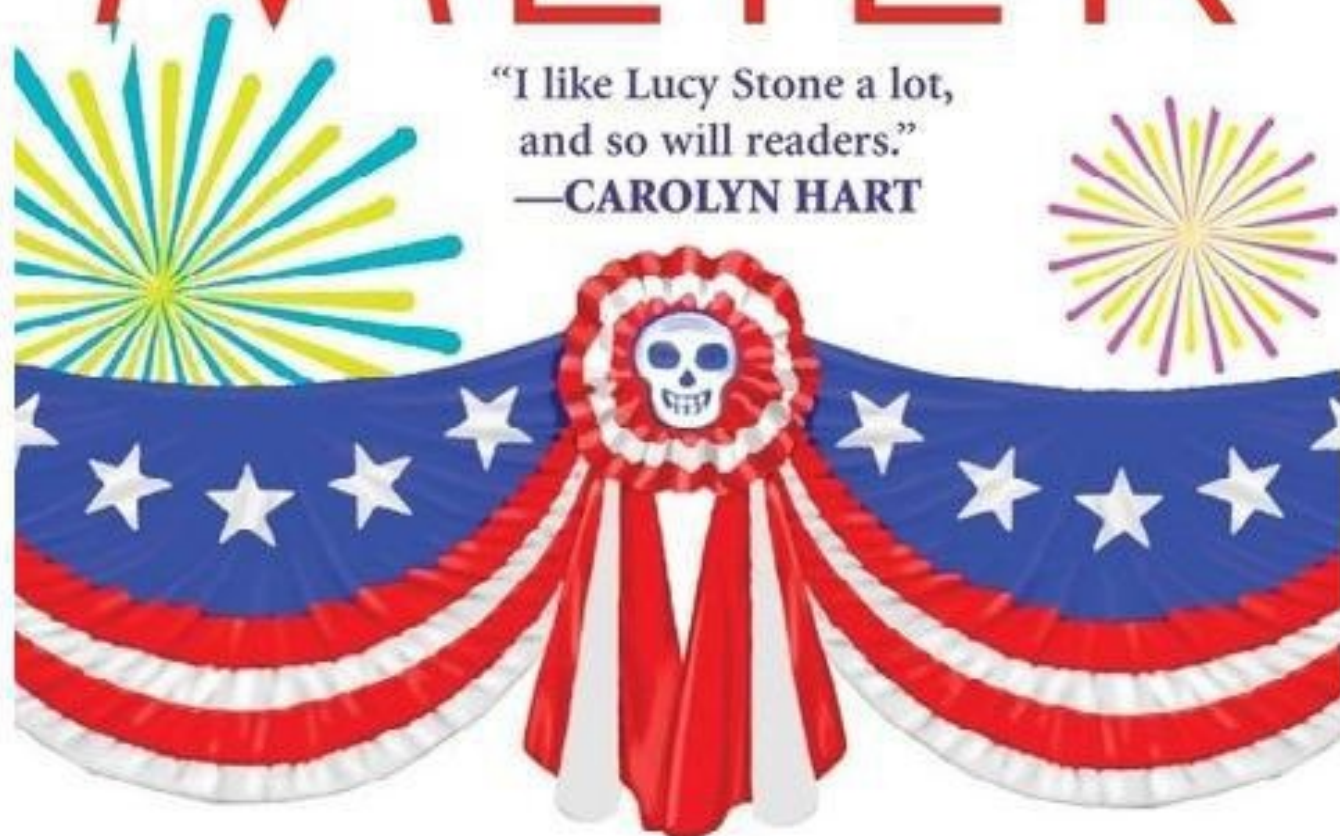


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LESLIE MEIER

"I like Lucy Stone a lot,
and so will readers."
—CAROLYN HART



A Lucy Stone Mystery

STAR SPANGLLED MURDER

FOURTH OF JULY MURDER

Lucy was pretty sure Pru was home because her car, an aged but impeccably maintained Dodge Shadow, was parked in its usual spot.

Lucy knew the wisest course of action would simply be to leave. She could leave a note, she could call later. She could stop by on her way home from work. The one thing she shouldn't do was start poking around in the hopes of finding Pru perched high on a ladder cleaning out the gutters or on a roof behind the chicken coop.

On the other hand, she was here right now and she wanted to get this thing off her chest. She wanted to get it over with. It certainly couldn't hurt to peek around the hose, where Pru kept a clothesline.

Lucy squared her shoulders and continued a few more paces down the drive, until she reached the corner of the house. There she had an unobstructed view of the turning area, where the driveway widened and where Wesley and Calvin parked their trucks. There were no trucks, today, but there was a crumpled pile of something blue, maybe laundry that had dropped off the line where several pairs of jeans were hanging heavily in the humid air.

Lucy went to investigate and as she drew closer she realized it wasn't a pair of blue jeans that had fallen at all. It was Pru, herself, lying in a heap.

Reaching the fallen woman, Lucy instinctively reached out and touched her shoulder, as if to wake her up. But Pru wasn't going to wake up. Pru was dead. Definitely dead . . .

Books by Leslie Meier

MISTLETOE MURDER
TIPPY TOE MURDER
TRICK OR TREAT MURDER
BACK TO SCHOOL MURDER
VALENTINE MURDER
CHRISTMAS COOKIE MURDER
TURKEY DAY MURDER
WEDDING DAY MURDER
BIRTHDAY PARTY MURDER
FATHER'S DAY MURDER
STAR SPANGLED MURDER
NEW YEAR'S EVE MURDER

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation

A Lucy Stone Mystery
STAR SPANGLED MURDER

Leslie Meier



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Who enlisted in November 1941 and served in the Army Air Corps for “three years, nine months and sixteen days” in England, North Africa, and Italy.

Prologue

He'd killed before and he would kill again. He couldn't help himself. It was more than an addiction, he was programmed to do it. It was in his DNA. He loved the rush of excitement when he spotted his victim and the sense of power he felt when he'd mastered his prey. They were so stupid. Going about their daily business unaware of the eyes watching them. His eyes. They thought they had it all under control, but they didn't. They would live or die as he willed. As he desired.

He sighed and rolled over on the sorry excuse for a bed that his captors gave him. There would be no killing today. He stared at the thick wire mesh that confined him. It was nothing more than a perimeter fence, really, but there was no way out. He'd tried, of course. It was his major occupation, considering the small amount of exercise his captors allowed him. He'd examined every corner, looking for a gap, a loose screw, a flaw in the concrete. So far, he hadn't found any.

