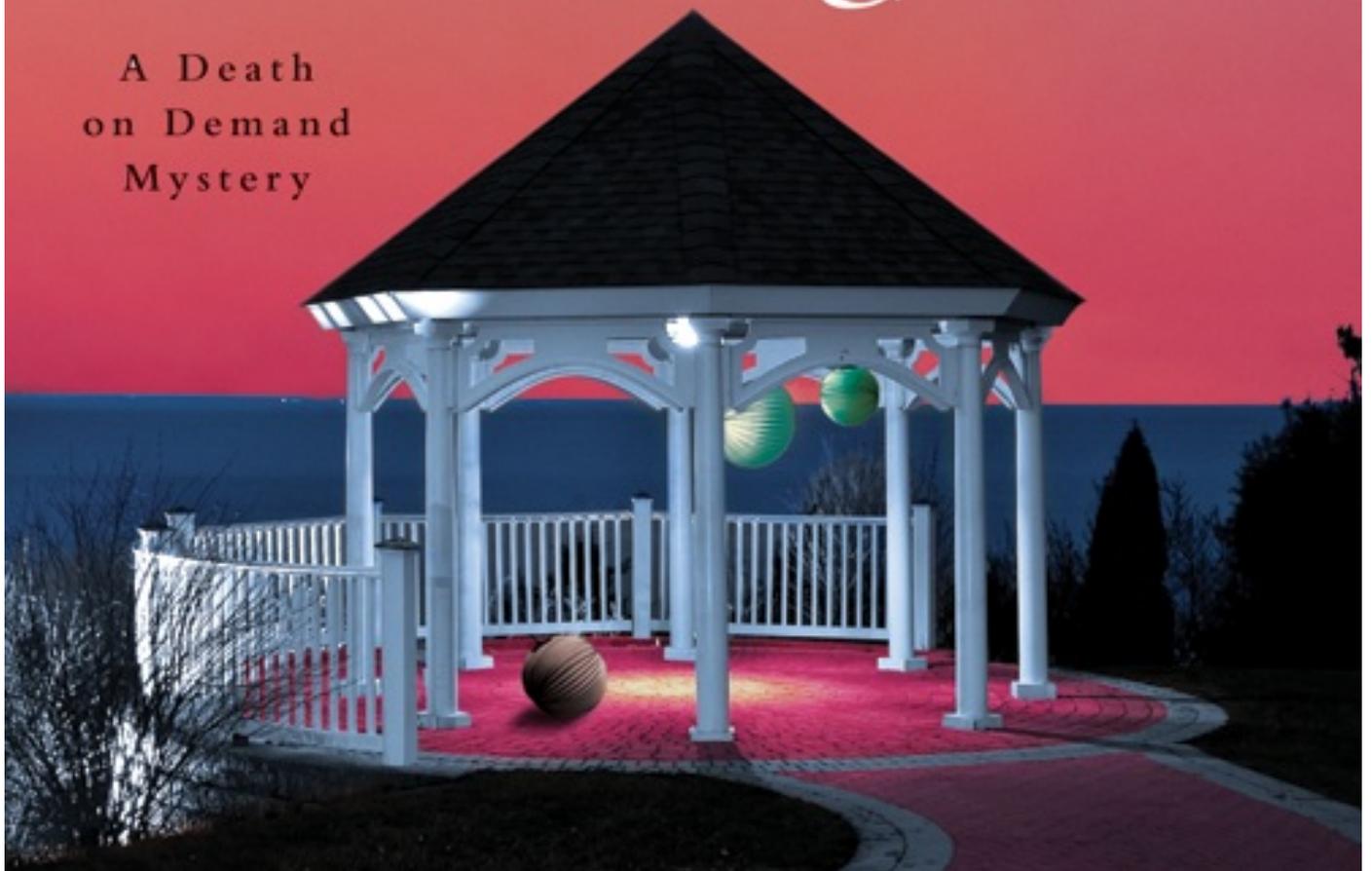


Author of *Laughed 'Til He Died*

CAROLYN HART

Dead by Midnight

A Death
on Demand
Mystery



Dead By Midnight

Carolyn Hart

 HarperCollins e-books

Dedication

To Deborah Schneider with love

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Chapter One

Glen Jamison looked every one of his fifty-two years, his fair hair flecked with silver, his aristocratic face mournful, his six-foot-two frame too thin. He hunched at the desk in his study and felt a sense of panic, like the beginnings of a fire flickering at his feet then billowing to an inferno. How much longer could the firm go on?

There wasn't enough money coming in. The appointment book had too many empty spots. Maybe they shouldn't dump Kirk even though cutting him should save at least a hundred thousand a year. He hated looking into Kirk's blue eyes, which held the hurt puzzlement of a kicked dog. Of course, Kirk was young. Not yet thirty. He was a brilliant lawyer. He'd find a job. But he wouldn't find a job on this island. There were only two other firms and neither intended to expand. Not in times like these. Kirk needed to stay on Broward's Rock. Glen tried not to think how desperately Kirk needed to be here.

Glen wondered if it would do any good to talk to Cleo again. If Kirk stayed, Laura wouldn't be so angry with him, either. It was a misery to go to the office and see Kirk, tight-lipped and grim. Then he shook his head. He knew in his heart that Cleo wouldn't agree to keep Kirk. Maybe it had been another mistake to give Kirk a couple of months to wind down his cases. But that had seemed the decent thing to do and Cleo had agreed.

Glen had been a little surprised at her acquiescence but grateful he didn't have to face her disapproval. He was getting enough disapproval around town. A couple of times at the Men's Grill, he was sure he'd been avoided by clients. In fact, Ted Toomey had canceled an appointment a few days after word got around that the firm was letting Kirk go. Ted had said evasively that he was still giving the matter that they had intended to discuss some thought. One more empty slot in the appointment book. The money wasn't coming in and Cleo wanted . . . Cleo wanted many things. He'd given in over the trip to Paris for Christmas.

When the kids were little, he and Maddy and the kids came home from the midnight service and put the baby Jesus in the crèche. Now the crèche was in the attic with the other Christmas decorations.

that had been in his family for generations. The decorations Maddy and the kids had made together were boxed up, too.

Cleo had wanted all new decorations for their first Christmas together. He'd hated the tree. Shiny white with all blue balls, the tree reminded him of a department store. The kids hated the tree, too. They hated everything Cleo did. This year she had waved away the idea of decorating. After all, they would be in Paris . . .

The kids had been unhappy ever since he married Cleo. He used to be excited to have his children home. Not anymore. Maddy had been gone so long now. He still felt the clutch of emptiness in his gut when he thought of her and the night the police came to the door to tell him about the accident. The first few years he'd been in a daze, working, trying not to think, hurting. He owed everything to Elaine. She'd given up her job in Atlanta and come to help and be there for the kids. The kids loved their aunt.

