

Tulle Death  
Do Us Part

## TULLE DEATH DO US PART

Book 4 in the Material Witness Mystery Series

A Polyester Press Mystery

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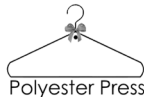
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A MATERIAL WITNESS MYSTERY

# Tulle Death Do Us Part

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READING, PENNSYLVANIA



*To Sandy Fields*



# 1

MY TEN-FIFTEEN APPOINTMENT WAS TWENTY MINUTES LATE. I wouldn't have minded so much if said appointment hadn't asked me to close my fabric store, Material Girl, to the public while she browsed the aisles to get ideas for her wedding dress. It was an unusual request, and I would have politely refused if she hadn't been referred to me by Adelaide Brooks, general manager of the historic mansion less than a block away. It was bridal season, after all, and sending brides my way had become just one of the many small kindnesses Adelaide had shown me since I'd reopened my family's business.

It was early October, and the hot summer temperatures were starting to break. I'd had the store ready to open at ten and wasted fifteen minutes rearranging a display of delicate tulle fabric that I'd discovered in the back room just last week. Someone, presumably my great-aunt Millie, the original owner of the shop, had wrapped each bolt in quilted cotton to protect it, which explained why I hadn't found it until recently. It wasn't unusual for eighty-year-old fabric to exist, but to find several full bolts, in pristine condition, was like spotting a unicorn in

the frozen foods aisle at the grocery store. Discoveries like this—vintage fabrics that had been preserved by the store, which had been closed for ten years before I inherited it, along with new additions like the proprietary blend of velvet I'd had woven for the store and the end-of-bolt acquisitions I made from my contacts in the wholesale fabric market—helped Material Girl stand out as a place where you could find the fabric of your dreams.

You can only fuss so much with delicate fabric before potentially destroying it, so I forced myself to leave the tulle display, and I moved to the stoop outside my shop. Material Girl was on the bottom floor of a Victorian row house, neighbored on one side by an antique market and the other side by a shop of tiki ephemera. The rest of Bonita Avenue was populated with the kinds of shops, restaurants, and banks that gave San Ladrón its small-town charm. Already, the street parking was filling with cars, and visitors were going into and out of shops, looking for something special.

And my store was still closed.

A young couple came out of Tiki Tom's next door. The woman, a pretty blonde with fair features and wispy hair that framed her cherubic face, pointed at my window. "A fabric store!" She turned to the man next to her. "You don't mind if I go in, do you? I promise I'll be quick."

The man smiled. "Don't make promises you can't keep," he said teasingly. "Go in. Take all the time you want. I'll go across the street and get a cup of coffee."

The woman smiled. They shared a kiss that told me there was no animosity behind his teasing, then she turned toward the shop. That was when she saw me.

"Oh, hi! I didn't see you standing there," she said. She glanced behind me and saw the Closed sign in the window. "Is this shop closed?"



My hours were listed on the window just below the sign, so it wasn't difficult to see that they were in conflict.

I glanced up and down the street. It was a typical Friday morning. By noon, cars would have to circle the block, waiting for a parking space to open. The weather was sunny and seventy-five, one of the first near-perfect days we'd had after the gloom of June and the heat of July, August, and September. Today would bring with it a crowd of day trippers, the best business in a small California town like San Ladrón, and I was at risk of missing them. Adelaide couldn't be blamed for the tardiness of the client she'd referred to me, but I was getting more and more curious about how she'd come to recommend her in the first place.

I pulled my phone out and checked for a message or missed call then made a snap decision. "I was expecting a private, um, consultation this morning, but she's running late. Come on inside." I pulled the door open and stepped back.

At that moment, a small black sports car with tinted windows screeched to a halt in front of Material Girl. The passenger window rolled down, and a blond woman in oversized black sunglasses and a black beret peered out. "Are you Polyester Monroe?" she called out to me.

"Yes, I'm Poly."

