

# MURDER BYTES

By Gayle Carline

## CHAPTER 1

He needed to be somewhere else. Instead, he was stuck behind a dumpster, negotiating with an unwashed, unkempt, unpleasant man, over a stupid jacket.

“Fifty bucks, man.” The man squinted, showing three teeth, all rotted. “This is Italian leather.”

Dev wanted to throw him a ten and point out the jacket was neither. But the morning sunlight was already invading his pounding head, and the smells coming from the dumpster reached into his stomach and tossed it like a salad. A very bad salad.

He withdrew two twenties from his pocket. “Here. Does this work?”

The altered-statesman grinned at the money through dilated pupils, stretching his hand out. “Sweet.”

Deal done, Dev slipped into the jacket and zipped it up. It smelled tangy, but he couldn’t afford to mind. There were stains on his shirt, stains he needed to hide.

Police sirens made him flinch. Homeless Man chuckled.

“That’s my swan song, man.” He ambled away from the dumpster, north, toward the freeway.

Dev watched a parade of flashing lights whip into the hotel parking lot next door. He backed a few steps, his heart urging him to turn and run.

Instead, he forced himself to walk toward the university. His legs twitched, ready to take off, and his pulse throbbed violently. Around the corner from the fast food joints and gas

stations, California State University, Fullerton stretched to his right. The glass-and-steel buildings, punctuated with jacaranda trees, closed in around him. The scent of star jasmine sickened him as it floated on the warm June air.

*Relax, he kept telling himself. Only a guilty man runs.*

While he strolled, last evening's events galloped across his mind. He knew he'd been in the hotel lobby, waiting for...someone...a sales rep? From there, images flashed, brief, chaotic, in no clear order. Blonde hair and floral perfume...white sheets and blood...the tang of copper...a shiny, sharp edge, and a scream...

A second scream, from the maid, had awakened him to the horror in the room. He bolted, half-dazed, half-mad, fully terrified.

*God, my head hurts.*

The university campus looked too deserted to hide him. At the corner of State College, he remembered a bakery down the street. Panera, or one of those chains, it didn't matter.

He needed to clear his head, figure out his next move. Coffee sounded like a good start. He opened the door, cringing at his reflection as he did. The server barely glanced at him as she gave him coffee, and took his money.

He shouldn't have run away, but the deed was done. With a sigh of reluctance, Dev Minneopa pulled out his cellphone and called the only person who could help him.

## CHAPTER 2

Peri Minneopa draped her tall frame across a lounge chair, surveying her surroundings.

Soft tones of green, from pale to dusky, painted the yard. Breeze whispered through the swath of shocking pink bougainvillea, carrying hints of scent from nearby plumeria.

The garden was an oasis, yet all she could hear was the hammering and yammering of the construction team in her house. She took another swig of coffee and closed her eyes, reminding herself that she made this choice.

*God, why did I make this choice?*

The French doors from the kitchen opened, letting more decibels into the yard for a moment. Peri glanced back to see her fiancé, Skip, shuffling toward her. He had acclimated well to using a cane. His limp was almost unnoticeable.

“Morning, Doll.” Leaning in, he gave her a peck on her lips, his mustache brushing her face as he did.

“Is it too early for a martini?” She nodded toward the house. “They insist on getting started at 7-damned-o’clock every morning.”

Skip smiled as he settled into the second lounge chair. “Jared and Willem promised eight weeks, right?”

“Eight of the longest weeks of my life.”

“Well, don’t stick around. Go for a run. Visit Blanche. Clean out your office.”

Peri watched her fingers trace the arm of the chair. “Not in the mood to run, Blanche is out on a call, and...I don’t know, Skip, I can’t seem to find the energy to dig through all those files.”

“Maybe call the therapist?”

“Already got an appointment, later today.” She tried to smile, but it felt like a grimace. “I really hate going through this when you’re going through your rehab. Feel like I’m not being very supportive.”

He rose and slid into her lounge chair, wrapping her in his arms. “Hey, we’re doing great. If anything, we understand each other.”

A song softly hummed amid the background cacophony of drills and hammers. Peri stretched across her fiancé to wrestle her phone from the table.

“Hey, Sis, it’s Dev. I’m in trouble.”

She sat up, pushing against Skip. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t explain it over the phone.” His voice sounded raspy. “I’m at Panera on State College.”

She ran her fingers through her blond hair. “And?”

“And what?” His voice got a little louder. “I need you to meet me here.”

“Oh, so you snap your fingers and I’m expected to jump.”

She could almost hear the wall of stubbornness building. It was a family curse. “Forget it. Sorry I bothered you.”