He felt guilty every time he passed the first bedroom on the second floor that had been Elaine's room. Now she lived in the cottage not far from the gazebo. She'd acted as if the new quarters were fine. Maybe she liked the cottage, but she didn't like Cleo any more than the kids did. Cleo had insisted Elaine needed a life of her own. After all, she'd done a good job with the kids. Maybe she would like to go back to Atlanta. But Elaine had been on the island for so many years now. She had her friends, a life she'd built, and of course Tommy was still in high school. That was another problem. Well, Tommy had acted up. He had to find out who was boss. The matter was settled.

Anger was everywhere around him. Pat Merridew had worked for the firm for so many years, but Cleo had insisted Pat was frumpy and they needed a young and charming receptionist. Firing Pat hadn't saved money. Cleo was paying the new girl even more. Glen hated to remember the ugly look on Pat's face when he saw her yesterday on the street. And then there was Kirk . . .

Glen shied away from thinking about Kirk. It would be a relief not to have to face him every day. They'd given him two months to close down his cases. Three more weeks and he'd be gone.

Cleo told him to buck up. Everything would get better.

The money flow would have to get better soon.

Richard Jamison parked his rust-streaked 2004 Pontiac in the shade of a live oak. He left the window down and pulled a stained duffel from the trunk. The house looked just as he remembered it, a gracious Lowcountry antebellum home, tabby exterior moss green in the June sunshine. Wick's furniture on the shaded verandah looked inviting. He'd like to settle in a rocker with a rum collins. He and Glen could talk over old times. He'd have to go cautiously with Glen. It would never do for Glen to realize that Richard had come to the island to seek financial backing. If he presented everything just right, he could persuade Glen that he was giving him a good investment opportunity.

Richard hefted the duffel. He was curious to meet his hostess. He'd been in Singapore when Glen remarried. Maddy had been dead for six years now, maybe seven. He wondered how the kids felt about a stepmother. Especially a stepmother who was only a few years older than Laura. And how did Glen

sister, who had since then served as chatelaine of the antebellum home, feel about the new Mr. Jamison?

Kids . . . As he climbed the front steps, he gave a slight shake of his head. Not kids anymore. Laura must be about twenty-four. Kit was in graduate school. Tommy was in high school.

An old friend had written him about Glen's second wife. "Cleo's hot, a tall brunette, sultry brown eyes, leggy but stacked. Cleo's one lucky lady. Whatever she does succeeds. High school beauty queen. Top grades in law school. Bowls over guys with one glance. Her favorite game's roulette. The ball always seems to fall in her pocket. Don't know what she saw in Glen except he's top drawer when it comes to an old Southern family and her roots are middle class. She grew up in Hardeeville, mom a teacher, dad a fireman. They lived in a modest frame house on an unpaved road. Plus, Glen used to have a lot more cash till the meltdown in '08. Cleo came to work at the firm, made partner in a year, married Glen the next year."

Richard shifted the duffel, punched the doorbell. He'd selected his wardrobe with care, a borish blue oxford-cloth shirt, poplin slacks, and cordovan loafers, a far cry from his usual frayed tee, baggy shorts, and flip-flops. He'd shaved the stubble that he preferred, even sported a short haircut. He hoped the preppy look would reassure Glen that his wild cousin Richard could, with the proper financial backing, become a pillar of the community.

When the white door opened, Cleo Jamison pushed the screen, held it wide for him. Dark brown hair cupped a long face with deep-set brown eyes, a straight nose, and full lips. A summery blouse emphasized the curve of her breasts. Sleek jade slacks molded to her legs. She smiled. "You must be Richard." Her throaty voice made him think of cast-aside pillows and rumpled sheets. She reached out a perfectly manicured hand, the fingers long, slim, and warm, to take his hand.

Richard felt a flood of desire. His response was immediate and instinctual. For an instant, a hot current sizzled between them.

Cleo relinquished his hand. Her gaze was abruptly remote. Her lips curved in a conventional, polite smile.

He stepped inside, once again under control. But she'd responded for a flicker of an instant. Hadn't she?

A door opened toward the end of the hall. A tall man walked wearily toward Richard and Cleo.

Richard felt an instant of shock. Glen's fair hair was silvered, his face drawn and tired; his clothing hung too loosely on his body. "Hey, Glen." Richard forced a robust shout.

Glen's slightly reedy voice was raised in welcome. "Hey, little buddy, welcome home."

Cleo was well aware that Kit Jamison had been in her father's study for almost fifteen minutes. She felt a surge of triumph. It had taken all her cleverness to delicately maneuver Glen into a state of acute dissatisfaction with his daughter. He'd almost proved intractable, but Cleo's will had prevailed. Funny that he should be so devoted to unstylish, awkward, socially graceless Kit. Of course, she looked like her father, fair-haired, fair-skinned, slender, but her pale blue eyes were humorless, her thin face

ascetic. Sure, Kit was academically brilliant, but she didn't have the smarts to go after a well-paying career. Kit's plan to go to the Serengeti to help catalog declining lion populations as a volunteer biologist might be admirable, but let her manage on somebody else's dollar. Asking Glen to support her intellectual and nonpaying lifestyle would have been all right a few years ago, but Glen not only lost half of his savings in the crash, he'd been panicked enough to sell when the Dow was plunging down toward seven thousand. Cleo's lips thinned. He should have asked her. But he hadn't.

Despite the thickness of the walls between Glen's study and hers, the sounds of acrimony penetrated.

Cleo rose from her chair. She paused in the sunlight that poured through the large, wide window to admire the glitter of the emerald bracelet on her wrist, a gift from Glen, then strolled toward the hallway. She knocked briskly on Glen's study door, swung it wide.

Kit jerked to face the door, her narrow face folded in a furious frown. Without makeup, her face skin was pallid, though marred now by red patches of anger.

Cleo's voice was pleasant. "Kit, won't you stay for lunch?"

Kit flung out one hand. Her hands were graceful and elegant despite chipped nails. "I'd rather eat with hyenas." Head down, she rushed toward the door.

Glen pushed up from his chair. "Kit, come back here. Apologize to Cleo."

The only answer was the clatter of steps in the hallway and the slam of the front door.

Darwyn Jack straightened the collar of the green polo. His fingers luxuriated in the crinkly feel of the cotton mesh. His thick, sensuous lips curled in the half smile that made women his for the taking. Women couldn't resist his tangle of thick chestnut curls and sloe-brown eyes that held a reckless glint. He felt on top of the world, invincible.

He looked around the dim, small room, seeing only its cramped lack of space and shabby furnishings, blind to its scrubbed cleanliness and the lovingly hand-pieced quilt on the bed.

He gave a final approving glance at the mirror and moved into the hall. He was tall, muscular, and well built, but he walked with a slight limp. He'd been the best running back in the state when he was a junior and there was already talk of how he'd have his pick of colleges when he graduated. A car accident while mowing a hayfield ended his football dreams and his college hopes. He'd never bothered much about grades. Who needed them if you could run like the wind?