So he'd just have to bide his time until they made a mistake. He could wait. He was used to it. He had to get used to it. But that didn't mean he'd given up. Oh, no. He was simply waiting for an opportunity. Hearing a door slam, he looked up. Maybe this was his big chance.

The woman was coming towards him carrying a bowl. His dinner. He got to his feet and watched as she opened the door and carefully slid the bowl towards him. "Hungry?" she asked, in a high squeaky voice. What did she think? Of course he was hungry. And bored. Eating was the high point of his day. Even the slop they gave him. He licked his chops, turning his attention to his meal.

And then he heard it. A shriek. "Mom! Come quick!"

She whirled around, slamming the heavy gate and ran for the house. He waited until she disappeared inside, then gave the gate an experimental push. It opened. This had happened before. She'd slammed it too hard and it had bounced back without latching. Stupid woman. Would she never learn? In a moment he was outside, sniffing the air, feeling the warmth of the sun on his back. It was a fine day, a fine day for killing.

He gave himself a good shake, then he was off, tail held high. His bowl of kibble remained untouched. Kudo was in the mood for chicken.

Chapter One

Lucy Stone wasn't usually a clock watcher. Time didn't pass slowly for her; it galloped ahead of her. As a part-time reporter—not to mention feature writer, listings editor and occasional photographer—for the *Pennysaver*, the weekly newspaper in Tinker's Cove, Maine, and the mother of four, her life sometimes seemed to her an endless chase after a spare minute. She was always late: late for meetings she was supposed to cover, late for doctor's appointments, late for picking up the kids. But not today.

Today her eyes were fixed on the old electric kitchen clock with the dangling cord that hung on the wall behind the receptionist's desk in the *Pennysaver* office. If only she could stop the minute hand from lurching forward, if only she could stop time, then she wouldn't have to go to the Board of Selectmen's meeting at five o'clock.

"Is there something the matter with my hair?" asked Phyllis, whose various job descriptions included receptionist, telephone operator and advertising manager. She gingerly patted her tightly permed tangerine do. "You keep staring at it."

"Your hair's fine," said Lucy. "I'm looking at the clock."

Phyllis peered over her rhinestone-trimmed cat's-eye glasses and narrowed her eyes. "Have you got the hots for Howard White? Can't wait to see him," she paused and smoothed her openwork white cardigan over her ample bosom, "wield his gavel?"

Howard White was the extremely dignified chairman of the Board of Selectmen, a retired executive who was well on in years.

Lucy laughed. "Howard's not my type," she said.

Phyllis raised an eyebrow, actually a thinly penciled orange line drawn where her eyebrows used to be. "Why not? He's not bad looking for an old guy, and he's rich."

"He also has a wife," said Lucy. "And I have a husband."

"Details." Phyllis waved a plump, manicured hand, nails polished in a bright coral hue.

"I don't want to go to the meeting. I wish Ted would cover the Board of Selectmen until this dog hearing is over."

Ted was the owner, publisher and editor-in-chief of the *Pennysaver*.

"Did I hear my name?" he inquired, sticking his head out of the morgue where the back issues going all the way back to the *Courier & Advertisers* printed in the 1800s were stored.

"Ted? Do me a favor and cover the selectmen's meeting? Please?"

"Trouble at home?"

"You could say that," said Lucy. "It's Kudo. He's been going after Prudence Pratt's chickens and got a summons yesterday for a dog hearing. I just feel so awkward trying to cover the meeting with this thing hanging over me."

"Is the hearing tonight?"

"Next meeting."

"Sorry, Lucy, but I don't see a conflict of interest tonight. I'll cover the next hearing though."

"Do you have to?" asked Lucy, picturing her name in the headline. That darned dog was such an embarrassment. She felt like a criminal. "Couldn't we just skip that meeting? Pretend it never happened?"

"No," said Ted, flatly. "And if you don't get a move on, you're going to be late for today's meeting. It's five, you know."

Lucy checked the clock. It was five minutes to five.

~~“They never start on time,” she said, slowly gathering up her things. “And town hall’s just across the street. There’s no hurry, really.”~~

~~“You better get a move on.”~~

Lucy hoisted the faded African basket she used as a purse on her shoulder and drifted towards the door.

“I’m not going to miss anything. Bud Collins is never on time and they always have to wait for him.”

Ted yanked the door open, making the little bell jangle. “Go!”

“See you tomorrow,” said Lucy, walking as slowly as a convict beginning the last mile.

The door slammed behind her.

Selectmen’s meetings were held in the basement hearing room of the town hall. The walls were concrete block painted beige, the floor was covered in gray industrial tile, and the seating was plastic chairs in assorted colors of green, blue and orange. One end of the room was slightly elevated and that’s where the board members sat behind a long bench, similar to the judge’s bench in a courtroom.

What with the flags in the corner and a table and chairs for petitioners, the room was quite similar to the district court, thought Lucy. It wasn’t a comforting idea and she tried to put it out of her mind. She took her usual seat, smiling at the scattering of regulars who never missed a meeting. Scraton Hallett, a gruff old fellow who had a plumbing and heating business and was active in veteran affairs, was a particular favorite. She also recognized Jonathan Franke, the former environmental radical who was now the respected executive director of the Association for the Preservation of Tinker’s Cove, and several members of that organization. They were exchanging friendly nods when Lucy’s attention was drawn to a newcomer. Tall and gaunt, with her skimpy red hair pulled back into a straggly ponytail, it was none other than her neighbor Prudence Pratt, dressed in her customary summer outfit of baggy blue jeans and a free Blue Seal T-shirt from the feed store.

Lucy’s heart sank. She hoped Pru hadn’t gotten the date wrong, and thought the dog hearing was today. Or maybe she wanted to file an additional complaint. Kudo had gotten loose again the other day, and had come trotting home with a chicken feather stuck in his teeth. The memory made Lucy wince. She was at her wit’s end; she’d tried everything she could think of to restrain the dog but he was some sort of escape artist. And whenever he got out, he went after her neighbor’s chickens.

Lucy tried to catch Pru’s eye, hoping to start some kind of dialog. Maybe if she apologized for the dog’s behavior, or offered to pay for the damages, they could work something out and avoid the hearing. But Mrs. Pratt stared straight ahead, pointedly ignoring her.

