her tea. The sip was a big one, more like a gulp.

Arlo drew back. "A mob hit? What would make you think that?" Because there was so much organized crime in Sugar Springs. Not. The town was so quiet, if anything less happened, they would be in a coma. Before today anyway.

"I dunno. Wally has to do research for his books. Maybe he started talking to the wrong people. Then..." She made a squelching noise as she dragged a finger across her neck. She laughed, took another drink, then hiccupped loudly. If Arlo hadn't made the tea herself, she would have thought it had been spiked. As it was, she knew that Chloe was about to crack. Having your high school sweetheart and one-time lover fall to his death—by whatever means—was too much for one morning.

"I don't think it was a mob hit."

A knock sounded on the door downstairs.

Arlo stirred herself out of her chair and smoothed her hands down her sides. "That's probably Mads," she said. "I'll go down and talk to him."

Chloe shook her head. "I can't—"

"Shhh." Arlo patted her shoulder reassuringly. "I'll take care of it."

Sure enough, Mads was waiting outside the doors of Books and More. He waved Arlo over and she went reluctantly. She unlocked the door to let him in and tried not to

look over to where Wally still lay on the sidewalk. By this time, he had been moved and was positioned in a more dignified pose for a dead person. Someone had taken the time and care to cover him with a sheet.

She *tried* not to look; not that she had succeeded.

"Could I trouble you for—"

She was not going to let him talk to Chloe. It was inevitable, but it wasn't going to happen this morning.

"—some coffee for the guys?"

Arlo glanced toward the stairs, back to the coffee bar, and once again to Mads. She was letting Chloe's imagination get way with her. Wally had jumped. It was that simple. "Yeah, uh, sure. How many?"

"Four," he said, showing her the number on his fingers as a physical backup.

"Coming up." Arlo moved behind the counter and got out four paper cups with sleeves, then started the Keurig once again.

Chloe hated the thing, preferring to make the coffee in the espresso machine or the French press. But it was easier for the customers who wanted a straight cup of coffee to use it as a self-serve.

"I'm going to need to talk to Chloe, you know," Mads said as she started to brew the first cup. He leaned one elbow against the dogleg bar and looked around as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"I know. Just not now, okay?" She didn't want to tell Mads how much Chloe still cared for Wally, or about all the promises he had made to her, then broken shortly after. If Wally had indeed been pushed, then that information would make Chloe look guilty as all get-out.

She resisted the urge to shake her head at herself and started the next cup of coffee instead.

Mads checked his watch and blew out a breath. "Once Bob gets his body out of here..."

Arlo added lids to the cups and nodded. "Okay." She didn't think Chloe would be better by then, but she would be better than she was now. Arlo hoped anyway. "It's just..."

"What?" Mads asked.

She shook her head. "You didn't hang around him."

"And when would that have been?"

"In high school." She dipped her chin toward the large sign hanging from the second-story railing. *Welcome Classmates All-School Reunion*. Unfortunately, Sugar Springs High School rarely had enough attendees for single-year reunions. Sometimes Arlo thought an all-school reunion was better since most kids were friends with others in different grades. This way everyone could get together and reminisce. "We were all in poetry club together. Me, Chloe, and Wally." Though, she had only joined because Chloe wanted to be close to Wally and she wanted Arlo there for moral support. "You were too busy with football."

Mads nodded and took a sip of his coffee. "What does this have to do with what has happened now?"

"Wally was always a bit..." *Arrogant? Full of himself? Haughty? How about all the above?* "Confident. Very, very, very confident." Even after the car wreck that nearly cost him his life. Most people would have been humble. Wally just grew more self-assured.

Mads turned as Faulkner rattled something inside his cage. The cover was still on, but Arlo had heard the noise before. The crazy bird was trying to open the cage himself.

"Faulkner," she said by way of explanation.

He squawked again, responding to his name.

Mads turned his attention back to her. "So he was a jerk."

"What?" Oh, Wally. "Something like that." But it was more. "He was always so damn sure of himself."

"And you think a guy like that wouldn't walk off a three-story building?"

"Yeah," she said, relieved that Mads had picked up on what she was trying to say.

"I worked homicide for five years. Those kinds of men? They are the worst offenders."

"But this isn't a homicide." Was it? *According to Chloe it is.*

"Murder is murder whether you kill someone else or yourself."

