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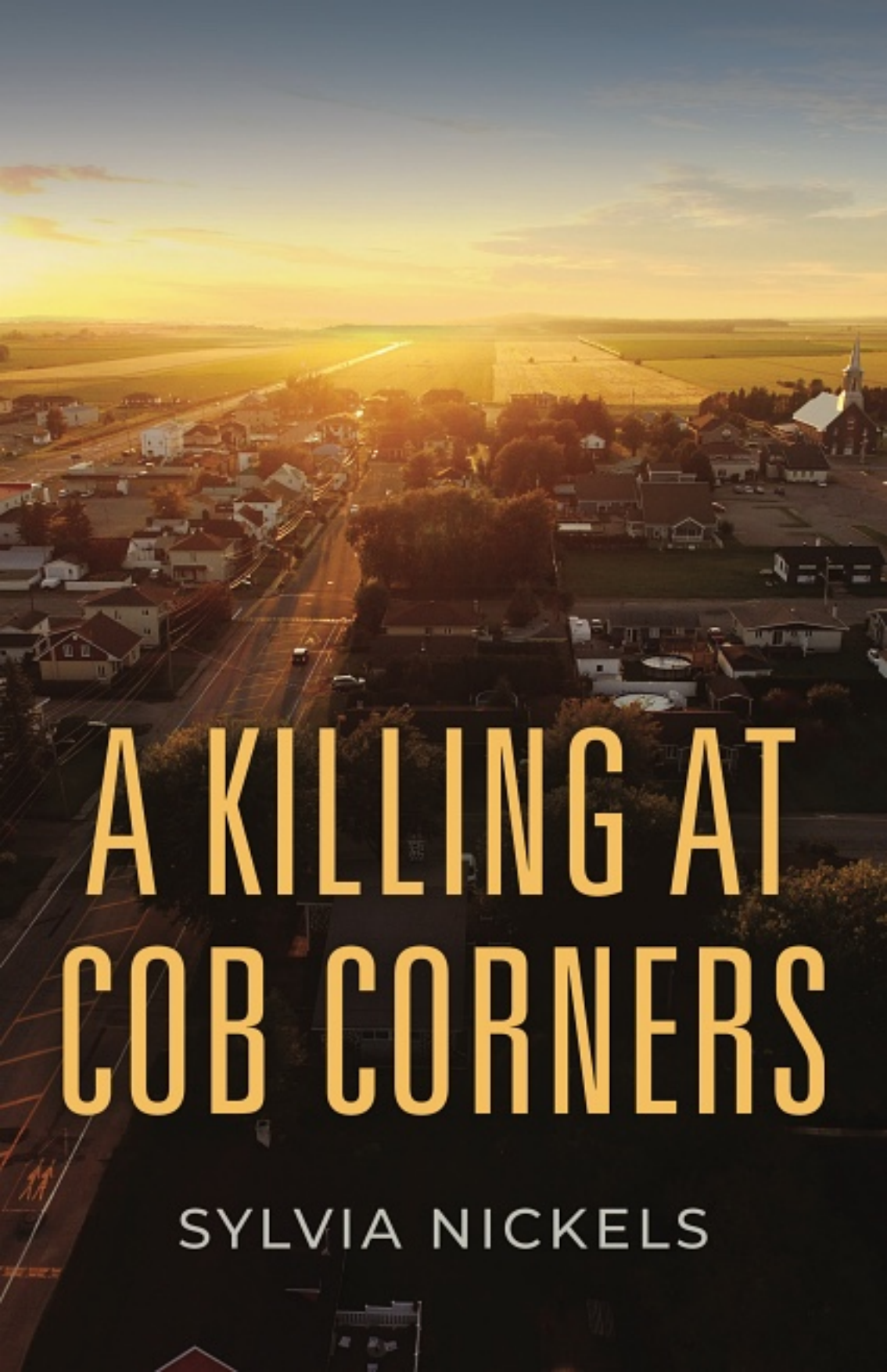
A Killing at Cob Corners

By Sylvia Nickels

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An aerial photograph of a town at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow and a long, intense light flare that streaks across the sky and down a central road. The town below is bathed in the warm light of the setting sun, with houses, trees, and a church with a steeple visible. The overall mood is serene yet mysterious.