In the kitchen, he walked to the old oak table, pulled out a chair. This room, too, was clean and bright with daffodil-yellow curtains at the windows.

Bella Mae Jack's cotton housedress was crisp and starched. A big woman, she moved slowly now that she'd reached her seventies. She no longer cleaned homes for a living but she baked and cooked for the weekly farmers' market that was held every Saturday in the park near the harbor. She was careful with her money, always frugal, unfailingly honest. She turned, a plate in her hand. "Sausage patties and dilly bread." She stopped, peered nearsightedly, her pale worn face folding into a frown. "You march back to your room and take that nice shirt off. You have work clothes. Wear them." He

voice was stern.

Darwyn hesitated for only a fraction, then, with a shrug, he came to his feet. When he'd played football, he liked to hurt opposing players. Darwyn had a cold, dark core, the product of abusive years before his drug-ridden parents died and he came, a withdrawn and wary seven-year-old, to live with his grandmother. Only for Bella Mae would he ever be meek.

In his room, he shrugged and carefully pulled off the polo. Soon he would wear fine clothes whenever he liked.

Pat Merridew walked back and forth across her small living room, too angry to sit and try to relax. Finally she stopped at the closet, reached for her light jacket. Even though it was summer, the nights were cool in the woods. She slid a small flashlight into her pocket and retrieved her BlackBerry from her purse. She didn't need a BlackBerry now, not since she'd lost her job. But she always carried a phone in the woods in case of an accident.

She edged out of the back door, careful to keep Gertrude from following. "Not safe for you, sweetie." Gertrude was only permitted outside on a leash and their walks avoided the lagoon with its leathery black king, a nine-foot alligator who would see Gertrude as an hors d'oeuvre. "You stay inside." The door shut, muffling the disappointed whine of the elderly dachshund. Pat walked swiftly the way familiar now. She'd begun her late-night forays when she found it hard to sleep after she was fired.

Pushed by hatred, she walked the half mile to the Jamison property and stood in the shadows of an old live oak, glaring at the dark windows. Long ago, the land had been home to one of the island plantations. There were stories of a ghostly little girl wandering on summer nights, looking for her father, who had been killed in the Battle of Honey Hill. What if a ghost began to haunt the house? Or maybe a poltergeist might make its presence known by little destructive acts.

She stood in the shadows and hugged ideas of revenge.

Oyster shells crackled. She was alert, wary. It was past midnight. Pat watched a dimly seen figure slip through the moonlit garden to the gazebo. Footsteps sounded on the gazebo steps. A flashlight flared, illuminating the interior. The beam settled on a wooden bench. The shadow behind the light knelt for a few minutes, then rose. The light was turned off. Footsteps again thudded softly on the wooden steps. Pat watched the swift, confident return toward the house until the visitor to the gazebo was out of sight behind shrubbery.

Pat waited a few minutes. No one stirred in the garden. She walked swiftly to the gazebo and edged up the steps. She bent and used her pencil flash for a quick flicker. A rolled-up brown towel was taped beneath the bench. She knelt and touched the towel. Oh. She took a quick breath. She didn't need to remove and unroll the lumpy towel to know what it covered. She thought for a moment, then smiled grimly as she reached in her other pocket.

A moment later she moved swiftly along the path in the woods, using the pocket flash to light her way. A thought darted as swiftly as a minnow: knowledge was power.

Henny Brawley sat on her verandah overlooking the marsh. The spartina grass glimmered gold in the morning sun, rippling in a light breeze. Fiddler crabs skittered on the mudflats as the tide ebbed. She took a sip of rich, black Sumatra coffee and breathed deeply of the distinctive marsh scent. All would be well in her sea island world except, of course, for the challenge of personalities. But Henny wasn't irritated. Detecting motives, choosing the right word at the right time to achieve a desired effect provided a never-ending challenge in her role as a volunteer, and was almost as much fun as reading clever, multilayered mysteries.

Henny laughed aloud. As soon as she identified one more of the paintings hanging this month at the Death on Demand mystery bookstore, she would break a current tie with Emma Clyde. Emma, the island's famed mystery author, was also—Henny was willing to give credit where credit was due—a voracious omnivorous mystery reader and a worthy opponent in the contest. Each painting represented a particular mystery novel. The first viewer to identify titles and authors would win free coffee for a month and a new book. She would choose the latest by either Jasper Fforde or Rosemary Harris.

Henny could almost recall the book depicted in the third painting, but not quite. Browsing the store's shelves this afternoon, she was certain something would nudge her memory. However, first she needed to help her old friend Pat Merridew, who had applied for the paid manager's job at the Helping Hands Center, a private charity that threw out lifelines to the sick, the old, the troubled.

There was a fly in the ointment. One of the board members was a stickler for checking references, which seemed a trifle absurd on an island the size of Broward's Rock. All of them knew Pat Merridew, admittedly a bit quirky and sometimes fractious, but whatever her shortcomings, Pat exuded energy and she knew everyone in town.

Of course, there had to be a reason why Pat had lost her job at the law firm. That was the point made by Rachel Thompson in her brusque way. "Depend on it, Henny, there's a story there. We can't hire Pat until we know what's what."

Henny had made no headway when she'd suggested that Pat was simply another casualty of Glen Jamison's remake of her husband's life and office. Rachel had insisted, "We must know the truth of the matter."

Henny flipped open her cell, punched a number.

"Jamison, Jamison, and Brewster." The unfamiliar feminine voice was obviously young. The new receptionist, no doubt.

Henny raised an eyebrow. Kirk Brewster's name was still included in the firm name. But not for long. Glen should be ashamed. Of course, everyone had been struggling with hard times. "This is Henny Brawley calling for Mr. Jamison." She and Glen had worked together on fund-raising for the island youth center.

"May I ask the subject of your call?" The voice was chirpy.

Henny felt as if a door had slammed in her face. If Pat had answered, the call would have been passed through without question if Glen was in the office and available. It would take the new receptionist some time to learn the ropes. "I'm calling in regard to a recommendation for Pat Merridew."

“How is that spelled, please?”

Henny responded politely, though she was annoyed. Pat had worked at the firm for more than twenty years. Was she already completely forgotten?

“Thank you. One moment, please.”

Henny understood that Kirk had started looking for a job on the mainland, but law firms had cut back on hiring in the face of the economic downturn. Kirk’s record was amazing. He’d been number one in his law class and made junior partner in a mainline Atlanta firm in four years, instead of the usual seven. He would likely still be on the fast track to an equity partnership except for his sister’s serious illness. Both parents were dead and he was the only family she had. Henny felt sure Kirk would eventually receive an offer, but that didn’t change the fact that his single-mom sister had leukemia and depended upon Kirk to help with her two little boys. The grim news had come only a few months after he made partner at the Atlanta law firm, but he’d immediately resigned and returned to the island. If he had to leave Broward’s Rock, his nephews would suffer.