A little flurry of activity announced the arrival of the board members, who filed into the room accompanied by their secretary, Bev Schmidt, who kept the minutes. They always came in the same order, with IGA owner Joe Marzetti going first. He was a bundle of energy, tightly focused on the task at hand.

He was followed by newly elected member Ellie Sykes, a dollmaker and member of the Metinnick Indian tribe whom Lucy had gotten to know when Indian rights activist Curt Nolan was murdered a few years before. Kudo had actually been Curt’s dog and Lucy had taken him off Ellie’s hands when he’d begun raising Cain with her flock of chickens. Ellie gave her a big smile as she sat down and arranged her papers.

Next came board veteran Pete Crowley, whose crumpled face and world-weary attitude seemed to imply he’d seen it all in the twenty years or so he’d sat on the board and nothing would surprise him.

Chairman Howard White always took the center seat, and was the only board member to wear

sport coat. He invariably shot his sleeves when he sat down, as if he were chairing a high-level meeting of movers and shakers instead of this oddly assorted group of public-minded citizens.

Bud Collins always brought up the rear. A retired physical education teacher and coach, he seemed to have used up all his energy urging Tinker's Cove High School students to run faster and jump higher. He often dozed off during meetings. Lucy would have made a point of it in one of her stories except for the fact that she sometimes dozed off too, especially during presentations by the long-winded town accountant, who tended to drone on endlessly in a monotone.

"The meeting is called to order," said White, with a tap of his gavel. "As usual, we'll begin with our public comment session. This is the time we invite citizens to voice any concerns they might have, keeping in mind that once we begin the advertised agenda discussion will be limited to the issues under consideration."

Pru's hand shot up.

Lucy swallowed hard and sat up straighter.

"You have the floor," said White, with a courteous bow of his head. "Please state your name and address for the minutes."

"You know perfectly well who I am," she snapped, "and so does Bev Schmidt. Gracious, we were in school together."

Howard White was normally a stickler for detail, but after glancing at Bev and receiving a nod in reply, he decided to allow this breach of procedure. "Please continue," he said.

"Well, as you know, my property on Red Top Road goes back all the way to Blueberry Pond, which is owned by the town. It's conservation land, open to the public for swimming and fishing, duck hunting in the fall, and up 'til now there's been no problem."

"But now there is?" inquired White.

"I'll say there is. They're naked back there. Butt naked! It's a disgrace!" Pru was clearly outraged. Her mouth seemed to disappear as she sucked in her lips and her pale blue eyes bugged out.

Lucy fought the urge to giggle in relief, concentrating instead on the board member's reaction. They also seemed to be struggling to keep straight faces.

"I think there has always been a certain amount of skinny-dipping at the pond," said Bud Collins. "The kids like to go there after practices, especially the baseball team. To cool off with a swim."

"I don't know who they are and I don't care. I don't like it and I want it stopped! Isn't there a law against this sort of thing?" demanded Mrs. Pratt.

White looked to the other board members, who shook their heads.

"I am not aware of any town bylaw that forbids nudity," said White.

"And a good thing, too," offered Joe Marzetti. "There's nothing the matter with a hard-working man stopping by the pond for a quick dip on his way home on a hot summer day. Or at lunchtime, for that matter. There's nobody there most of the time. What's the harm?"

"What's the harm?" Pru's eyes bugged out in outrage. "It's immoral, that's what. It's time this town took a stand and stood up for public decency!"

"You're welcome to write up a proposal and put it on the town warrant for a vote at the town meeting," said White.

"Town meeting! That's not until next April!"

"We could call a special town meeting, but you'd have to get signatures for that." White paused. "Bev, how many signatures would she need?"

"Two hundred and fifty registered voters," said Bev.

"Bear in mind that a special town meeting costs money," said Marzetti. "It's not generally popular with taxpayers."

"We'll see about that," said Pru. "I'll be back, you can count on it."

“We’ll look forward to it,” said White, casting a baleful glance at Ellie, who was struggling to suppress a giggling fit.

Lucy knew her duty as a reporter, so she followed Pru out of the room, catching up with her in the parking lot.

“Do you have a minute? I’d just like to get your reaction to the board’s decision for the paper. . . .”

“My reaction isn’t fit to print,” snarled Pru. “That board’s a bunch of godless, lily-livered, corrupt scoundrels. They’ll rot in hell and so will you, Lucy Stone, you and that dog of yours.” With that she climbed into her aged little Dodge compact and slammed the door.

“Can I quote you on that?” yelled Lucy, as she rolled out of the parking lot.

When Lucy returned to the meeting, Jonathan Franke was making a presentation with the help of a laser pointer and a flip chart. He had certainly adopted all the accessories of success, thought Lucy, who remembered the days when he was usually seen holding up a sign protesting government inaction or big business profiteering and sporting an enormous head of curly hair.

“As this chart shows,” he said, indicating a bar graph, “Tinker’s Cove is blessed with one of the few surviving communities of purple-spotted lichen in the entire state. Once abundant, this complex lichen form has fallen victim to a sustained loss of environment due to development and pollution. It is now considered endangered and is protected under the state’s environmental protection act. I’m here tonight, with other members of the Association for the Preservation of Tinker’s Cove, to request that the town take all appropriate steps to protect our priceless legacy of purple-spotted lichen.”

Judging from their pleased expressions, Lucy understood the board members were congratulating themselves on their good judgement and wise management of a resource they hadn’t actually known they had. Whatever they’d been doing, it had apparently been the right thing, at least for purple-spotted lichen.

“And how do you suggest we continue to care for this rare and wonderful little plant?” asked Ellie.

“That brings me to my next illustration,” said Franke, flipping to the next page on his chart, a map of the town with prime lichen areas indicated by purple patches of color.

“As you can clearly see,” he said, making the little red laser dot dance over the map, “one area of particular concern is out on Quisset Point. This is actually the town’s largest community of purple-spotted lichen, thanks to the abundance of ferrous rock.”

The board members nodded, indicating their high level of interest in an issue that was sure to be noncontroversial and certain to resonate positively with voters.

“That is why our organization, the Association for the Preservation of Tinker’s Cove, is here tonight to request the cancellation of the upcoming July Fourth fireworks display.”

All five board members were stunned, even Bud Collins, who had been nodding off. They had certainly not expected this.