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SYLVIA NICKELS

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Chapter One

The peeling of the doorbell seemed almost a part of the trumpet notes of the recorded concert soaring from Clementine Rush's sound system. When it penetrated her attention she reached for the system remote and lowered the volume. Probably Michael, Caroline's fiance. He often came by when he had worked late at the State Police substation, where he held the rank of Captain under Commander Forrest. Despite her usual, and probably baseless, reluctance to interact with the man she supposed she should go down and speak to him. She hadn't seen him since arriving home from the city two days ago.

When Clem reached the head of the stairs, she could see her sister and future brother-in-law standing in the living room. Caroline's left hand was kneading a wad of Michael's once smoothly ironed uniform shirt, her face buried on his shoulder. He patted her hair and made low, soothing sounds.

Clem froze on the landing. What could be wrong? Had something happened to Dad? Or Chance? Oh, God, a car crash?

Michael glanced up and saw her.

"Come on down, Clem." Her face must have reflected the fear squeezing her heart, for he added. "Not Chance or your Dad. But something has happened to one of your old friends." Clem hardly felt her feet touch the stair treads as she hastened down the stairs.

Caroline raised her tear-streaked face. She didn't resist when Michael guided her to the sofa, and sat obediently. "Clem! It's Mary Lou. She's dead. Dead!" As her eyes flooded with fresh tears, they poured down her cheeks.

On the bottom step Clem reached for the newel post as her legs threatened to give way. "Mary Lou? Dead? Michael? What happened to her? When?"

He beckoned her to the sofa. "You'd better sit down, Clem. Sometime this evening, apparently." He answered her last question first. "Some kids were walking through the cemetery behind the old Cob Corners school building and found her body. We don't know yet exactly what or when it happened."

"What injuries did she have? Was she ..." Clem found her voice choked with tears, unable to finish the question. She managed to reach the sofa and took her sister's hand.

"As I said, we don't know much about what happened. She had a head injury and marks on her throat. The medical examiner will determine the cause of death when he does the autopsy."

Michael walked to the French doors and looked out into the darkness. His back was not as straight and stiff as usual, and his broad shoulders drooped slightly. Apparently the necessity to deliver such news to the family had taken a toll on the self-possessed state cop. He raked his right fingers thru his thick, dark hair, then smoothed his palm over the wrinkles on his uniform shoulder. His medium gray Stetson, with the State Police insignia on the band, lay on the glass-topped table behind the sofa.

Caroline sat silent and unmoving on the sofa, hands folded in her lap, as though too stricken for words or movement. Clem put her hand on her sister's knee. Tried to get her mind to accept what she had just heard.

"Michael. You said some kids found her? But you don't know how long she had been there? Nor how she might have died?"

"Right. But we'll find out. Had either of you seen her recently or spoken to her?"

"No. But we were just talking about her this evening."

"Oh, my God. Clem. It could have been happening just when we were talking about her." Stricken lines drew anew across Caroline's smooth forehead. She covered her face with both hands.

"Does Louise, her mother, know?" Clem remembered what Caroline had been told when she called the Waldrop home.

"The Commander went to Mary Lou, Mrs. Aldeen's home, to tell her husband. I'm sure he will tell her mother."

He returned and knelt on one knee in front of Caroline. He covered her hands with his. "I need to get back, help with the investigation. Are you all right?"

"No. But go. They'll need everyone. Find out who did this to her."

At that moment the front door opened. Chance crossed the foyer and came into the great room. He looked from one to the other of his

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sisters on the sofa. "Why are you crying, Caroline?" Fear touched his dark blue Rush eyes. "Is it Dad?"

"No, no. Nothing's wrong with your dad, as far as we know." Michael answered. He picked up his hat and headed for the door. "An old friend of your sisters has been killed. I have to get back to the station."

He cast a final solemn look at Caroline and said he would call her as soon as he had any news about Mary Lou's death he could share.

Chapter Two

When the door closed behind Michael, Caroline burst into fresh tears. Clem wrapped her arm around her sister's shaking shoulders, patted her back as she fought her own tears.

Caroline sobbed for a moment before wiping sodden tissues hard across her eyes. She swallowed, before she spoke. "To think, I tried to get in touch with her only a couple of hours ago."

Clem nodded. "Strange how things turn out. Who would have expected this in a thousand years?"

Chance had dropped into an armchair next to the sofa. He raised his head. "Why'd you try to call her, Sis?"