The chirrupy voice returned. “Mr. Jamison is in conference, but Mrs. Jamison is available.”

Henny hesitated. She could call Glen at home tonight. But she’d promised Rachel she’d check the morning. Before she could answer, Cleo came on the line. “Cleo Jamison.”

Henny raised a disdainful eyebrow. Cleo dismissed niceties such as hello. Implicit in her tone was the conviction that she, Cleo, was due homage. Cleo had succeeded in conveying her sense of self-worth to the community of Broward’s Rock. Since her arrival on the island a few years ago, she excelled as a rising young lawyer, married the widowed senior partner, and now she dominated the island’s social scene, young, beautiful, and joyously self-confident.

Henny spoke pleasantly. “Hi, Cleo. Henny Brawley. I need a rec for Pat. She’s applied to work at Helping Hands. Of course, the job isn’t on a level with her work at the firm. She’ll be overqualified, but we’ll be glad to have someone to sort and arrange the clothes and household goods.” *And you screwed her royally, so now’s the time to pony up some help, lady.*

“Pat?” A sigh of regret. “I wish I could be helpful, but as I told Rachel this morning—”

Henny’s eyes narrowed. Rachel was humorless, didactic, pompous, and perhaps the wealthiest member of the Helping Hands board. Rachel was pleased to provide support, but only if people and proposals met with her approval. Had she called Cleo?

“—I’m afraid Pat’s become a bit unbalanced. She wasn’t the right face for the firm now. The firm wants to project an up-to-the-minute image, youthful, forward-looking. Glen explained it to her as kindly as possible—”

“Pat doesn’t need a youthful image at Helping Hands.” Henny’s tone was sharp, but she knew it was a stiletto flick at an opponent who wore emotional chain mail.

“Of course not.” Cleo sounded amused. “But Rachel agreed that it wouldn’t do to hire someone who is emotionally unstable.” Now Cleo’s voice was metallic. “Last weekend she slipped into the house and accused Glen of ruining her life. There was a dreadful scene. She refused to leave until I threatened to call the police. Of course, she’s old—”

Henny was icy. "Not quite fifty." Cleo knew full well that Henny was a septuagenarian. Cleo was arrogantly on the sunny side of thirty.

"Oh, perhaps it's hot flashes." Cleo was dismissive. "In any event, you'd better check with Rachel. I gave her a ring when I heard Pat had applied to Helping Hands. I thought she should know the truth. But I suggested a charming young woman who's working on her certification for home health. Ciao."

Henny listened to the buzzing line, clicked off the handset. Was Cleo's tale of Pat's behavior true? Whether it was or not, Pat wouldn't get the job. It was too late to try to talk to Glen.

Henny sipped coffee. She watched a majestic blue heron poised to capture a fish. The heron's beak darted into the murky green water, lofted its prey. The great bird swallowed and the fish was gone, plucked from its summer moment in the warm water just as Pat had been ousted from her once secure job.

Annie Darling looked out at the teeming marina as she hurried toward the boardwalk that fronted the shops. She took a deep breath of the sea-scented onshore breeze. It was a perfect June day, the sky a soft blue without a trace of clouds. Herring gulls bobbed in pea-green water. Fishermen dotted the pier that jutted into the sound. Boaters hosed down decks or maneuvered their crafts, everything from sunfish to sloops to catamarans to yachts. She shaded her eyes to search the marina. She felt, as always, a quick thrill when she saw Max, blond hair glinting in the sunlight. He was on his way out into the sound to take a run in his new fiberglass powerboat. He'd excused his absence from his office on the grounds that having a new powerboat and not taking it out the first day qualified as cruel and unusual punishment. It would have been fun to join him, but the bookstore needed all hands at the ready on a sunny summer day.

In fact, she needed extra help. She and Ingrid, her loyal clerk, were working long hours. Too long, according to Max. This morning when she attempted to slip from bed an hour early, the better to take care of needed orders, he'd caught her hand and tugged her back to his side, murmuring that early birds surely deserved a playful launch.

A smile touched her lips. How could she resist Max, his blond hair tousled, his stubbled cheeks bristly, his lips seeking. So she not only wasn't early, she was a few minutes late. She walked faster, passing his office with a smile. Jaunty letters announced: CONFIDENTIAL COMMISSIONS. Max specialized in solving problems. He always made his status clear to prospective employers. He was not a private detective. The state of South Carolina had particular and specific requirements for the licensing of private detectives. There was no law that a man couldn't offer advice and assistance to those in a state of trouble.

Annie reached Death on Demand. As always, she was pleased and proud to see her storefront. A new cream-colored wooden sign hung above the front door. DEATH ON DEMAND gleamed in gold letters. A dagger dripping bright red drops pointed to the legend: *The Lowcountry's Finest Mystery Bookstore*.

Annie took an instant to glance in approval at the display behind the plate glass of the front

window. Ranged on a beach chair were brightly jacketed books sure to please summer sun worshippers: *Our Lady of Immaculate Deception* by Nancy Martin, *Cemetery Road* by Gar Anthony Haywood, *The Puzzle Lady vs. The Sudoku Lady* by Parnell Hall, *A Night Too Dark* by Dana Stabenow, *The Bone Chamber* by Robin Burcell, and *Revenge for Old Times' Sake* by Kris Neri.

The bell jangled as she pushed open the door. She eyed the recently hung poster at the end of the thriller section. She loved to tell the story of its discovery. Last month she and Max had wandered around a flea market in Savannah. Next to a particularly eclectic booth sat a worn old trunk adorned with this sign:

MYSTERY CONTENTS, YOURS FOR TEN BUCKS

She'd grabbed Max's arm. "Mystery contents!"

"To you and me, maybe. Not to the shopkeeper."

"Cynicism does not become you." Annie had always loved mystery packages with unknown contents. She remembered with delight *The Iron Claw* by Phoebe Atwood Taylor writing as Alicia Tilton in which three brown packages powered the plot. Thriller writer Robert L. Duncan advised authors when they were stuck to have a package of unknown provenance left at a hotel desk for the hero.

All the way home Max speculated about what she would find, possibly old *National Geographic* (the trunk was heavy), maybe discarded cowboy boots, or Kewpie dolls from a carnival. At *Death on Demand*, Max had hefted the trunk on a table. He found a chisel in the back room. As he pried open the lid, his suggestions continued, ". . . stuffed moose heads . . . old Pittsburgh phone books . . . hand-knitted purple tea cozies . . ."

The lid popped up, as if snapped by an invisible hand.

"Oh." Annie's spirits had drooped at the sight of a dun-colored worn army-issue blanket, like 1940s vintage. She'd lifted out one and a second and a third.

Max had taken pity at seeing her crestfallen expression. "Hey, they'll make a great gift for animal rescue. Put those back and I'll take the trunk over."

