

Tattletale Parrot: A Bama Cotter Cozy Mystery Murder in Dixie is Contagious

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# **TATTLETALE PARROT**

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

The acrid smell of fire and smoke and burning flesh filled my nostrils and I struggled to move. "Stay still, honey. You'll be okay." I heard a voice comforting me. "The fire! I smell fire! The Jeep is on fire!" Then I heard in the darkness, "No, baby, that booger that hit us is on fire!" Carmel was alive and I must be because I hurt like hell! Was I blind? Then I realized my eyes were squeezed shut. As I opened them I saw concerned faces fading in and out around me. "Just be still honey, don't try to move. I sure am glad you are small, because we've got to get you up that side of this mountain. "Where is Carmel?" I asked. "She's right over here. We are going to have to get a hoist to pull her up that hill. Four strong men can't lift that big woman through these trees." "Where is Astrid?" I heard someone ask "Who is Astrid, is there another person in that car?" I heard Carmel say in a tense voice, "No, it's this great big bird sitting on my shoulder. Don't nobody scare him off, he needs his cage...and I sure as hell need him off me." A prick of a needle, and I lapsed back into painless oblivion.

Bits and pieces of the ride to the hospital came and went with painful screams, but another calm cool injection dismissed the screaming woman and relaxed my body in a floating cloud. Through the confusion I heard Granny praying and Boone cursing, but I was unable to remain attentive long enough to make sense of the noise. I opened my eyes and felt the smooth hands of my grandmother stroking my forehead. I tried to move but tubes and wires held me stationary. Then I heard Granny shout, "Praise the Lord, she's awake!" Boone's face came into view and tears trailed down his cheeks. "Oh my little one, you are back with me!" I asked, "Is Carmel....is she okay?" Boone kissed my cheek and said, "Honey you can't put that woman down! She's got a broken arm and ankle, but she is doing fine." "What about Astrid? Is he okay? Did you take him to a vet?" Granny said softly, "That bird is fine. His cage got a bit dinged up, but Boone bought him another one. He's at your shop fussing at everyone."

I tried to smile but my face hurt, then I asked, "Who hit me, and why?" Boone took a deep breath and said, "Clara Patterson forced you off the road and she ran squarely in the path of an 18-wheel truck." "Why did she do that? Is she all right?" Granny answered with a

satisfied tone, "She was an evil woman, and the devil took her soul. Her body burned up in the fire she brought on herself. The truck driver wasn't hurt, but he managed to get help for you and save your life." I looked into Boone's worried eyes, "What are you doing out of bed?" He smiled, "Baby, you've been out for ten days. I'm well...now it's your turn."

It was the next day when I discovered they'd cut my hair off, and I now had a crew cut under my white turban. I hated to think of what I'd look like when the bandages were removed from my head. I met the truck driver who rescued me, and thanked him for my life. My body took a beating, and I'd suffered some head trauma and some pretty deep lacerations plus a broken bone. I was told that my lungs collapsed, and my heart stopped a time or two, but Carmel, Astrid, and I were fortunate to make it out alive. My Jeep was totaled.

"Why did Clara try to kill us?" I asked Boone later. Although the nurses insisted that all the visitors leave, the sheriff refused to leave my side. The hospital staff, as well as my doctor, was not able to convince Boone that I'd be better off alone. He advised the medical personnel that an attempt had been made on my life, and until he was sure there was only one person in the attack, he was staying.

Boone stroked my face, gently and answered my question. "Jamie said that his wife always had a violent temper, but lately she'd been suffering with horrific mood changes and more unreasonable behavior than she'd ever exhibited. He suspected she'd been taking drugs. Thanks to our prominent citizens drugs are easy to come by. Anyway, he believed his wife might have killed Bobby Joe, because of her threats to tell the court about Clara's abuse of Suzie. It seems that your sister-in-law discovered some damaging activities going on in the mental health facility. She was going to blow the whistle. People were standing in line waiting to kill her."

"Do you think Clara was the one who increased the dosage of Jamie's medicine?" Boone gave me the lifted eyebrow look and said briefly, "Could be." "Maybe Jamie decided to listen to Bobby Joe when she said that Suzie was not mentally incompetent? I wonder if she investigated the Mental Health facility. Maybe he discovered more than the problems with Suzie and his wife's harassment of his sister." Boone agreed. "That facility is a swarming nest of thieves. The State is sending some investigators to look into the problems that have been

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swept under the carpet for years.”

“Did Jamie think Clara killed Irena? Does he know Ms. Cave is okay? Was Bobby Joe threatening him with telling his wife the truth about his affair with Ms Cave?” I asked the lawman. He answered slowly, “Honey, why don’t you just rest a bit. You don’t need to be worrying about all this mess.” I looked at my chief and said, “I’ll rest better if I know what is going on. After all, I’m in this pot too.”

Boone sighed and continued, “At this point, I don’t know who was blackmailing him, and I don’t know what Jamie thought. His wife called him when he visited Suzie at the school in Florida. Clara was wild and she told him you thought she was guilty of Bobby Joe’s murder. She admitted nothing, but she said he’d be sorry if he didn’t return and help her. She threatened Serena.” Boone stood up, and kissed my cheek. “You quit thinking about these murders and get some rest. I’ll be back to see you later.” A nurse came in with some sedatives when Boone left. I was glad to take them.