Caroline seemed to seize on the question as a distraction from her grief. "The school. She was a drop out, you know. Clem finally convinced me to talk to Mary Lou, see what she thought about it, might want to help."

He nodded. "Might have helped her, if something like your school had been available then." Perhaps unable to sit still, he jumped up and walked to the slider to the garden, looking out as Michael had done. "You convince that Education Committee, Sis."

Caroline was determinedly hopeful that her plan would be approved by the County Education Committee. A plan she had labored over for two years, to establish a girls' prep school, using money she and her sister had inherited from their mother.

Many years ago the old Cob Corners School building in the rural section of Longwater County called Cob Corners, had originally served all twelve grades. The year Caroline finished ninth grade the county had switched to the elementary, middle, and high school educational division system. High school and middle grades were combined to the large new Cedarvale High School in town. While she was in college the Cob Corners School was closed permanently and Cob Corners students combined with a slightly larger elementary school just outside Cedarvale.

Caroline wanted to buy or lease the Cob Corners building for her prep school. But the County Education Committee had to approve the

use or disposal of the building. She preferred the lease arrangement, which would give her more money to establish the school.

Earlier that evening Clem had been the one to suggest Caroline talk to Mary Lou. "You could ask her for an affidavit of support."

"Be a 'show and tell' as the inspiration for my wanting to set up Longwater Preparatory Academy? I'm afraid it would feel awkward to look her up for that after such a long time. She might feel I was using her."

"She was your best friend at Cedarvale High before she dropped out. She wouldn't think that."

"Maybe she's happy and wouldn't be pleased that I consider her life a negative example."

"I hope she is happy. But considering that Brad Aldeen was a dropout, too, with little or no ambition, I think it's open to doubt."

"I wonder if she really loved him."

Clem shrugged. "Maybe. And maybe she just married him to get away from her dad."

"Then her dad left her mother and ran off to California with another woman the year I went to the University. Louise never married again, did she?"

"As far as I know, she still lives at their old place near Cob Corners. You could call her and find out where Mary Lou and Brad are living."

Caroline's reluctance to contact Mary Lou persisted. "Lyle and J. T. think the committee will approve my request. Mary Lou being there wouldn't make any difference."

"They're the junior members of the committee. They have no idea what the good ol' boys are cooking up in the back room. That's how it works from the county to the state legislature." Clem said. "You know that."

"They could be right. Since this isn't going to cost the county anything. In fact, it will take an expense off the county's back. Upkeep of the old building."

"We know that. It makes good sense. And since when did that amount to much in Georgia or Longwater County politics? Call Louise."

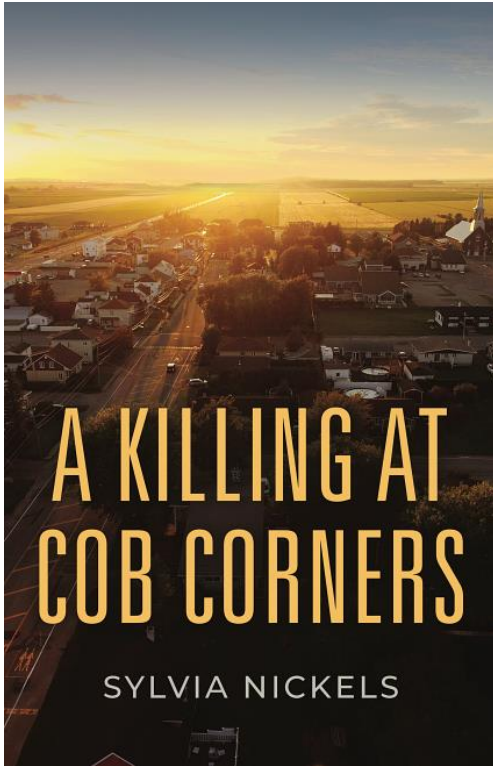
"She might resent me for not looking Mary Lou up when I came back after graduation. She probably thinks I feel superior or something."

"Caroline, she treated us like her own kids after mom died. Even Chance."

"Why haven't you kept in touch, then?"

"I did, for a while. Then I went off to school. And worked those summers in Appalachia. And the last three years in Dad's office in Atlanta." Clem sat on the couch and crossed her legs, swinging her foot in small arcs. "It's not the same as asking Dad's help."

"All right. I'll call her. We've both been unforgivably negligent toward Mary Lou and her family."



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