But maybe . . . just maybe . . . She kept on pulling out blankets. At the very bottom of the trunk there was a rectangle covered by brown butcher paper. Annie lifted out the thin, stiff package and eased open the sealed wrapping. She had turned to Max and held up a poster and her smile was at a thousand watts.

Now customers shared her joy with the vintage movie poster for *Murder, My Sweet*, starring Dick Powell and Claire Trevor in the 1944 film version of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*. The yellow letters of the title were as bright as the day the poster was created. Annie could almost smell buttered popcorn.

Agatha, *Death on Demand*'s elegant and imperious black cat, shot past, batting at a small plastic ball with a wobbly feather.

“It just goes to show,” Annie called after her, but Agatha was too engrossed to respond and disappeared around the end of a bookcase. Annie wasn’t altogether sure of the cosmic significance of her fondness for mysterious packages and boxes, but she was certain they made life more interesting.

Maybe today there would be a new surprise awaiting her.

“Annie, is that you?” Footsteps sounded in the central aisle. Slender, quick moving, and efficient Ingrid was, beneath her crusty exterior, kind to the core. Ingrid planted herself in front of Annie. Graying brown hair drawn back in a bun, her sharp-featured face looked harried. “Glad you’re here. There was just the tiniest hint of rebuke for Annie’s tardy arrival. “A book club from Bluffton is due in half an hour, Henny’s waiting for you in the coffee area, and Laurel put a portfolio on your desk.” Ingrid looked puzzled. “On the outside of the portfolio—I couldn’t help seeing it as I went by—there’s an inscription in straggling pink letters and a funny splotch.”

Annie was well aware of the portfolio’s contents, which Laurel had exhibited to her and Max over dinner one evening. “I’ll deal with Laurel’s portfolio later.” Annie wished her reply didn’t sound as strained as if she’d found a copperhead wrapped around the coffee machine. After all, her mother-in-law’s enthusiasms were nothing new, from Laurel’s flirtation with harmonic convergences when they’d first met to her fascination with saints and now . . . This time Max would have to corral Laurel. There were limits.

An inner voice hooted: *Sez who?*

Ingrid looked sympathetic and changed the subject. “Anyway, I’m on the phone with the Harp rep about the Mary Daheim titles. That bed-and-breakfast in Bluffton wants fifty copies by tonight. She whirled and rushed toward the storeroom.

A distant whir indicated that Henny, no stranger to the store, was making cappuccino. Annie hurried down the central aisle to the coffee bar. Readers sat at several tables, all with mugs and biscotti.

Annie reached the coffee bar. “Thanks for taking care of everyone.” She gestured toward the contented coffee hounds and smiled at Death on Demand’s best customer and her cherished friend. Always, Henny was fashionably dressed, the terra-cotta of her linen top flattering to her silvered dark hair and dark eyes.

Henny pushed a mug toward Annie. “Lots of caramel. Hey, I like your sundress.”

Annie glanced in the mirror at the far end of the coffee bar that added illusory depth to the cafe area. She hadn’t been sure about the color, a dusty plum. The mirror reflected her honey-blond hair and gray eyes and the loose-fitting A-line dress decorated with appliqués of silvery fern fronds. She thought maybe the color was too cool.”

“Perfect for you.” Henny spoke with fashion authority.

Annie took a sip of the scrumptious foam. She was glad Henny liked the dress, but still felt a bit unsure of the shade. Though she knew she needed to get to work, she slid onto a stool at the coffee bar. She would take a moment to visit with Henny and admire the collection of coffee mugs behind the coffee bar, each with the name of a mystery author and title. Annie glanced at her mug. *Knocked for*

Henny followed her glance. "I know how you like surprises."

Annie noted the lively, determined intelligence in Henny's dark eyes and felt a tingle of alarm.

"That depends."

Henny's smile was quick. "Nice surprises, like the *Murder, My Sweet* poster."

Annie, of course, had shared the story of her well-rewarded curiosity far and wide.

Henny finished a latte with an extra dollop of almond slivers and came around the bar to settle on a stool next to Annie. She held up her mug (*Taken at the Flood* by Agatha Christie) in a toast. "As you pointed out after you so wisely persevered despite initial disappointment, treasures can be found in the most unlikely places. Darling, do I ever have a treasure for you!" Henny's beautifully modulated voice was confident, but her dark eyes held a plea.

Chapter Two

“Did you read Nancy Drew when you were growing up?” Annie heard the discouragement in her voice. As far as she had been able to determine, Pat Merridew had never read a single Agatha Christie.

Pat pushed back a sprig of graying auburn hair. Her pale blue eyes slid away from Annie, then back. “I always watch *CSI*. I’ll catch up. I’m a quick study.”

Annie saw bravado and embarrassment.

Pat slid her fingers together in a tight grip. “I know it’s important to be knowledgeable for our customers. But Henny said you really needed help at the store. If you’ll give me a chance, I’ll do my best. Maybe let me try out for a couple of weeks.” Her mouth twisted in a wry almost-smile. “I’ll get nuts if I sit around the house much longer. I’ve always worked.” She tugged at the collar of her blouse. She’d obviously dressed with care for the interview, a crisp white cotton blouse, a tropical bright skirt with cheerful splashes of indigo and rose, light blue leather loafers.

Annie knew it wasn’t the money that prompted Pat’s plea, certainly not the modest salary Death on Demand offered. It was the sense of worth conferred by holding a job. Jobs on a small island could be few and far between. It was the height of the tourist season, but those jobs had been snapped up before the end of May, primarily by college students. The handful of year-round shops near the marina or the island’s small downtown belonged to people who had owned them for years, and openings were quickly filled by someone who knew someone.

Henny knew Annie. Death on Demand needed a clerk. But Pat obviously didn’t know cozy from noir or thriller from police procedural.

Pat’s gaze fell. She looked resigned and began to turn away.

Annie reached out, touched her arm. “I’m sure you’d like mysteries.”

Pat faced Annie, her eyes brightening with hope. “I know I would. I’ll read as many as I can as soon I can.”

Annie forced a bright smile. “You can be a great help with unpacking and shelving and ordering

Let me show you around.”

By the time they reached the coffee bar, Annie was berating herself internally. She was beginning to suspect that Pat not only didn't read mysteries, she didn't read, a state of being Annie equated with abandonment on an ice floe without a Kindle, Sony, or Nook, much less a book.

Annie gestured toward the watercolors hanging above the mantel. “Every month I hang fresh paintings for our mystery contest. Each represents a particular title. The first person to identify the book and author receives a month of coffee and a free book.”

Annie admired the bright splashes of color.

In the first painting, moonlight beamed through tall windows, illuminating a staircase and grand hall. Hanging banners appeared shadowy and gray in the cool radiance. A man in a soft bathrobe lay limply on the checkered floor. An awkward figure scrambling unsteadily to his feet reached out, crashing a suit of armor to the floor.