She hadn't thought about it that way. But still—

"Trust me on this one," Mads said with his own brand of blown-up confidence. Where did it all come from? Maybe there was a warehouse down in Jackson where men went to pick up the stuff by the truckload.

Mads picked up the paper carrier filled with the to-go cups that Arlo had prepared. "I've seen it all before."

.....

It took the rest of the morning and the better part of the afternoon before Mads and Jason were finished out front. Arlo had uncovered Faulkner only to cover him again a couple of hours later. All the commotion outside agitated him and his squawks and cries of "He did it!" had started to put her on edge. The crime scene tape still partitioned off a strip of the sidewalk, though there was nothing to see. The

men who normally ran the street cleaners had come out to work on the dark stain that Wally's fall had left behind. And even though the mess was gone, the too-clean spot on the pavement was something of a reminder. So there were still gawkers, edging by every so often to take it all in.

But that wasn't to say the investigation was over. It had only moved. Shortly after they had removed Wally's body and the street cleaners had gone as well, Mads had come in and told her that he needed the keys to her third floor. She only used it for storage, but Mads explained he had reason to believe that Wally hadn't jumped from the roof, but from the third-story window.

She wondered why they could believe such a thing and wished she had looked up to see if the window was still open when she was out in front of the store.

She looked up at the ceiling now as if she could hear them moving around on the third floor. She couldn't, of course, but she was so aware of them being there, Jason and Mads poking around, doing heaven knew what. Finding clues against Chloe...?

She couldn't think about it that way. Chloe was innocent and she had to keep remembering that.

Arlo wiped down the bar, though she had only served drinks to the workers outside all morning. Wiping down the bar seemed to be the only activity that she could do with any precision today. No big surprise with everything that was going on. And yet...

She looked around the empty store, shoved the rag in its place under the counter, and headed out.

There were two ways to get to the third floor of her building. There was a staircase tucked in a closet near the

back room, but it was kept locked at all times. In fact, she had even pushed a reading chair in front of it. If no one was using that entrance—and they weren't—then why should she leave empty space in the store? And there was the staircase at the side of the building. When Arlo had bought the store, she had wondered about the setup. She supposed sometime or another, the third floor had been rented out and the new tenants needed a measure of privacy. The door at the side of the building led to a covered staircase that only went to the third floor.

But the real rumor around town is that bootleggers used the space in the thirties to store moonshine. The legitimate business owner below, an insurance salesman, wanted no ties with his upstairs neighbor and made the landlord build the special staircase on the outside of the building to separate their businesses. It was an odd setup to be sure, and one that was working in her favor at the moment. Mads and Jason were upstairs investigating while Books & More was still open down below. But she had to know what they were doing.

Around the building she went, through the door, up the stairs, and onto the third floor.

She had never seen a real police investigation before. She had seen plenty on TV, but this was completely different...and the same simultaneously.

Men were walking around with Tyvek suits shielding their clothes and covers on their shoes. Even their hair was hidden. But it was only the two of them, Mads and Jason.

"Bag it," she heard Mads say. She eased into the room as Jason picked up a piece of paper with his gloved hands and stored it in a plastic bag marked "evidence." Even from across

the room she could see the word written there. Written was really too kind; scrawled was more like it: *I'm sorry*.

"Is that a suicide note?" she asked.

Mads's attention swung around, his eyes narrowing as he caught sight of her. "Not another step," he growled.

Arlo stopped, only then realizing that she had been steadily inching into the room.

"What are you doing in my crime scene?" He straightened from his task, which looked a lot like scouring the floor for a lost contact. He was down on his knees, a pair of tweezers in one hand.

"I just..." What was she doing? Just checking. Just trying to protect her friend. "I thought I would come up and see if you need anything."

"Like?" This from Jason.

"A cup of coffee? Maybe some water?" And this gave her the perfect opportunity to see what they had found. It didn't look like much: a paper coffee cup that she supposed had belonged to Wally, a wrapper that looked like the ones Chloe used when someone bought a muffin or a scone, and something else she couldn't see from where she stood. Or maybe the bag was empty.

"We're fine," Mads growled, but she didn't take offense. A little gruff and always to the point was merely his nature. Always had been.

