

When detective Peter Abbott goes to meet his new wealthy client, he finds a dead body instead.

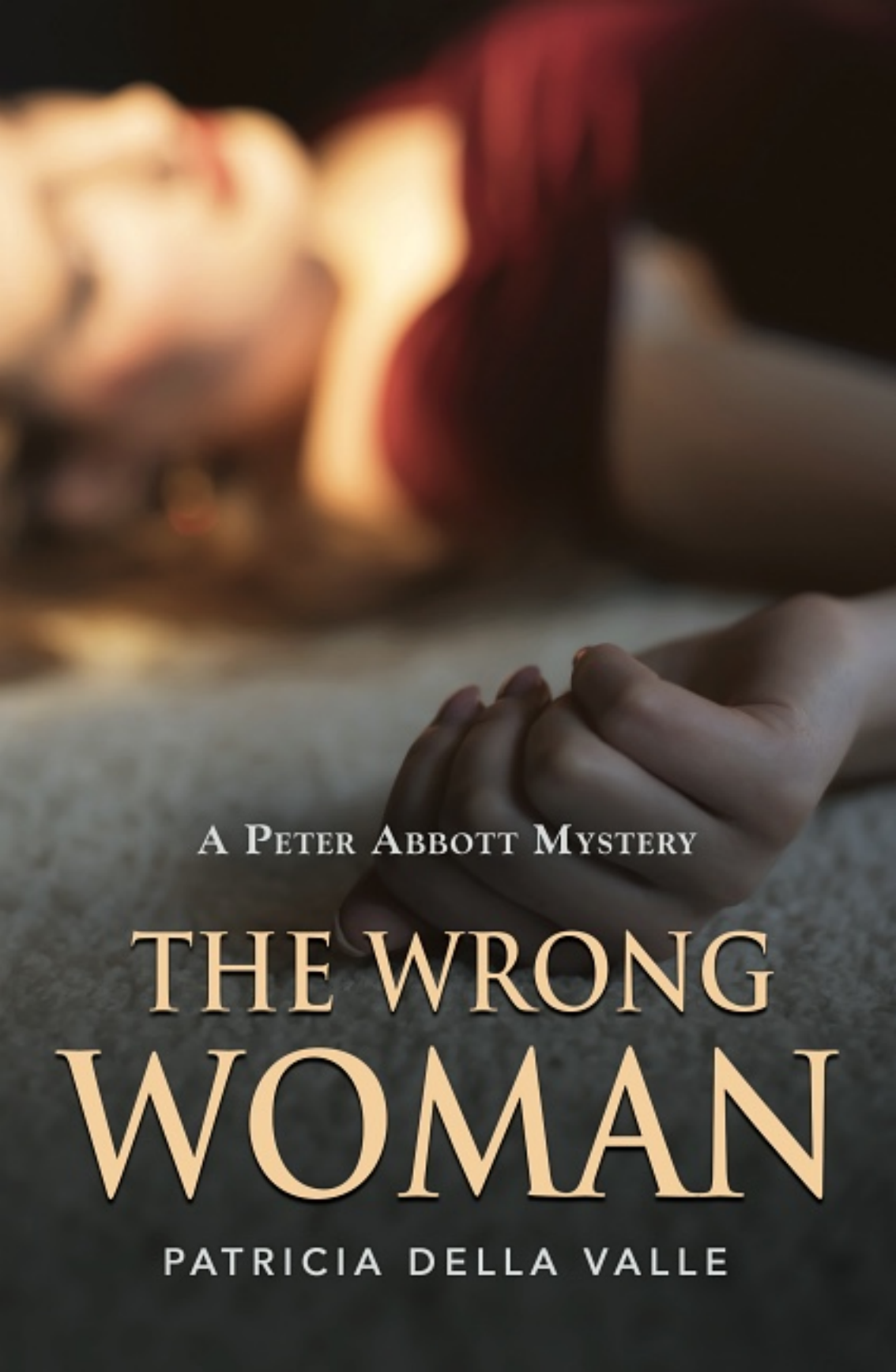
The Wrong Woman: A Peter Abbott Mystery

By Patricia Della Valle

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A PETER ABBOTT MYSTERY

THE WRONG
WOMAN

PATRICIA DELLA VALLE

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CHAPTER ONE

I'm driving Route 75 on the way to a new client. The sky is ominous. Black clouds are getting thicker and I'm heading right into them.