“I’d like a clarification,” said White. “Did you say you want us to cancel the fireworks?”

“You mean call them off?” demanded Marzetti.

“No fireworks at all?” exclaimed Crowley. “Isn’t that un-American?”

“Believe me, we are not making this request lightly,” said Franke, looking very serious. “We wouldn’t consider it except for these facts.” He lifted a finger. “A: The lichen is severely endangered throughout the state. B: The lichen is extremely fragile and easily damaged by foot traffic. And C: The lichen is highly flammable and one errant spark could wipe out the entire Quisset Point colony.”

“I get you,” said Crowley. “What say we move the fireworks off the point? Onto a barge or something?”

“Once again I believe there would be substantial risk from sparks.”

Crowley scratched his head. “Okay, you say this is the best colony in the entire state, right? We how come, if we’ve had the fireworks out there every year since who knows when? I mean, maybe the pinkspotted moss likes fireworks! Have you thought of that, hey?”

“Actually, we have, and we’ve concluded that the continuing success of this particular colony of purple-spotted lichen is nothing less than miraculous. We’ve been lucky so far, but it’s far too dangerous to continue endangering this highly-stressed species.”

The board was silent, considering this.

“Can I say something?”

Lucy turned and saw Scratch Hallett was on his feet, his VFW cap in his hand.

“Please do,” invited White, desperate for an alternative to calling off the fireworks.

“This just don’t seem right to me,” began Hallett. “A lot of folks have fought and some have even made the supreme sacrifice to keep America the land of the free and the home of the brave. We celebrate that freedom on the Fourth of July, always have, ever since 1776, and I don’t see what the purple-spotted stuff has got to do with it. We didn’t know we had it, none of us did except these here environmentalists. I never noticed it myself, and I don’t care about it. We defeated the Germans and the Japanese and just lately the Iraqis so we could enjoy freedom, and you’re telling me we have to stop because of an itty-bitty little plant?”

“Mr. Franke, would you care to reply?” said White. “I think this gentleman has made an important point.”

“Yes, yes he has,” said Franke, beginning diplomatically. “And I and the other members of the Association value our American values and freedoms as much as anyone, and the sacrifices made by members of the Armed Forces. I want to assure you of that. But,” he continued, his voice taking on a certain edge, “I’d also like to remind you that the purple-spotted lichen is on the list of endangered species in this state and is therefore subject to all the protections provided by the state environmental protection statute, which includes substantial penalties to any person or agency judged to have caused harm to said species.”

The board members looked miserable. If she hadn’t known better, Lucy would have suspected they were all coming down with an intestinal virus.

“As much as I hate to cancel the fireworks, it seems to me we have a responsibility to preserve our environment,” said Ellie.

“I think we have to look at the APTC track record,” said Crowley. “They’ve been active in our town for a good while now, and Tinker’s Cove is a better place for it. We’ve preserved open space, we’ve maintained our community character, I think we’ve got to give them the benefit of the doubt on this one.”

“I don’t know what community character you’re talking about. It’s things like the Fourth of July parade and the fireworks that give our town character. I refuse to vote against the fireworks,” declared Marzetti, who had grown hot around the collar.

“Well said,” drawled Bud Collins.

“Is this a vote?” Howard White seemed uncharacteristically confused.

The others nodded.

“Two for and two against. I guess it’s up to me.”

The room was silent.

“My inclination is to hold the fireworks. It’s been a tradition in this town for as long as I’ve been here and I hate to see it end.” White sighed. “But I truly believe it would be irresponsible and futile to ignore the state regulation. It would set a bad precedent and it would cost us dearly in the end. It is with great sorrow that I vote to discontinue the fireworks display.”

He had hardly finished speaking when Scratch Hallett was on his feet, marching out of the room. F

paused at the door. "This isn't the end of this," he declared, as he set his VFW hat on his head. "We may have lost the battle, but we haven't lost the war!"

Chapter Two

The buzz of the alarm woke Lucy and she squinted, trying to make out the time. Five-thirty. There must be some mistake. Then reality gradually dawned and she remembered it was Wednesday, deadline day. It was no mistake. She had to get up.

With a groan she sat up and groped with her feet for her slippers. Then she slipped on her lightweight summer robe and headed downstairs to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. While it dripped she made a quick stop in the downstairs powder room, then went outside and down the driveway to get the morning paper. Kudo greeted her with a wagging tail and she stopped by the kennel to stroke the big, yellow dog's long nose, which he poked through the heavy-duty wire mesh fencing. Then she went back inside to drink her first cup of coffee and check her horoscope. It didn't look good: only two stars out of a possible five. Not that she really believed that stuff. Not at all.

At six she climbed back upstairs with a cup of coffee for Bill and to wake Elizabeth, who had to be at work at the Queen Victoria Inn by seven. Elizabeth liked to cut it close and sacrificed breakfast in favor of an extra half-hour of sleep before starting work at her summer job as a chambermaid. Lucy knew she was counting the days until she could go back to Chamberlain College in Boston to begin her sophomore year. Toby, the oldest, was already gone; he'd left the house well before four. He was working for Chuck Swift on his lobster boat this summer and had to be down at the harbor before dawn.

While Bill enjoyed his coffee in bed, checking out the sports pages, Lucy got dressed. Since she'd be in the office all day and didn't have any interviews, she opted for comfort in a pair of khaki shorts and a polo shirt. It was already warm and there was every sign it would be a scorcher of a day.

Elizabeth wasn't up yet, so she called her again. "You're going to be late," she warned. Elizabeth groaned in reply. Encouraged, Lucy went back downstairs and popped an English muffin in the toaster. She was sitting at the table, eating it, when Elizabeth sped through the kitchen, the apron strings of her uniform streaming behind her. Minutes later she was back.

"My car won't start."

"You probably flooded it. Give it a minute and try again."

"A minute!" she shrieked. "I haven't got a minute!"

"Shhh. You're going to wake up Sara and Zoe." The youngest girls were still asleep; Friends of Animals day camp didn't start until eight-thirty. Since she had to be at the *Pennysaver* as early as possible, Bill would drop them off, starting a bit later than usual on his current project, restoring an old oneroom schoolhouse that had been moved from New Hampshire to become a guest house for some wealthy summer people.

"Let me take your car, okay, Mom? Please?"

"But what if I can't start your car, either? Then I'll be stuck. Call and tell them you're running late. They'll understand."