Arlo nodded and started backing out of the room toward the staircase. The stairs that would take her back to the street. If the window had been open, it was shut now and she was certain it had been dusted for fingerprints. "Okay then. See ya." She turned and made her way down the steps, around the building, and back into her store.

And she had learned nothing. Except Mads thought Wally had been in her building on the third floor before he died. Could it be? How did he get up there? She and Chloe were the only ones with keys.

Arlo shuddered. She was tired of thinking about it, tired of the drama, tired of gritting her teeth and wondering if this was all. What was next? Somehow she knew there was more. She just *knew* it, and she could feel it in her bones.

She had learned long ago to trust her instincts. Or maybe it was throwback emotions from her hippie upbringing. But she remembered the nights long ago when she was a child. She would complain about not being able to sleep. Her parents would share a look, then pack them all up and move them to another campground, another field, another copse of trees where they could pitch their tent for the night. After a couple of times of Arlo not being able to sleep, an hour or so later, they would be chased off by the police or an angry farmer with a shotgun—sometimes loaded sometimes not. Mostly loaded. Of course that was after the commune days and long before she had insisted on putting down her own roots in Sugar Springs, regardless of her parents' reluctance to stay in one place for more than a couple of months. But that was long ago. And no matter where the feelings had stemmed from, Wally was still dead.

She had finally convinced Chloe to go home and get some rest, but it had taken two and a half hours to get her to leave. There was no sense in both of them being at the store. They might have been given the all clear to open from Mads, but there was nobody on Main Street today. Nobody shopping, that was. There were gawkers and police and a

large roped-off section of sidewalk in front of her store, but not any customers.

But she had held on until closing time, having a couple of customers come in just after six. One was Travis Coleman. Arlo wasn't surprised to see him, for he came in from time to time and bought the latest bestseller in paperback. No, the big surprise was he brought a copy of *Missing Girl* to the counter.

"Will that be all today?" Arlo asked. She wanted to ask more. So much more. Like why Travis was supporting the man he thought was responsible for his twin brother's death.

"Yeah." Travis pulled out his credit card and handed it to Arlo.

She finished the transaction without bursting from the questions racing around in her mind. "How's business?" she asked.

"Good." He drummed his fingers impatiently on the counter.

She had known Travis since school but oddly enough rarely saw him outside Books & More, even in a town the size of Sugar Springs. Travis's family home was outside of town a little, just under halfway between Sugar Springs and neighboring Walnut. He had worked at his daddy's tire business since high school graduation and inherited it after his father died. Don Coleman passed away a couple of years ago. Travis's mother had died soon after his brother. From grief, if the rumors were true. Was that possible? she wondered. To actually die from grief?

She ran Travis's card and handed it back to him. He seemed to be in such a hurry.

"Thanks." Travis picked up his sack and receipt and headed for the door.

She watched him until the two girls behind him, both in their late teens, plopped a copy of Wally's book on the counter. The girls giggled as they waited for her to ring them up. Arlo wasn't sure what that was all about either, but she wasn't asking today. It was closing time and that was what she was going to do: close the store and head home.

Well, swing by Chloe's and check on her friend, *then* head home for a nice hot bath and a glass of wine or five—not necessarily in that order. Perhaps even simultaneously.

A knock sounded at the front door, even though Arlo had put up the *CLOSED* sign.

"We're clo—" she started as she turned, but the words dried up before she could finish.

Fern Conley stood on the other side of the double doors, peeking in the large glass window each boasted. Her picnic basket was hooked over one arm and the other hand was cupped around her eyes to help her see inside. Fern would be what some called the quintessential great-grandmother type. She wore floral-print dresses, had blue-rinsed curls that she set at home, preferring to get her gossip from Facebook rather than the beauty parlor like the rest of the over-seventy crowd in Sugar Springs. And she rocked her tan Nike running shoes and compression stockings with pride. "Arlo? Is that you?"

Arlo bit back a sigh and backtracked to the front of the store. She had been on her way to turn off the lights and start shutting everything down. So close to going home. But she had forgotten about one important event: book club.

She had started the book club a couple of months ago. Her plan had been to bring a bit of insight and culture into their sleepy little town. She had imagined all the

twentysomethings in Sugar Springs meeting on Friday night to discuss the latest bestseller and drink Chloe's fabulous coffee concoctions. She had set the date for the first meeting, posted flyers all over town, and told everyone she knew. But when Friday night rolled around only three people showed up: Helen Johnson, Fern Conley, and Camille Kinney.