Name is Peter Abbott and I'm a private investigator. On my way to Westminster, one of the wealthiest areas per capita in Minnesota. I've acquired a reputation in the years I've been practicing. I thought I'd been everywhere in Minnesota, but this area is new to me. Tremendous homes, many of them built over one hundred years ago by wealthy land barons who made their fortunes in coal. Small cottages about a mile away were homes for the miners, men who risked their lives every day so the people at the top could live their lives in luxury.

Before I reach my destination, the skies open up and rain pours down in buckets, dousing my windshield, making visibility impossible. I see a shoulder out my side window and pull over. See car lights, but little else. Turn off the ignition and sit back thinking about the call I am about to make.

Yesterday, when Minnie was preparing dinner and I was working at my desk, the phone rang. It was a woman with a very cultured voice. Two notches more and she would be speaking with an English accent.

“Mr. Abbott,” she began, “I need a private investigator to help with a problem. A friend of mine used your services and was pleased. The person I choose must be discreet. If we decide to work together, anything we discuss is to go no further than the two of us.”

I asked her name.

“Cathryn Mortimer,” she replied. I knew the name. Cathryn and her husband, Gerald were philanthropists, often in the newspaper for their charity work, but I read recently that Gerald had died.

I assured Mrs. Mortimer of my discretion. “Would you be able to see me tomorrow in my home?” she asked.

We made an appointment for today.

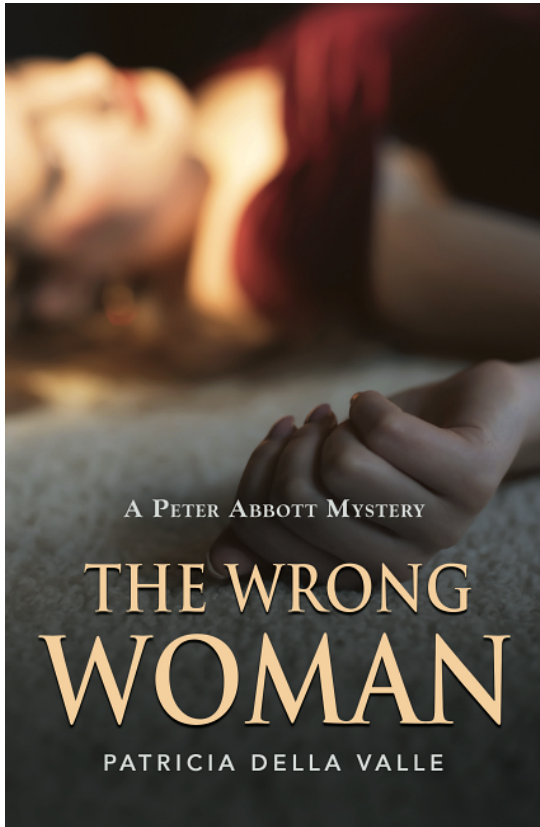
The rain is stopping and the sky brightening. Get back to driving and in half an hour I come upon a huge rock at the side of the road with the name Westminster Estates engraved like a tombstone. I’ve found the hallowed grounds of Westminster. Turn at the rock and find myself on a dirt road. Wooden arrows, each bearing the name of a homeowner are attached to a post. They point to the road you have to travel

to get to your destination. Not very classy. There is one other name on an arrow which I recognize. It's the name of a movie star, Lloyd James. He's always the hero in Grade B action films. Have to tell Minnie. She loves his movies. She'll be very impressed.

The Mortimer's arrow points to another dirt path which I follow through thick trees and brambles. As I drive along, some of the branches from each side meet in the middle forming a canopy over my car. I see a human hand in this, making the trees part of the entrance to the estate. My leafy path opens onto the grounds of Mrs. Mortimer's spectacular Tudor mansion. It sits at the top of gradient green hills, perfectly manicured. It looks to me like an English castle I've seen in books or the movies.

The road I am on continues to a portico in front of the home and I steer the Buick into it.

Walk the short distance to the house. A brass lion's head knocker hangs from the door. I take hold of it and knock. Wait. No answer. Knock again. Wait. Still no answer. Notice a button to my right and press it. I hear the ringing of a doorbell, but no one answers. I look at my watch. I'm exactly on time. There's a knob. I open the door and step inside.



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