In the second painting, a fresh-faced teenager, eyes bright, held his cell phone up, but three women in a sunroom were oblivious. Seated with one foot on a hassock, a heavily made-up woman in a film dress and matching turban gazed in dismay at a small, older woman. The smaller woman also wore a turban. Gray hair poked from beneath purple cloth. Scowling, she held a bent cookie sheet. On the sheet rested a plate of cookies. Observing the turbaned women was a graceful, middle-aged woman whose expressive face reflected breeding, intelligence, and wisdom.

In the third painting, roiling smoke and shooting flames were shocking in the pale moonlight. Smoke darker than the night billowed through the front door of a three-story building as an obviously injured man hobbled across a porch toward the front steps, helped by a stocky figure wearing a bandanna that covered the lower part of his face.

In the fourth painting, a tall young woman with auburn hair stood in a radio studio. Her eyes wide, she stared out the window into the palm-tree-rimmed parking lot at a platinum-haired, voluptuous blonde in a shocking-pink halter dress and Jackie O sunglasses as she navigated forward in stiletto slingbacks.

In the fifth painting, shock was obvious in the moonlight-illuminated faces of two young women lugging a tarp-wrapped body. A Pomeranian, with its mouth open wide to bark, rode on the corpse's chest. Looking haunted were a tall, olive-skinned brunette and a plus-size Rita Hayworth lookalike with long red hair.

“Oooh.” Pat looked impressed. “Do they get any book they want?” She had exclaimed at the \$300 price tag for the three-volume leather-bound set of Sherlock Holmes.

Annie's reply was swift and firm. “Only a noncollectible.”

“Noncollectible?”

Annie took a deep breath. Maybe Pat would be a whiz at the coffee bar.

Annie's cell rang. She stared at the computer. Online ordering might be easier for the publishers, but the lines to fill in and boxes to click made her feel as if she were negotiating a maze in a deep forest.

Let's see . . . She needed to return the unsold Dan Brown hardcovers, but not the paperbacks. She answered absently, "Death on Demand, the finest mystery—"

"Hey, Annie. Has anybody figured out the paintings yet?" Henny's resonant voice, which easily reached the last row in island little-theater productions, was just this side of strident.

Annie tossed aside her usual tact. "Nope, but don't you sometimes feel like it's shooting fish in a barrel? Where's your sportsman's blood? Why don't you give ordinary readers a chance?"

"When Democrats embrace Sarah Palin or when you bar Emma from the contest."

Since Annie would rather sunbathe nestled next to an alligator than in any way challenge the island's rock-visaged queen of crime, she changed the subject. "Can you think of any way I can dive Laurel from hanging that stuff in the bookstore?"

A throaty chuckle was an answer. Of sorts. "I'm taking bets on whether Laurel prevails. And I wouldn't call those lovely matted photos *stuff*. I thought you loved cats."

Annie felt her spine stiffen. "I do love cats. And I know the posters are fetching." It was a grudging admission. "But Death on Demand isn't the place for Laurel to display them. I don't care how clever they are." Annie determinedly ignored the portfolio, only inches from her hand.

"Odds are running eight to one."

Annie didn't have to ask in whose favor.

"On a happier note—I hope—how is Pat doing?"

Annie smiled. "A much happier note. She's a live wire. She's trying so hard." Through the open door into the office, she heard Pat's eager voice. "Certainly if you enjoy Earlene Fowler, you'll love Diana Killian and Emilie Richards. Over here we have . . ." Of course, Pat was cribbing from the staff recommendations list at the end of the romantic suspense aisle, but she'd taken the time to learn. She gave her some Christies and, no surprise, she was enchanted. She read those and now she has another batch. She's started quoting Christie."

"A quotable lady." Quick as a rapier thrust, Henny demanded, "Which character said: 'I had the firm conviction that, if I went about looking for adventure, adventure would meet me halfway. It is the theory of mine that one always gets what one wants.'"

"Anne Beddingfield in *The Man in the Brown Suit*."

Again that throaty chuckle. "Of course you know that one. I'll bet your copy is dog-eared. You have a dash of Anne Beddingfield. I like this game. We'll play it again."

Annie was smiling as she clicked off the phone. There were no clouds on her horizon this summer Friday.

Except, of course, Laurel's latest project. And tomorrow.

Annie glanced at the portfolio, the better not to think about tomorrow. She reached out slowly, then yanked back her hand. No. Double, triple, quadruple no. She would not look and be charmed. Riggs was right. Death on Demand was a mystery bookstore, not a venue for highly original philosophical . . . She grasped for the proper word. Philosophical treatises? Too weighty. Philosophical exercises? Better. Philosophical nonsense? Too harsh.

As if on cue, Agatha bounded onto the desk. Before Annie could grasp the silky-haired creature, one black paw poked the keyboard.

The book order vanished.

“Did you do that on purpose?” Annie stared into cool green eyes that appeared both amused and questioning.

She suppressed the quivering thought that somehow Laurel had engineered the cat’s action. She mustn’t succumb to hysteria.

Annie grabbed the portfolio. Didn’t self-help gurus counsel confronting fears? She reached in and pulled out the first cardboard-mounted photograph. She looked from the photo to Agatha. “When did you pose for her?” And since when did cats pose? Of course, the cat wasn’t Agatha, although the resemblance was startling. There was no denying that the pictured cat had sleek black fur, glittering green eyes, and an uplifted (to swat) paw. The caption read: “British Black Shorthair. *My way or the highway.*”

Annie shoved the picture back into the portfolio and concentrated on breathing evenly. Was Laurel hoping to win Annie over by including a poster with Agatha’s double? Possibly. Possibly not. Who knew what Laurel was thinking? That question had mystified all who had ever known the woman, especially her daughter-in-law. It was time to go home, relax, forget Laurel and her posters. In any event, Annie couldn’t spare the emotional energy.

She needed every ounce of calm to survive tomorrow, which was a double feature for Death on Demand, Emma Clyde appearing at the Author Luncheon at the library at the same time as the Savannah Captivating Crimes Book Club arrived at Death on Demand for a light lunch and discussion of suspense novels from Eric Ambler to Suzanne Brockman. A recently departed (not from this life but from the island) employee had blithely approved the date for both events. By the time Annie discovered the conflict, the schedules of the library and book club were set.

Somehow Annie had to sell books at the library while convincing Emma that, of course, the crowd was wonderful and not the least bit smaller because of the meeting at the store or the competition from several other luncheons occurring in various venues that the interim help also had not checked. Ingrid, meanwhile, would host the book club. Normally such an event required Annie’s presence as well as a summer clerk. Henny often helped out but she was presiding at a Red Cross luncheon at the Sea Side Inn. Laurel loved to sub at Death on Demand, but Annie had no intention of calling on her.

Thank heaven for Pat.

Saturday wouldn’t be doable without her.

Annie rushed into the kitchen. She’d changed into a short-sleeved knit top that matched a bright orange stripe in flamboyant cropped pants that shouted summer with pink, grape, white, lime, and orange stripes.