I thought I’d dosed off a few minutes, however, the sun was streaming in my window and dancing on my bed. I’d slept through the night. When my breakfast was delivered, I took the coffee, but the rest of the meal turned my stomach. What is it about hospitals that they felt food should be drenched in grease? I flipped the TV on in my room and watched the news. A slim cheerful girl who appeared to be right out of high school informed the listeners of all the tragedies in their neighborhood. “A small town is the scene of three horrible murders. Two young women were brutally murdered in the last month, as well as a prominent building contractor. I smiled when I thought of what Jimmy Mack would say about that job description. He told me, “I’m just a handyman, like my daddy before me.”

The TV reporter continued her news report, “The attempted murder of local business woman and artist, Bama Cotter, resulted in the death of the attacker. I had to turn away from pictures of my wrecked Jeep, and Clara’s burned out SUV. “Local officials are without a clue in either case. State officials have been called in to investigate the small town murders as well as possible fraud in Mental Health Facility.” I turned the TV off.

My doctor and his nurse came into the room with a happy face plastered on their heads. The physician spoke softly, “The lacerations on your head have healed beautifully. I’m happy that you didn’t suffer

any permanent damage to your brain or vital organs.” Well, duh...I was glad too. He continued, “You may have some pain till your body heals from the shock it received, and of course the broken ankle will require a walking cast. Your shoulder had a bad sprain, but it should heal without any problem. All in all you’ve come out of that horrific wreck amazingly whole. Of course, you might not like the hair cut we gave you, but a hair stylist can improve our cut.” He and his nurse laughed at his joke.

I didn’t laugh though, I cried when I looked in the mirror after the doctor and his nurse left. My long hair was gone. “Vanity thou name is women...” so the saying goes. I supposed that is true. Without my thick mane of flaming hair I looked like any other person...if that person was a young boy. Curly ringlets sprang up from my scalp in all directions, not more than an inch in length.

The door opened and I tried to hide, but there was no place to go. Boone walked in the room and his eyes searched the bed and then fell on me...The new me. “I didn’t think you’d look any sexier, Bama girl, but you are a magical vixen. Oh you little fire bird, I love you so!” I fell in his arms and cried. Once more I was a woman...His woman. The sheriff held me gently, and kissed me. I replied, “Oh Boone...I love you too.” The door opened and Bob walked in. He paused a moment, and looked at our embrace, then backed out without saying a word.

Jamie returned to Woodville to bury his wife and Suzie came home too. Granny and I attended the funeral to show support for Jamie and Suzie. The services were short, and only a few people attended. Nobody wanted to be associated with the mad woman who may have been a killer. The fact that she tried to kill me didn’t help her case. Rain drizzled from the sky and a cold wind whipped through the trees. The prominence the woman hoped to accomplish was destroyed.

Beyond the site in a grove of trees, a black Cadillac waited like a vulture for the dirt to fall on the coffin. Jamie looked up and squinted through the rain in an attempt to identify the passenger through the tinted windows. I turned to look too. As our small group walked in the direction of the parked car, it sped away. Boone sat in the squad car just beyond their sight, but he and his deputy noted the car’s tag number. With the help of a computer, the owner of the car would be known, and he or she would lose any anonymity that they’d tried to accomplish.

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Judge Ponder hovered between life and death. I'd known and loved this old man most of my life. So many rumors floated around town about his indiscretions, but I found them hard to believe. I didn't know what really happened all those years ago, but these tales didn't fit the Judge's character that I knew.

Boone and I stood at the foot of Judge Ponder's bed, and watched the dying scene. Irena and Bob sat at his bedside and became acquainted...brother and sister. She must have favored her mother since she and Bob didn't resemble one another at all. Irena looked up when I came in and she thanked me for rescuing her daughter and keeping her in our home. "I'll pick up Serena and Rags in a little while. Do you mind letting her stay with you...until there is a change in our father's condition?" She looked toward Bob and clasped his hand, "I've wondered so long about the man my mother married, and lost. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't accept me. Now, I just want him to get well, even if he doesn't want to claim me as his daughter," she wiped the tears that trailed down her cheeks.

The Judge opened his eyes and he saw his son. His weakened hand reached out for him, and Bob leaned down and kissed his father's cheek. The old man whispered his son's name, and closed his eyes while he continued to cling to Bob's hand. Bob looked at his new found sister and explained, "I think he was trying to make things right. Dad made mistakes..." and he looked at me..."so have I, but I think he was trying to set them right." Suddenly the Judge's eyes opened wide and looked at Irena, and with as much strength as he could muster he called out, "No!" We were all shocked by the old man's outburst. The nurse came in quickly and said. "He needs to rest now. You must leave."

We left the hospital and the sheriff drove me home. Both of us were silent with our own thoughts. I continued to think about Irena and her little girl and the possible dangers they might face. As the sheriff stopped the car in front of my home, I asked, "Will they be safe, Boone?" He knew who was on my mind without further explanations. "We'll watch them as close as possible and their friend, Edna Worth, said she will let us know of any strange behavior in the neighborhood. Of course...I'm not sure..." He broke off the sentence. "Who is Ms. Worth? Is she some kind of detective...or something?" I questioned.

He looked away then said, "She's something. Just let it go for now." I knew when to let it go. After what I'd been through, I didn't want to get involved with any kind of conspiracy. Besides, I needed to get back to my studio.

The next day I planned to give the papers I'd stolen from Ms. Cave back to her...or to Boone and let him give them to her. However, in the early morning hours the sirens sounded again, awakening the town to a new event. Ms. Cave's house was on fire! The volunteer fire department sped to the subdivision in an attempt to save the structure. I prayed Irena Cave was not home.



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