Arlo unlocked the door to let Fern in. "I really hadn't planned on meeting tonight," she said as she started to relock the door once again.

"You better keep that open," Fern said. She set her basket on a nearby table and untied the scarf from under her chin. She carefully removed it to protect her just-done hair. "Helen was right behind me and she has her Crock-Pot." Fern rolled her eyes. "You know how she likes to experiment."

"Yes, but—" Arlo got no further as a deep knock sounded behind her. She whirled around to find Helen Johnson, her surrogate grandmother, standing outside. Helen was about as opposite from Fern as she could be. Not only in stature—Helen was a tall woman, busty and solid, whereas Fern was what Arlo considered to be medium. Not too tall, not too skinny or heavy, not too...well, anything. Helen might be eighty years old, but she was fighting her age with all her might. She wore ripped jeans with bedazzled pockets, T-shirts with bedazzled emblems, and Nike running shoes with bedazzled hearts on the sides. Her hair was long, reaching halfway down her back. The top was a perfect more-salt-than-pepper gray, while the bottom was deep red, the color of a perfect Valentine. Most days she wore it in a braid. In her hands she carried her infamous Crock-Pot, the cord tossed over one shoulder to keep it

out of the way. Her two-toned braid fell over the other one. From her stance, Arlo figured she had knocked on the door with her elbow.

Great, she thought, but she managed to keep the words in her head instead of letting them go to her mouth. She loved Helen and owed the woman so much. She wouldn't want to hurt Helen's feelings because she was having something of a bad day.

Arlo opened the door to let Helen in and left it unlocked, figuring Camille couldn't be far behind. The women were nothing if not punctual.

"Hello, sugar," Helen said, planting a quick peck on her cheek.

"Hey, Elly" was all Arlo could manage: her pet name for Helen. She was so important to Arlo that Arlo needed something special to call her. When Arlo had moved to Sugar Springs with her family, she had been a tender sixteen and desperate for roots. Her new age hippie parents thrived off new adventures, surroundings, and people. It seemed as if they never stayed in any one place longer than six months. Her brother, Woody, loved the free lifestyle, but Arlo had had enough. Thanks to her father's generous trust fund, she stayed on in Sugar Springs and took a room in Helen's Sugar Springs Inn. She had been there ever since.

"Why is Faulkner covered up?" Helen asked. "Where's Camille?" She looked around as if the other woman might be under some of the furniture, just out of sight.

"She said she was running late. Didn't you check your Facebook?" Fern asked.

Helen turned from pulling the cover from Faulkner's cage and shot Fern a withering look.

"I didn't—" Arlo started.

"No, I didn't check my Facebook."

"Facebook," Faulkner echoed.

"—want him uncovered," Arlo finished.

"Well, you should have, old woman." It was a continual discussion between the two of them. Fern was pretty tech savvy for a woman five years from ninety, and Helen felt social media was nothing more than a "time suck"—her words—and she had no use for it. Camille was on the fence.

"She sent a PM," Fern continued. "If you had a smartphone you would have gotten it there."

"I'm not getting anything that's so smart it's got the word in the name."

"Don't you own a Smart Car?" Fern asked.

And the argue-cussion was underway.

"Smart Car," Faulkner squawked. "He did it."

Arlo turned as Camille pushed her way into the shop. Born and raised in Australia, Camille had all the bearing of an English aristocrat. Her cap of small, snow-white curls looked as soft as cotton. She wore pastel pantsuits, cream-colored shells, and pearls—always. And she always matched her Nike running shoes with her outfit. Today's ensemble was lavender with shades of purple. Where she got purple and lavender Nikes in Sugar Springs, Arlo had no idea. Like the others, she carried goodies for their refreshments. Tonight's offering appeared to be pineapple upside-down cupcakes. Arlo's favorite, aside from Camille's strawberry scones with clotted cream. That was one thing the Brits had gotten right.

Camille tilted her head toward the pair of ladies. "Same ol', same ol'?"

Arlo nodded, then gestured for Camille to set the pan of cupcakes down on a side table in the reading nook.