Max, muscular and tanned in a T-shirt, khaki shorts, and espadrilles, shredded carrots at the center workstation. Not only was he a gorgeous hunk, he was a super chef. He looked over his shoulder

“Sangria’s made.”

Annie felt bubbly without a sip. She moved toward the refrigerator. “What kind tonight?”

“Max’s Coolest Ever. Chardonnay with fruit, lemonade, and two shots of peach brandy. You can add the ginger ale.”

Annie fixed two glasses, placed one near Max, then perched on a stool to watch as catfish sizzled in the skillet. She cradled the cool glass in her hands. “If I ever needed a pick-me-up, it’s tonight.” She hesitated, then asked obliquely, “Have you talked to your mother?”

Max ladled rice from the cooker. “She looked cheerful when I saw her.” He carried their plates to the table. “If you’ll zap the corn bread in the microwave, everything’s ready.”

Annie put down her glass. “You saw her?”

“Why don’t we eat and then—”

Annie folded her arms. “Where are they?”

Max’s blue eyes shifted away. He moved fast as Dorothy L, his plump white cat, jumped onto the table. “Not when we’re eating, D.L.” He retrieved the fluffy cat and carried her to the kitchen door.

Annie was still waiting when the door clicked shut.

Max studied Annie’s face and placed the plates in the microwave for later reheating. “In the living room.”

Annie stalked from the kitchen and strode to the living room, her sandals clicking on the heart-pink floor. Just inside the wide double doors, she stopped and took a deep breath. She spotted a portfolio twin to the one in her office, pink letters and black splotch straggling across the stiff plastic over. The inscription was burned into her consciousness:

PAWS THAT REFRESH: Cat Truth

She wanted to snarl that the black splotch following the title, obviously a paw print, was just too cute. Actually, the paw print was cute, even though Annie loathed cuteness. She didn’t turn when Max came up behind her and slipped an arm around her rigid shoulders.

His voice was conciliatory. “Don’t you think they’re clever?”

“Of course they’re clever. But they don’t have anything to do with mysteries. Displaying them on *Death on Demand* would distract from the books.” Not to mention the watercolor contest. She had no doubt Laurel coveted the expanse above the fireplace as a space to display the cats.

Laurel had discovered free online pictures of exotic cat breeds and never looked back. She printed photos on glossy paper and mounted them on acid-free mat board. In printed letters beneath the photos, each cat was identified by breed, and a caption expressed a “Cat Truth.” The classy, high-end posters were everywhere, propped against the sofa and several chairs, ranged along the mantel, and spread across the coffee table.

A smile tugged at Annie’s lips. She honestly couldn’t look at pictures of cats, all kinds of cats—Maltese, Abyssinian, Siamese, Scottish Fold, domestic short hair, tabbies, and not be enchanted by

their beauty. The coup de grâce was the legend beneath each picture. A Sphinx, its hairless gray skin wrinkled, stared with obvious reproof. Uneven pink letters inquired: *Who you lookin' at, dude?* multicolored Manx, mostly white with a black half mask and black back with a dash of orange, stood with his head twisted staring over raised haunches: *Nobody sneaks up on me!*

Annie counted twenty admittedly fetching photographs of gorgeous cats, each mounted on poster board with the announcement of breed and an inscription. "Cat Truth," she mused. "Okay, the pix are great, the comments priceless." If Max quoted her to Laurel, maybe this sop to TV ads would soften the blow. "However"—she was emphatic—"a Philosophy of Life according to cats has no place in my mystery bookstore." She turned and realized she was in Max's embrace, a very nice place to be. She smiled up at him. "I have a great idea." She wriggled one arm free and made an inclusive gesture. "We'll leave the posters just the way they are and have a cocktail party here to celebrate Laurel's"—she paused for inspiration—"trenchant philosophical triumph."

Annie's cell rang. She glanced at the clock. A quarter to eleven. She felt beleaguered, irritated, pressed, and ill-treated. She needed to get to the library and set up the book table. Emma Clyde wanted books on sale both before and after an event. What Emma wanted, Emma got, Annie having long ago decided the better part of valor was never to rouse a quiescent literary lioness. She checked her cell ID and frowned. "Hi, Henny." She tried to sound pleasant, but if she hadn't listened to Henny, she probably have found someone other than Pat to hire and today would not be a disaster waiting to happen.

"You sound stressed."

"That sums everything up nicely. I have the library Author Luncheon for Emma and"—she heard the high twitter of feminine voices through the open door of her office—"the Savannah book club here and Pat's a no-show, which puts Ingrid in a deep, deep pit. I need to get to the library. I'll talk to you later."

Annie put more copies of Emma's new paperback, *The Case of the Curious Cat*, into a box. She moved too quickly and a stack of the books tilted from the worktable and slapped to the floor. As she scrambled to pick them up, she glanced at the cover art and glared into the almond-shaped blue eyes of a white, long-haired Siamese with an inscrutable expression. "Cats," she muttered. "Everywhere go, cats."

A black paw snaked through the air, leaving a mark on the back of her right hand.

"Agatha, I'm not playing now. I don't have time." When the books were safely in the box and Agatha distracted with a moist treat, Annie pressed a Kleenex against the scratch and poked her head out of the storeroom.

"Has Pat shown up?"

Ingrid slid her hand over the portable phone's mouthpiece. "No. I called Laurel and she's going to help out."

Annie opened her mouth, closed it. Pat Merridew had picked a lousy day to be late for work.

Obviously, Ingrid couldn't handle the book clubby herself. Henny was committed for a luncheon. Emma would be wearing her author hat. That left Laurel.

"What did she say?"

Ingrid blinked uncertainly. "Kind of a funny answer. She said: 'He who asks shall be rewarded.' "

Annie whirled back into the office and snatched up Laurel's portfolio, thumbed through the contents. She found the proper poster, a large, sleek, muscular Bengal cat with a dense marbled coat and a hugely satisfied expression: *He who asks shall be rewarded*. So Laurel was quite willing to help out. No doubt, radiating charm, she would expect Annie to hang cat posters in *Death on Demand* as a reward.

Annie gripped the portfolio. Could she hide the thick manila folder?

Her cell rang again. She fumbled in her pocket, lifted the phone, saw the caller ID, tried not to squeak when she answered. "I'm on my way, Emma." She tossed the portfolio on the worktable. *Qua sera, sera*. She grabbed the box of books. "I'll be there in a jiffy."

Annie whistled a jaunty tune as she toted a single box with no more than a half-dozen unsold titles up the steps to the back door of *Death on Demand*. Even Emma had been pleased by the sales and it took a lot of *ka-chings* to bring a smile to her redoubtable square face. She had even offered a grudging compliment. "Better than I expected. Of course, everyone loves Marigold."

