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Murder With A View

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Murder With A View

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CHAPTER 1

Saturday, October 5

The Fall Fest Ball appeared to have been successful although the handful of members still left at Harbor View Yacht Club were trapped for now because of the storm surge. We were all jitterbugging and line dancing, trying to ignore the frenetic rhythm of the rain and wind. Except for the weather problem, everything had gone as planned and I was thankful. The other committee members and I had worked hard to make this night an evening to remember, but the weather had made the event perhaps *too* memorable for the thirty-some people still left in the building. The loud music could not mask the crashing thunder of the storm passing overhead.

The lights began to flicker and a macabre feeling tingled down my back. The lights went out, thunder rolled, and a scream vibrated the air. Then everything went silent and dark. The only illumination came from the decorative oil lamp centerpieces on the tables.

Barbara Voorhees, wife of a local jewelry storeowner, came rushing down the pitch-black hallway, feeling her way along the walls. "Quick, someone help me," she cried. "It's Emile...It's my husband...I think he's...I think he's dead."

"Call 9-1-1," someone shouted.

"The landlines are down," cried another voice.

"The emergency services won't be able to get through. The road's flooded," someone else called out.

Chaos overtook the small crowd. People frantically fumbled for their cell phones, but to no avail. This was an area prone to signal block-out. Worse yet, no electricity foretold an evening continuing into morning.

With emergency room precision, Susan Fairfield, a doctor at Newport General, grabbed an oil lamp from one of the centerpieces and double-timed it in the direction of Barbara's voice. I followed in hot pursuit.

"Take me to him," she said. Barbara Voorhees fumbled her way back to where she had left her husband. He was lying on a small leather couch in the head chef's office. His legs were bent toward his chest. His back facing us, a knife protruded from it at an unnatural angle. Barbara stood at the doorway, motionless, showing no signs of concern or emotion. All I could do was put my arm over her shoulder for comfort and support.

Susan set her lamp on a small table near the body, but more shadows than light bathed the scene. She leaned over and placed two fingers on Emile's neck, resting them for a moment. I watched the dead man's wife studying the doctor's actions. She seemed distant and detached. I squeezed her shoulder tighter, thinking she had to be in shock.

While we waited for Susan to speak, my instinct was to shake Emile and tell him this wasn't funny. I had interviewed witnesses of nursing home abuse and dog fighting, but I had never been privy to the actual crime scene. It took us all a moment to understand and recognize the inevitable. After seconds that seemed like minutes, Susan turned to me and quietly stated what we both knew. "This was murder. Did anyone reach 9-1-1 yet?"

My heart began pounding faster. My mind flipped back to a month ago and the last time my heart had beat at such a rhythm. I was on a freelance investigative story. It revolved around murder of a different sort: the horror of puppy mills. I also owned a pet store, so I understood, perhaps better than others, the lengths people would go to to make a buck at the expense of life. I confronted evil firsthand as I scooped poop

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in those dreadful conditions. Life is full of atrocities, and here lying before me on the couch was one more. I wondered if Barbara Voorhees, whom I had first met the day before in my shop, had any inkling that today would be the last day she would see her husband alive. I also wondered if I didn't have another investigative story on my hands. Murder is never as clear-cut as it appears and I wondered what the next few days would hold.

Friday, October 4

It was one day before the annual Fall Fest Ball and I was riddled with anxiety. The much-anticipated yacht club dinner and dance had my nerves shot from worrying that some detail had been overlooked. After all, being one of the committee members meant responsibility and this month I had way too much of it.

For now, I needed to concentrate on driving. The early morning sun shimmered off the ocean to my right. Beyond that the waves continued north past Newport, Portsmouth and the infamous Fall River where Lizzie Borden wielded her axe. The story was great fodder for those who loved a good scare, myself included, but somehow this fall season everything seemed more eerie. Maybe my freelance investigative job was getting the best of me.

Whatever the reason, the sheet-ghosts hanging from the trees were spooking me more than normal. I rubbed my neck and patted Cooper on his brown head. I loved my one-hundred-fifteen-pound German shepherd who weighed as much as I did, but then again, I loved all animals. That's why a year ago my husband, Nick, and I had bought a beat-up shingled building in Harbor View, Rhode Island, and I opened my own pet store. Check off one dream fulfilled.

K.A. Neely

At first glance it would appear we lead a prosaic life. My husband's a dentist who golf's twice a week; we live in a regular-sized fixer-upper in a nice neighborhood; we own a used sailboat and a dog, or should I say the dog owns us; and we feed whatever wildlife scampers, flies or hops into our yard. If it weren't for my part-time freelance investigative writing job, life *would be* mundane. Trouble seems to follow me wherever I go and I wouldn't have it any other way.