“Dev, don’t. I’m sorry. I’ll be right there.” Peri ended the call and turned to Skip. “My brother’s in trouble. Want to go for a car ride?”

\* \* \* \* \*

Skip wore his usual flinty expression as he drove. “Did he say what kind of trouble?”

“He didn’t say.” Peri stared ahead, trying to will him to drive faster. “I’m not sure which is weirder—that he called, or that he’s here in town.”

“When did you ever hear from him without prompting?”

She tapped the console. “Never. And I haven’t seen him since Erik’s funeral.”

“I still can’t believe you grew up calling your parents by their first names.”

“I still can’t believe I’m grown up at all.” She pointed to the right. “That’s it.”

Skip pulled into a spot and Peri tried not to throw the door open before the car stopped rolling. He reached across her.

“Easy. It’s all gonna be okay.”

She leaned back and took a deep breath. “I guess. Everything feels so—I don’t know.”

“Like you’re running to catch up with it?”

She nodded. “One more side effect of the shooting?”

“Possibly, but patience has never been one of your strengths.”

She punched his arm and got out.

Inside, she saw a semi-familiar face tucked into the corner booth.

“Last time I saw you, you were a little tanner,” she said, sitting.

Dev gave her a shrug, saw Skip, and froze.

“Dev, this is my boyfr—my fiancé, Skip Carlton.” Peri slid over, to allow Skip to sit next to her. “Now, what’s the problem?”

Dev glanced from Peri to Skip and back, several times, silent. She reached under the table, gave Skip’s thigh a little squeeze, and he rose.

“I’ll be up front, having coffee.”

Peri studied her brother. The same blue eyes as their father, same crooked smile as their mom. He gripped his coffee cup in both hands, his knuckles swollen and knotted. Another familial trait, she glanced at her own hands.

*Were my knuckles always this big?*

Dev leaned over the table and spoke in a whisper. “I had a meeting last night with a sales rep, I think. I woke up this morning in a hotel room with a dead woman. I have no memory of what happened in between.”

She wasn’t sure what to expect from him, but this wasn’t it. “What did the police say?”

“No idea. I ran outta there before they got to the room.”

“Are you *kidding* me?” Peri’s voice climbed an octave.

“Keep it down, will you?” He grabbed her arm. “I realize, I have to go to the police. I just—needed someone to talk to first. I needed my little sister.”

Peri sat back, crossing her arms over her chest. “After not contacting me in over a year, after making me chase you down to even figure out where you are for the past, I dunno, seven years? Now you need me to get you out of a jam.”

His eyes narrowed, as he rose from the booth. “No, I guess I don’t. I’ll take my chances with the cops.”

Peri held up her hand. “Whoa, there, Bugsy. I didn’t say I wouldn’t help. I’m just not loving the way you only want to see me because you’re in trouble. I’ll get over it.”

He relaxed, slumping against the vinyl, staring at his mug.

She continued. “My fiancé happens to be a detective with the Placentia Police Department. He can go with us to the station so you can give your statement—and that shirt of yours for processing. I’m guessing that’s not your blood on the collar.”

He pulled his borrowed jacket further up on his neck, and gave her one quick nod. Peri looked around and found Skip, on the other side of the bakery. A small gesture from her, and he began to make his way toward their booth.

“I gotta hit the head,” Dev said.

“Can’t it wait?”

“Sure, if I want to piss myself.”

“Okay, but don’t wash. You might have evidence on you.”

“Whatever.” He slipped around the corner as Skip reached the table with a curious look.

“He went to the bathroom.”

Skip sat and drank his coffee as she explained Dev’s predicament.

“Let me see what I can find out.” He pulled out his cell phone and placed a call.

Peri strained to hear his half of the conversation, but it was no use. Skip had that remarkable ability to speak quietly and be understood by the person on the other end. Years of police training had also honed his poker face, so she couldn’t even read his expression. He ended the call and returned to his coffee.

The little patience she had evaporated. “Well?”

“Well.” He took one more sip. “There is a dead woman in the Holiday Hotel and Spa on Nutwood. Probably exsanguination—there’s a lot of blood. Fingerprints aplenty, along with a man’s jacket, size 38, with a visitor’s ID in the pocket from Howard Aerospace Company. Dev...Chaplain?”

“Chaplain. What an ass.”

“Because...?”

“Because Minneopa is our legal family name. How dare he deny it?”

“Right now, he’s denying his place in an interrogation room. I’ll go get him.”

Peri picked up Dev’s coffee cup, smelled the contents, and set it down. Smelled like coffee.

Skip returned, and stood by the table. “Your brother’s in the wind.”