"I've already been warned, Mom!" Elizabeth was close to hysterics. "They'll fire me."

"Well, whose fault is that?" grumbled Lucy. Maybe there was more to those horoscopes than she thought.

"I know. I know. I'll do better in the future I promise. If only you let me take the car this one time. Please. Pretty please."

Lucy knew she was making a big mistake.

“Okay,” she said, handing over the keys. “But this is the last time.”

“Thanks, Mom. You’re the best.”

When Lucy tried to start Elizabeth’s car, the engine didn’t sound right. “RRR,” it droned. “RRR.” After a few tries she gave up and went back into the house to get help from Bill.

“The battery’s dead,” said Bill, who had progressed to the breakfast table.

“Are you sure?” asked Lucy. “How can you tell?”

“I can tell,” said Bill.

“Can’t we jump it or something?”

“I doubt it’ll hold a charge. You’d just stall out somewhere and get stuck,” said Bill. “You’ll have to ride with me.”

“I’ll be late,” groaned Lucy. “On deadline day.”

“Nothing you can do about it,” said Bill, with a shrug. “You might as well relax and have another cup of coffee.”

At a quarter past eight, the girls were ready to go, but they didn’t like the idea of cramming into the cab of the pickup truck along with their parents.

“Can’t we ride in back?” asked Sara.

“Mom’ll squish me,” observed Zoe, smoothing her new summer outfit.

“It’s way too hot in the truck,” whined Sara.

“Get a move on,” snapped Bill. “Time’s a wasting.”

“Bill,” asked Lucy, as she struggled to get the seat belt around herself and Zoe, who was sitting on her lap. “Will you pick up a battery?”

“I will not.”

“We’ve got to get that car back on the road. What will Elizabeth do?”

“She can damn well take care of it herself. It’ll be good for her. Teach her a valuable lesson.” Bill paused. “You’re way too soft on that girl.”

“Right,” said Lucy, wondering why she couldn’t take the same hard line that Bill did.

“You’re late,” said Ted, when she finally arrived at the *Pennysaver*.

“I know,” said Lucy. “Car trouble.”

“I don’t want excuses. . . .”

“Not again. I’ve already been through this with Bill.” Lucy practically growled at him. “You’ll have your story. On time.”

“Okay, okay.” Ted held up his hands and turned to Phyllis. “Must be that time of the month.”

“I wouldn’t go there if I were you,” warned Phyllis. “I have proofs to check,” said Ted. “I’ll be at the morgue.”

Good place for him, thought Lucy, as she booted up her computer. If only he could stay there permanently. With Bill. They could sit and congratulate themselves on issuing tough lines and demands and ultimatums while the women of the world conciliated and compromised and kept things going.

“Anything much happen at the meeting?” asked Phyllis. The little fan she’d set up on her desk didn’t even ruffle her hair-sprayed hair.

Lucy stared out the plate glass window, through the old-fashioned wood venetian blinds. A few early tourists were cruising Main Street, looking for breakfast. Mostly older couples, the men sporting captain’s caps and the women with straw sun hats.

“They canceled the Fourth of July fireworks,” said Lucy.

Phyllis choked on her coffee. “What?”

Ted stuck his head out of the morgue. “What?”

“You heard me. They canceled the fireworks. ’Cause of this purple-spotted lichen. It’s endangered

At least that’s what Jonathan Franke and the APTC people say.”

“Lichen?”

“A flowerless plant composed of algae and fungi in a symbiotic relationship,” said Lucy, quoting from the dictionary open on her desk. “It grows on rocks. And there’s a major colony growing on the rocks out at Quisset Point.”

“So why can’t they move the fireworks?” asked Phyllis, looking quite perturbed.

“That was suggested, but they’d have to be in the cove so people could see them and there’s danger of falling sparks.”

“The board actually voted to cancel the fireworks?” asked Ted, incredulous.

“They weren’t happy about it,” said Lucy. “But I think they figured it was that or face all kinds of penalties from the state. This lichen is on the endangered species list. And Franke as much as threatened to take them to court and they’re terrified of spending taxpayer’s money on legal fees.”

“What does it look like?” asked Phyllis. “I never heard of it.”

“It’s that patchy stuff on rocks and trees.”

“Like barnacles?”

“Kind of. It’s softer. Sort of fuzzy.”

“With purple spots?”

“I guess so. It’s called purple-spotted lichen. It must have spots. Purple ones.”

“We’re going to need a picture,” said Ted, reaching for his camera. “Quisset Point, you say?”

“Just look for the spotty stuff.”

He left in a hurry, slamming the door behind him and making the little bell fastened to the top of the door jangle.

“I wouldn’t want to be one of those selectmen,” said Phyllis. “This isn’t going to be popular. Not at all.”

“The VFW’s already declared war,” said Lucy.

“I’m not surprised.”

It wasn’t the VFW who fired the first salvo, however. It was the Chamber of Commerce. When Ted returned with his film he was accompanied by chamber president Corney Clark, who was toting a picnic basket. Corney operated a successful catering business out of her stylish home on Smith Heights Road.

“I know it’s deadline day and you all work under so much pressure, so I brought you some relaxing herb tea and some fresh-baked corn muffins with my homemade lavender-lemon marmalade,” she cooed. “Lavender is sooo relaxing.”

In a matter of moments Corney had spread a blue and white checked cloth on the reception counter and topped it with an artful arrangement including a basket of muffins, a crock of marmalade and a cute vase of pansies. A thermos held the tea, which Corney was pouring into blue and white striped mugs.

“Sugar?” she asked.

“Sure,” said Lucy, absolutely amazed.

“Ted, would you like a muffin? With marmalade?”

“M-m-muffin,” stammered Ted. “Thanks.”

“This lavender marmalade isn’t half bad,” said Phyllis, talking with her mouth full. “I wouldn’t have thought it, but it’s very good.”

“I’m so glad you like it,” said Corney, taking a chair, crossing her legs and getting down to business. “Now, Ted, I have a letter to the editor here from the Chamber about the fireworks. It’s very timely and I hope you can get it in this week’s paper.”

Lucy knew the editorial page was already set, ready to go to the printer.

“Sorry, but that’s impossible,” mumbled Ted, biting into a second muffin.