The wind was whipping raindrops through the trees and kicking up the fall foliage as I slid the key into the lock of the pet shop. I could hear the phone ringing. Owning a business brings great rewards, but also great demands. Except for Jessica, the part-time college student who helps between classes and poetry readings, I am the sole proprietor of all the stress and anxiety of being a shop owner.

The door-lock was stubborn as I jiggled it to release the catch, but at last it opened. I dropped my purse and work paraphernalia on the wide-pine flooring and grabbed the phone with a breathless, "Hello, Paws for Love. May I help you?"

"I want all of them. Every last one of them for my Mimsey and a few bags of those special homemade treats we always purchase."

I knew for certain what this customer wanted. That strident voice had been grating on my eardrum for almost a year. My hand tightened around the receiver, but I kept my voice calm and cheerful, reminding myself that every demand from Mrs. Wessox translated into the ka-ching of the cash register.

"I can give you four bags of Science Diet Light for...Mimsey, but I need to keep a couple in inventory. I'll be glad to order more today. They should be in by Tuesday."

“If I must wait, but I certainly hope this weather won’t escalate into a hideous storm and trap Mimsey and me without her favorite treats. I’ll be sending Rutherford over to pick them up later this afternoon.” Her tone was accusing.

I didn’t see what all of the hullabaloo was about over a little precipitation, but I refrained from voicing my opinion to one of the few remaining matriarchs of Newport society. I had no idea why Mrs. Wessox had chosen my establishment to patronize, but after a year of dealing with her I had come to the conclusion that all the other stores must have politely asked her to take a hike.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Wessox, I promise Mimsey will have plenty of food for the weekend.” My tone belied my feelings. I appreciated sincere concern for family pets; I just couldn’t stand the upper crust’s pretenses.

The conversation ended. Once free of the phone and the desire to pull out my brainstem and jump rope with it on a four-lane highway, I commenced doing what I loved most, playing with the small furry critters I adored so much. My other passion was my freelance job as an investigative reporter.

As I passed by the counter on the way to the storeroom I stopped to finger through the pages of a month-old paper. I kept it around for inspiration. It held what I believed was my best story to date—that of the shocking and horrifying conditions found in puppy mills. Working those few extra hours after the store closed and on weekends was worth the aching back and sleepless nights because my efforts forced those operators to close their doors and never breed dogs again.

I had just finished cleaning the panda-bear hamster cage when the front door swung open, causing the small bell hanging overtop to ring-in a new customer. Stretching over

Cooper and the leftover beef bone he held between his paws, I pushed open the doors separating me from the whitewashed, beadboard counter.

My smile stiffened. Generally I liked all of my customers. I assumed anyone who took care to shop in a premium pet store couldn't be too bad. However, this coiffed individual was a stranger. I prayed this wasn't another Mrs. Wessox; one brainstem is all I have. This chic-looking woman must be someone from Boston, I decided, or maybe even Newport. She appeared able to afford an upscale lifestyle. I assessed her expensive cream linen suit, brown alligator pumps and a wedding ring with a diamond equaling anything owned by Elizabeth Taylor. Slung over her shoulder was a plaid Burberry purse from which peeked the brown-and-white face of a Papillon.

Skipping around the counter I reached out my hand. "Hi, I'm Morgan. May I help you find anything in particular?" I shook the stranger's hand. Her grip was cool and firm, her face serious, her manner formal, but not prudish. At first blush, I liked her.

"Hello. I'm Barbara Voorhees and this is Cocoa," she said, pointing to the small muzzle in her purse. "I don't mean to be discourteous, but Emile, my husband, is waiting for me in the car and we're in a hurry. Could I get a small bag of dog food?" She pointed to a small yellow bag on the lower shelf. "We've been away for the week and I know I'm out at home." She turned her head and her eyes flicked a disdainful look toward the Mercedes parked near the front door.

I saw a man about her age behind the wheel. I surmised marital issues for this woman whose name sounded so familiar, but for now salesmanship was overpowering my recall abilities. "Oh, yes, of course. Is there anything else I can get for you?" I dodged some boxes stacked behind the counter

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to retrieve the food and a free sample of treats. I placed them on the stainless steel countertop and rang the sale into the register. After an exchange of monies I offered to carry the items to the car, but Mrs. Voorhees scooped up the plastic bag and thanked me for being so efficient before darting out the door.

As the wind howled against the shop's front bay windows, I thought again, *Voorhees, why does that name sound so familiar?* My mind wandered as I watched the darkening clouds pass overhead. I stretched my neck to gaze down the street, past the dock in the distance. The sliver of water I could make out seemed to be churning from underneath, as if by the tumbling of some menacing sea monster, and I struggled wondering why I couldn't shake a feeling of dread.

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