Annie loathed Emma's sleuth, Marigold Rembrandt. Annie considered her a carping harpy with all the charm of a molting mongoose, but since she enjoyed *ka-chings*, too, she had warbled happily. Emma, "Marigold knocked 'em dead." A flash in Emma's frosty blue eyes reminded Annie that the author's insatiable hunger for praise must be fed. "You were wonderful, Emma. Splendid. Brilliant." Annie paused.

Emma had nodded, looking expectant.

Annie had almost rebelled. How much attention did the old warhorse need? She knew the answer. She took a deep breath. "Cogent. Compelling. Charismatic." When they'd parted in the library parking lot, Emma had been at her most congenial.

Annie laughed as she opened the back door, the box on one hip. All's well that ends well. Now, only Ingrid had weathered the book club. Annie put aside any thoughts about Laurel and Cat Truitt. Time would, unfortunately, tell.

She stepped into the storeroom. The door to the coffee area was ajar.

". . . and what am I bid for the Chestnut Oriental Shorthair?"

Annie would know that husky voice anywhere. Adrift on a space station. In a Deadwood saloon. Behind a Venetian mask. From the depths of a cavern. Riding in an alpine cable car.

Annie stopped in the doorway.

Her slender blond mother-in-law, her patrician features quite lovely and perfect, her pale blue lined dress elegantly styled, stood in stocking feet on the coffee bar. She held up a poster. A rectangular muzzled, green-eyed, chocolate-colored cat appeared as brooding as a gothic hero. The legend read

Always say yes to adventure.

A lantern-jawed woman in the front row thundered, “Two hundred dollars.”

A plump matron with untidy brown curls jumped to her feet. “Three hundred.”

“Three hundred dollars.” Laurel repeated the sum twice. “Do I hear three-fifty?”

After a beat, she clapped her hands together. “Sold for three hundred dollars. That completes my offering of *Paws That Refresh: Cat Truth*. I thank you for your wonderful support today for our animal rescue center. The sum raised by the auction—”

Annie took a step into the coffee area.

Laurel continued smoothly, “—will help provide shelter and treatment for abandoned and abused dogs and cats. We would also like to thank Death on Demand for offering to host the auction. And here is the wonderful proprietor of Death on Demand, eager to welcome you lovely ladies from the Captivating Crimes Book Club. Perhaps Annie would like to share a tribute to Mississippi Delta author Carolyn Haines, who writes wonderful books and helps rescue abused and abandoned horses, dogs, and cats, and to Mary Kennedy of *Dead Air* and *Reel Murder* fame, who rescues cats and supports all efforts to protect animals.”

Annie remembered one of the posters now residing in her and Max’s living room, a silky-furred, mitted, and bicolored Ragdoll stretched out on a red silk cushion, looking as comfy as Eva Longoria in a Hanes ad: *Go with the flow*.

Annie’s smile was genuine. “Thank you, Laurel, for your support for animals and for sharing news of Carolyn Haines’s Sarah Booth Delaney series and Mary Kennedy’s talk-radio series. Animal lovers”—she swept her arm in an all-inclusive gesture—“will enjoy visiting Carolyn Haines’s online animal rescue page, www.goodfortunefarmrefuge.org.”

Immediately, several ladies lifted their iPhones and fingers flew as they typed in the link.

Annie beamed at Laurel. The best outcome, in addition to sales, was that the dreaded posters were no longer on her worktable, though Annie well knew there were more where these came from. However, there was no point in borrowing trouble. Moreover, a worthy cause had profited.

Annie mingled and was charming. But if Pat Merridew dared enter Death on Demand, it would be the shortest stay in history.

As soon as Henny reached her car at the Sea Side Inn parking lot, she flipped open her cell.

“Death on Demand, the finest—”

Henny interrupted. “Hey, Ingrid, did Pat show up?”

“No. Laurel helped out. We made it through.” Ingrid described the auction.

Henny grinned. “If you can’t beat ’em, maybe you need to join ’em.”

“I don’t think that’s what Annie wants to hear. Oh, got to go. Some tourists . . .”

Henny sat behind her wheel, tapped Pat’s number. No answer. She had called twice before going to the luncheon. Pat wasn’t at the store. She wasn’t home. Where was she? Maybe she had a call from a friend who needed to go to a doctor’s appointment in Savannah. Maybe she forgot to call the

bookshop. Maybe a lot of things.

Henny tried to maintain a positive outlook, but she felt both irritated and disappointed. She had helped Pat find a job and now Pat had let Annie down. Henny pressed her lips together. Her words might be sharp when she found Pat. With a decided nod, she turned on the motor and headed for Pat's house instead of home.

Henny drove with her windows down, enjoying the pleasant June heat. In July the island would swelter and cooling the car with air-conditioning would be automatic. She turned on a dusty narrow road north of downtown. Palmettos, live oaks, red cedars, and yellow pines crowded the road. The burgeoning woods were interrupted by occasional houses. She enjoyed the variety: shacks perched on pilings; late-nineteenth-century, two-story frame or tabby homes; and new multistoried mansions of stucco or stone.

The road swung around a lagoon. On the wooded side of the road, Henny turned into a driveway. Pat's modest home was an early Colonial clapboard cottage. It was well maintained, the white paint fresh. Henny pulled up behind Pat's blue Chevy. Had she returned home shortly before Henny's arrival? Henny's eyes glinted. Had she chosen not to answer the phone?

On the porch, Henny admired some crimson begonias in a glazed blue vase. A light cotton sweatshirt lay on the green swing. Letters and magazines protruded from the mailbox. Before she could ring the doorbell, frenzied barking erupted beyond the front door. Gertrude sounded frantic. That was unusual. She was a good-natured dog.

A frown touched Henny's narrow face. There had been enough time for Pat to answer the door. The dachshund's yelps continued, faster and faster.

Henny glanced out at the drive. That was Pat's car. Of course, someone might have picked her up. . . .

Dog claws scabbled on the other side of the door.

Henny pulled open the screen. She turned the front knob and pushed. She wasn't surprised to find the door open. Many islanders only locked up at bedtime. "Pat?" The door swung slowly inward. Henny stepped into the small foyer. A grandfather clock ticked to her left.

Gertrude twisted in a circle, her claws clicking on the wooden floor, then bolted to the living room. She skidded to a stop, lifted her sleek head, and howled, the pitiable cry high and mournful.

Henny felt a tightness in her chest. She crossed the hall, stopped in the doorway.

Sun spilled across the room, illuminating the rose sofa and the cream chintz easy chair and the pinewood coffee table. A crystal mug with dark sludge in its bottom sat on the table. Pat slumped on one side of the easy chair, her auburn-gray head resting against the upholstered side, her face slack. One arm dangled over the side of the chair.

Annie loved the long sweep of the garden behind their house, azaleas bright in spring afternoons, dusky roses damp with dew in summer, billowy white blossoms of sea myrtle in late fall. Tall pine and Spanish-moss-draped live oaks framed the view down to the pond with its resident alligator.

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