“It’s extremely important,” continued Corney. “I think we’re all in favor of protecting endangered species, but the local economy is also something of an endangered species, especially if this fireworks ban isn’t lifted. The Fourth of July celebration with the fireworks is traditionally the beginning of our summer tourist season, and Ted, I’m sure you know how much many local businesses rely on the tourists.”

She flourished the letter, making Lucy wonder where she’d had it stashed. Was the woman a magician?

“Of course, this is all stated much better in the letter,” continued Corney. “Joe Marzetti and I and some of the chamber members got together first thing this morning. We decided it would be best to simply ask the selectmen to reconsider the probable impact of canceling the fireworks.”

“Great letter,” said Ted. “But I’ll have to run it next week.”

“Now, Ted, I don’t mean to tell you your business, but you’re missing the boat here. This is a hot issue. Everybody’s going to be waiting for their *Pennysaver* this week, believe me. You don’t want to let your readers down.”

Lucy found herself agreeing with Corney. “She’s got a point, Ted. Why not run it in a little box, sidebar to my story.”

“Old news is no news,” said Phyllis.

Ted knew when he was beat.

“Okay,” he said. “I could use a little more of that tea.”

“My pleasure,” said Corney, reaching for the thermos. She paused before pouring, holding it in the air. “No fireworks, and now Pru Pratt wants an anti-skinny-dipping bylaw!” She giggled. “What’s the town coming to?”

Corney was just packing up her picnic basket when the contingent from the VFW arrived, dressed in their parade uniforms, already wilted from the heat. Scratch Hallett had brought reinforcements; he was accompanied by the post commander, Bill Bridges, and the chaplain, Rev. Clive Macintosh. They stood in a line, hats in hands, and saluted Ted.

“Good morning, gentlemen. What can I do for you?” he inquired.

“It’s about the fireworks,” began Bridges, removing his cap and mopping his forehead with a large red bandanna.

“We want you to write an editorial condemning this un-American action by the Board of Selectmen,” continued Scratch. “The fireworks are an expression of American freedom, the right to pursue happiness. It’s in the constitution.”

“Actually, it’s in the Declaration of Independence,” said Ted.

“Well, wherever it is, it’s a fundamental American right and we want to protect it,” added the chaplain, uncharacteristically bellicose. “We’re ready to fight!”

“I haven’t really had time to form an opinion myself,” said Ted, hedging. “But I’ll certainly be your thoughts in mind. In the meantime, if you want to write a letter to the editor, I’ll be happy to run it.”

“How soon do you need it? We can get it to you by twelve hundred hours.”

Ted sighed. “That’s fine, as long as it’s not too long.”

“Just one more thing,” said Scratch. “In addition to our fundamental American freedoms, which must be preserved, we also need to bear in mind that the post, as well as other local organizations, counts on the fireworks for part of its operating budgets. We run the parking, you know, at two dollars a car. The Ladies Aid Society has a big bake sale, and the Hat and Mitten Committee sells popcorn and glow sticks.”

“He’s right,” said Phyllis. “I promised to make four-dozen brownies. The kind with cream cheese swirls.”

“Most delicious,” said the chaplain. “And the Ladies Aid Society does a great deal to help our less fortunate residents.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” said Ted. “That’s a good point.”

“I just can’t understand people who think a plant’s more important than people,” said Scratch. He winked at Lucy, who was clacking away on her keyboard. “Gosh, she’s fast, and in this heat, too.” He chuckled. “Better make sure you keep your shirt on! You don’t want to get Pru all upset.”

Then Bill barked an order and the three made a neat about-face, encountering Jonathan Franke and Ellie Sykes. No words were exchanged, but Franke politely held the door open for the departing veterans.

“Let me guess,” said Ted. “You’re here about the fireworks.”

Jonathan and Ellie looked at each other.

“The opposition’s beat us to it?” asked Jonathan.

“Representatives from the VFW and the Chamber have already stopped by,” said Ted. “They’re pretty upset that there won’t be any Fourth of July fireworks.”

“We anticipated that reaction,” said Jonathan. “That’s why we’re launching a public relations campaign, and we’d like you to help.”

“It’s called ‘I Like Lichen,’” said Ellie, producing a fact sheet. “This explains why lichen is so important, its vital role in the ecosystem, and the special properties of our own purple-spotted lichen. Did you know that researchers think it may offer a cure for cancer and other diseases?”

“They say that about every endangered plant,” sniffed Phyllis. “But even if they do find some fabulous cure, who do you think is going to be able to afford it with drug prices the way they are? If you ask me, this is getting out of hand. Lichen, shmiken. Who cares?”

“That’s exactly the problem,” said Jonathan, pulling himself up to his full height and adopting a earnest tone. “Lichen’s not glamorous, like the bald eagle or the moose, but it’s every bit as important to the ecosystem.” He gestured grandly with his arms. “It’s a whole wonderful super-organism, and every species has a vital role to play. Lichen is a valuable winter food source for moose, you know. If the lichen goes, it’s possible the moose won’t have enough to eat and they’ll disappear, too. Did you ever think of that?”

“I’m not all that keen on moose, if you want to know the truth,” grumbled Phyllis. “My cousin Elfrida hit one last year on the highway and her car was a complete loss. Moose, shmoose.”

Jonathan Franke’s face was reddening, but Ellie put a cautionary hand on his arm.

“All we’re asking, Ted, is that you consider this informational material. We know that you have a reputation for including all sides of an issue, so people can make up their own minds.”

“Maybe we can run the information sheet along with the letters from the VFW and the Chamber,” suggested Lucy.

“That’s a great idea,” said Ellie.

“Will you be writing an editorial?” asked Jonathan.

“Not this week,” said Ted, with a sigh. He glanced at the clock. “I hate to push you out the door, but

we've got a paper to put together."

"Thanks for your time," said Jonathan, extending his hand to Ted for a parting handshake.

"I just want a word with Lucy," said Ellie, seating herself on the extra chair next to Lucy's desk. "I'll catch up with you back at the office."

"I'm really in a hurry here," said Lucy.

"This will only take a minute. I know you have that dog hearing coming up and I'm sure you're worried about it."

"Do we have to talk about this now?" groaned Lucy.

Ellie smiled at her. "I just wanted you to know that I think you've done a good job with Kudo."

This wasn't what Lucy had expected her to say.

"Really?"

"I was so grateful when you took him after Curt died," she continued. "He was a handful, more than I could manage, that's for sure. He was constantly after my chickens. Curt never trained him, he had this idea that he was some sort of American wild dog and that training him would kill his spirit or something."