"Reading nook" was a charming description for a very large part of her bookstore. Arlo had wanted a place where people could be comfortable, hang out if they wanted to read, chat about books, or simply get away from the real world through the pages of a book. The area had two couches that faced each other with a long rectangular coffee table in the middle. Behind one couch was a wall of used books, and perpendicular to that was Faulkner's cage. It gave him the chance to be part of the action as well as gaze out the window. People brought books in for trade, then visited with Faulkner and one another. It was an easy setup. Several chairs were peppered around the area along with an assortment of occasional tables for incidentals like coffee and pastries. All the furniture had been picked up at out-of-town garage sales and estate auctions. The mismatched, slightly worn look gave the place a homey, inviting feel. To Arlo it was perfect. She loved it, though she couldn't say it helped her sell any books. She and Chloe both knew the coffee shop profits kept the store in the black. Of course it would help a lot if she could get a renter for the third floor of the building. They only used it for storage. And having that extra income would surely help the shop. Maybe soon...

"I was thinking about canceling tonight." Arlo said the words to Camille, but the others stopped their friendly debate and turned toward them.

"No," Fern cried.

"Why would you do that?" Helen asked.

They didn't know? Wasn't Friday beauty parlor day?

Arlo had assumed that they would have heard all about today's tragedy at Dye Me a River.

"Y-you didn't hear?" She wasn't sure how to start this revelation. The knowledge itself was hard enough to carry, but telling it all again...

"Of course we heard, dear," Fern said. "It was all over Facebook."

"Facebook," Faulkner echoed with a punctuating squawk.

Helen shrugged. "I heard about it when everyone returned to the inn."

Of course. As owner of the town's best place to stay, Helen was privy to anything and everything that happened to Sugar Springs' most prestigious visitors. When there were none, it was the unmarried male population that kept her informed. Many stopped by for a home-cooked meal in the evenings.

Arlo turned to Camille.

She smiled. "That's why I made your favorite cupcakes."

Arlo returned the smile, though it felt as brittle as autumn leaves after the first frost. "I guess I thought perhaps you would want to do something different tonight. Maybe go to the movies...or out on a date..." True, she suspected these women hadn't been out on dates in decades, but it was the only excuse she could think of now that she was on the spot.

"Nonsense." Fern scoffed. "I can't think of one place I'd rather be."

"That's true." Helen agreed. "The best thing to do after a tragedy such as this is to get your life right back on track."

"Back on track," Faulkner said.

That might be hard to do with the yellow police tape barricade still out front. It might not affect people coming and going into the store itself, but it was a little ominous. And the large patch of sidewalk that was cleaner than the rest...

"We've never had a suicide here before," Camille said in her soft, sweet voice. She had retained enough of her Aussie accent that everything she said sounded like the best thing in the world. "Not that I can remember."

"What about Heck Bascomb?" Fern asked.

As they talked, the women moved into their places in the reading nook.

"Give me a kiss," Faulkner called. "Give me a kiss."

"What was that, thirty years ago?" Helen leaned over and put her lips to the birdcage. Faulkner crab walked over and "gave her a kiss." Arlo kept telling Helen that one day he might decide he wanted a little more than to pretend to bite her lips, but Helen never listened. Affection given and received, she set her purse on the floor next to the armchair she preferred and eased down into it.

Fern frowned a bit but said nothing. That was another contention between the pair. Fern said Helen would never have any money if she set her purse on the floor.

Helen would reply that she had never had any money, so changing her ways now was a "silly endeavor"—her words.

But it was Camille's purse Arlo was normally interested in. Miss Camille sat with it in her lap the entire time they were at book club...and church...and whenever the Kiwanis Club held a pancake breakfast. In fact, every time Arlo had ever seen her sit down, Camille's purse had been firmly in her lap. And it was always the same purse. She

might change her shoes but never her handbag—large, white, nearly square with one short handle and a clasp that audibly clicked when she closed it. When they got their plates of refreshments, Camille hooked it on her arm. The blessed thing was never unattended.

“Heck Bascomb didn’t kill himself,” Helen said.

“Heck. Heck. Heck. Heck,” Faulkner chanted.

“That’s right.” Camille’s voice was full of awed remembrance. “His wife killed him.”

“Wasn’t he shot in the head?” Fern asked.

“That’s right.” Camille nodded.

“So, his wife shot him in the head and made it look like a suicide?” Fern asked.

“Yep,” Helen said. “Right after she filled him with rat poison.”