"He was doing pretty well," said Lucy, "until he discovered Mrs. Pratt's chickens. I try to keep him confined, I really do, but he's an escape artist."

"I know. I had the same problem with him going after my chickens. No matter what I did, I couldn't stop him. Fences, loud noises, nothing worked. Believe me, I tried." Ellie stood up. "I just wanted you to know that no matter how the hearing goes, the board members all respect you. They know you're a good person."

Lucy was appalled to discover she felt weepy. "Thanks."

"Well, I'm off," said Ellie, a naughty sparkle in her eye. "It's a pretty hot day, you know. I think I might stop by the pond for a quick dip . . . *au naturel*. Just don't tell Pru!"

"I wish I could join you," said Lucy, glancing over her shoulder at Ted. "But you know how he is." She pointed at the sign that hung above her desk: "It's not a guideline—it's a deadline."

Ted cleared his throat. "I need that story, Lucy. NOW."

Ellie scooted out the door, and Lucy bent over her keyboard. The little bell on the door gave a jangle or two, and then the only sound in the office was the steady clicking of three sets of fingers striking computer keyboards.

Chapter Three

By the time Lucy typed the final period and sent her story to Ted for editing, the digital thermometer outside the bank read an unseasonable ninety-four degrees. It wasn't much cooler inside the *Pennysaver* office, where the aged air conditioner wheezed and dripped.

"If you don't need me for anything else, I'm going to beat it," said Lucy, fanning herself with a sheaf of paper. "I'm hoping I can catch a ride home with Toby. They ought to be coming in around now."

"See you tomorrow, Lucy," said Ted, nodding his assent.

"Keep cool," advised Phyllis, lifting her brightly-printed Hawaiian shirt away from her skin so that the little fan she kept on her desk could cool her. "This is awfully warm for this time of year. Must be the global warming."

Her words echoed in Lucy's mind when she stepped outside and was hit by a blast of hot air. The bright sunlight bounced off the concrete sidewalk, radiating heat, and shimmers rose from the black asphalt road, which felt sticky on her feet when she crossed the street. It wasn't much cooler at the harbor, either, but there was a faint breeze off the water. Chuck's boat hadn't come in yet, so Lucy found a shady spot and sat down to wait.

She didn't have to wait long. Pretty soon she heard the steady chug of an engine and spotted the distinctive red hull of the *Carrie Ann*, named after Chuck's wife, rounding Quisset Point. Lucy got up and slowly walked down to the floating dock to greet them.

"Hot enough for you?" she asked, watching as Toby tied the boat fast. Sweat was dripping down his face.

"Boy, it's a lot hotter here than it was out on the water."

"Phyllis thinks it's global warming."

"Maybe that explains it," said Chuck, hoisting a fish box onto the pier. He was already tanned from working outdoors and his hair was bleached by the sun. "I never saw such a small catch. This is pitiful."

"Maybe the bugs are going deeper, to cooler water?" speculated Toby, using lobsterman's slang. "Or maybe it's that virus."

"Or maybe somebody's getting to the traps ahead of us," said Chuck.

"Poaching?" asked Lucy, unhappy at the idea. There hadn't been any poaching for some time, but she remembered the violence that rocked the waterfront years earlier, when Toby was just a baby. Accusations and suspicions had flown, and the body of a suspected poacher had been found floating face down, tangled in gear that didn't belong to him. He hadn't drowned; he'd been killed by a shotgun blast. "I hope not."

"Me, too," said Chuck, loading only two partly-filled boxes onto a barrow. "But I never saw so many traps come up absolutely empty. Usually there's females with eggs and undersized juveniles that you've got to throw back. Not this time."

"They're even taking the illegal lobsters?" Lucy was shocked.

"If they're stealing in the first place, Mom, they're not going to worry about breaking the rules," said Toby, who was hosing off the deck.

"I guess not," admitted Lucy, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. "I need to ride home with you, and we have to get a battery for Elizabeth's car. Give me the keys and I'll open up your car."

see if I can cool it off.”

Toby tossed her the keys. “I’m almost through here.” He laughed. “Promise you won’t complain about the way I smell?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said Lucy, reeling as she caught a heady whiff of lobster bait and honeysuckle sweat.

Bill was already home when they arrived, having quit early because of the heat. He was sitting on the back porch, freshly showered, drinking a beer.

“Too hot to work,” he said, lifting the brown bottle that was beaded with moisture.

“You can say that again,” agreed Lucy, collapsing onto the wicker settee beside him. Toby’s rattling trap Jeep wasn’t air conditioned, and she’d spent a hot half-hour at the service station buying the new battery. And then there was the matter of the way Toby smelled.

“I hope you’re headed directly for the shower,” said Lucy.

“You can’t say I didn’t warn you,” said Toby. “It’s too hot for a shower. I’m going for a swim at the pond.”

“Good idea,” said Bill. “Why don’t we all go? In fact, why don’t we have supper down there? It would save heating up the kitchen.”

“I don’t know,” said Lucy, “maybe we should go to the beach instead. Mrs. Pratt was at the selectmen’s meeting complaining about people misbehaving at the pond.”

“Misbehaving?” Bill’s eyebrows went up. “How?”

“Rowdiness, I guess.” Lucy paused. “Skinny-dipping.”

“Aw, Mom, everybody skinny-dips down there once in a while,” protested Toby. “What’s the big deal?”

“Not a big deal to me,” said Lucy, looking up as Elizabeth whipped into the driveway in the Subaru wagon, with Zoe and Elizabeth in the back seat. “Since you’re a filthy mess anyway, why don’t you help your sister install that new battery?”

Once again Bill’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to change into my swimsuit,” said Lucy. “Maybe you could start packing the cooler?”

“Can’t I watch you change?” asked Bill, following her inside.

Lucy rolled her eyes. The man was impossible, she thought, smiling to herself.

An hour later the whole family had piled into Bill’s truck and was bouncing down the old logging trail that led to the pond. The kids were all piled in the back, along with beach chairs, towels, a cooler, and a portable grill. Lucy and Bill were in front, with the windows open. The radio was blaring out a country oldies station and they were all singing along to “She Wore an Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini.” Zoe was singing loudest of all, delighted at this change in the usual routine.

When they came to the makeshift parking area in a clearing near the pond, they found it was packed with cars. It was full to overflowing and there wasn’t room for the truck, so Bill had to drive into the underbrush in order to leave the road clear.

“Good thing it’s old and has a few dings,” said Lucy. “I guess a lot of people had the same idea we did.”

“This heat’s bringing ’em all out,” grumbled Bill, busying himself handing out all the picnic paraphernalia. Toby and Elizabeth had run ahead with the towels and chairs. “I’ll take the grill, Lucy, if you and Sara can tote the cooler. Zoe, is this bag of charcoal too heavy for you?”

Zoe was offended. “I’m a big girl, Daddy.”

“Do you think it’s a church picnic or something?” wondered Lucy. “I mean, only local people know about the pond, and I can’t believe the whole town is here. I’ve never seen it this crowded before.”

“High school reunion, maybe? Something like that?” mused Bill.

“Could be. It’s the right time of year.”

Indeed, when they approached the pond they saw that the large granite boulders surrounding it were covered with people. Quite a few swimmers were in the water, too. Music from portable radios filled the air, and the inevitable cries of “Marco Polo” could be heard.

“Wow,” said Bill. “The population boom is out of control.”

“It’s people like us,” said Lucy. “We broke the zero population growth pledge. We have two extra children.”

“Okay. We’ll keep Sara and Zoe and eliminate the other two.”

“Bill!” protested Lucy. “We can’t do that! And we don’t have to. Look, nobody’s on our rock.”

For as long as any of the Stones could remember, the family had always spread out their blanket and chairs on the same enormous rock.

The family formed a little procession, almost like a caravan, with Elizabeth and Toby leading the way. Toby was balancing a stack of folding aluminum beach chairs and Elizabeth had a canvas bag full of towels and sun lotion. Bill was next, toting the portable grill, followed by Zoe who was carrying the charcoal and a string bag containing some balls and frisbees. Lucy and Sara brought up the end, carrying the big red-and-white plastic cooler between them. It was heavy and Lucy was feeling a bit out of breath.

“Do you want to rest a minute, Mom?” asked Sara.

“Nnnnnh,” said Lucy, distracted by Toby and Elizabeth’s odd behavior.

They’d reached the rock and started putting down their stuff when they suddenly began laughing hysterically and bolted back down the trail to the rest of the family.

“Those people are tanning all over!” exclaimed Elizabeth.

“They’re butt naked,” added Toby.

“All of them?” asked Lucy, shading her eyes with her hand and taking a closer look.

Her chin dropped. It was true. Every single one of the people sunbathing at the pond was stark naked. Not a single person was wearing a stitch: not the babies, not the grandmothers, not the mommies and the daddies. Not even the very pink, corpulent man who was standing up and stretching.

Lucy dropped her side of the cooler and clapped her hands over Zoe’s eyes.

“Back to the truck!” she barked.

“C’mon, Lucy, be a sport,” teased Bill. “I’m game if you are.”

“Well I’m not,” said Lucy, dragging Zoe down the path.

“Mom!” protested Elizabeth. “I want to stay! Just think—no tan lines!”

“Me, too,” agreed Toby. “There were some cute girls back there.”

“And some really icky fat people,” added Sara.

“You shouldn’t have looked,” said Lucy, primly. “We’re not staying. We’re going to the town beach, where they have regulations against this sort of thing. Chop-chop! In the truck, everybody.”

Giggling, the kids obeyed and soon they were ready to leave.

“I can’t believe it,” mused Lucy, as Bill backed out and made a three-point turn. “This is Maine, for Pete’s sake. Not the French Riviera.”

“Don’t you think maybe you’re overreacting?” asked Bill.

“I don’t think so,” protested Lucy, but deep down she wondered if he didn’t have a point. Even worse, she had to admit to herself that Pru Pratt was right. These were not casual skinny-dippers. The pond had been taken over by nudists.

Chapter Four

“Naked?”

The voice on the other end of the telephone line was incredulous. Sue Finch, Lucy’s best friend, had never heard of anything so ridiculous.

“You mean without any clothes at all?”

“Not a stitch,” said Lucy.

“But the swimsuits are so cute this year,” said Sue, who had a lifetime subscription to *Vogue* magazine. “Little boy shorts, triangle top bikinis, though those aren’t for me. I splurged on a wet-look halter number in black.”

“You go swimming?” This was news to Lucy.

“It’s not likely I’d actually get in the water,” admitted Sue. “But I like to sunbathe on my deck. With plenty of sunscreen, of course.”

“You don’t get a tan that way,” said Lucy.

“If you keep at it long enough, you do,” said Sue. “You have to *work* at it.”

“I thought the idea was to relax,” said Lucy, who occasionally rolled her pants up to her knees in the hope of tanning her legs when she was sprawled on a chaise lounge in the backyard. She usually fell asleep. And her legs usually kept that fish-belly look well into August, her tan developing just around the time the temperature started to drop and she had to start wearing long pants again.

“Well, within limits. I keep an eye on the time and turn over every ten minutes, and I make sure to drink a lot of water so I stay hydrated. And I’m aware of shadows and things like that. It makes a difference, it really does.”

“And you don’t worry about tan lines?”

“Not a problem. I wear the same suit all season.”

“I’ll suggest that to Elizabeth. She can’t wait to join the crowd down at the pond. Says she doesn’t want to have tan lines.”

“Right.” Sue sounded skeptical.

“Well, I can’t imagine she’s interested in anybody down there. They all seemed a bit the worse for wear, if you know what I mean.” Lucy paused. “From what I saw, most of them could’ve benefitted from an article of clothing or two or ten.”

Sue laughed.

The next caller was Pam Stillings, the wife of Lucy’s boss, Ted, and the mother of Toby’s friend Adam, who had a summer job mowing lawns and trimming hedges.

“Wow, news travels fast in this town,” said Lucy, who hadn’t been back from the beach for an hour.

“It’s the heat. A lot of people had the same idea you did to go down to the pond for a swim. It’s funny, but most of the folks around here don’t like swimming in salt water. Anyway, I heard all about it from Adam. He went for a quick dip after work and got an eyeful.”

“You can say that again.”

“Oh, Lucy. You’re so prim and proper. Didn’t you go skinny-dipping when you were a kid. I did, at the time.” She lowered her voice. “I even have photos of the whole gang.”

“Photos? I’d get rid of them if I were you.”

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