She got out of the car and said something to the driver. She turned back to me. "I've heard a lot about you." She stormed the stairs to my door and cast a dismissive glance at the woman next to me. After an awkward moment, she looked back at me. "My assistant *did* request privacy, didn't she?"

There wasn't a lot I could do in this situation. The woman in the beret was right; the initial request had been for a closed shop for her appointment, and the sign on the door indicated I'd honored her request. Pointing out the woman's tardiness

wasn't the best display of service, and Adelaide's referral lingered in the back of my mind.

I turned to the original customer. "She's right. I agreed to close the shop for her appointment. I don't know how long we're going to be, but if you give me a phone number, I can call you when we're done so you can come back."

"That's okay. We only had about an hour before we..." Her voice trailed off as she stared at the woman who'd just arrived.

The woman in the beret and sunglasses smiled at the blonde, and for a moment, I thought she might have a change of heart on her whole privacy thing. She glanced over her shoulder. "I just hope the paparazzi don't track me down here." She gave us a broad smile and swept inside.

It wasn't appropriate for me to make a disparaging comment about a customer, but her attitude was too big to ignore. I glanced at the shy blonde and said, "The paparazzi? That's a little much."

"She's right," the blonde said. "That's Beatriz Rosen. The media love her." She craned her neck, and her gaze followed the woman as she wandered deeper into the store.

I'd heard the name, but it took me a moment to place it. "The ballerina?" I asked.

The blonde nodded.

I turned and looked into my store. "She's on billboards all over Los Angeles."

And with that name, the reason for privacy became clear.

Since moving to San Ladrón, I'd lost touch with the gossip of Hollywood, but Beatriz Rosen's story had come to me before that. She was a prima ballerina who'd first made a name for herself for her bold dance performances and later as a bad-boy magnet, the gossip columns romantically linking her to a steady stream of rock stars, actors, and professional athletes. She'd

danced in her first lead over a decade ago, in her late teens, and the internet took notice. Ticket sales boomed as a whole new generation of balletgoers clamored to see her in person.

Someone at the Los Angeles Ballet took her image one step further and plastered it on billboards around the city. I used to see them when I drove to my old job in the fabric district. When I'd moved to San Ladrón, I left those billboards behind. I was more likely to watch movies from the thirties than attend the ballet anyway, and aside from the gossip I'd heard, I didn't know much else about her.

I shared a bittersweet smile with the blonde. "I'm sorry. I did agree to let her shop in private. But seriously, I can call you when she's done or stay open later tonight if you want to come back."

"I can't believe she didn't..." the blonde said, her voice trailing off. "We're on our way north, so we won't be around." She glanced into the shop one last time then turned away and crossed the street. I lingered for a moment to watch her enter the diner. Her cheeks were flushed, and she seemed genuinely excited to share news of her brush with fame with the man she'd arrived with. Their faces turned to the window, and I smiled and waved.

The street filled with more people, so I didn't think much when another woman approached the store. This one was dressed casually in a white T-shirt, jeans, and black-and-white Nike Panda Dunks. Her hair was in a ponytail, and her face was free from makeup.

"I'm sorry," I said. I positioned myself between her and the entrance. "My shop is closed for a private shopping appointment."

"Why don't you take out an ad?" she asked. "When Beatriz finds out you don't know the meaning of the word 'private,'

she's going to be furious." She elbowed me out of the way to enter my store.

With a backward glance over my shoulder, I saw the couple watching me from the windows of the diner. Their smiles had faded.

I liked to think of myself as a natural businesswoman, but in the span of fifteen minutes, I'd already turned away one customer and offended another. While the rest of the avenue was bursting with business, I was on my way to ringing up a big, fat goose egg.

I reentered Material Girl and closed the hinged black metal accordion gate across the entrance then locked it. Beatriz and her female companion stood by my bridal area. I'd wanted to maximize the opportunities of wedding season, so I'd pulled every white fabric in the shop into a freestanding display and papered the wall behind with drawings of wedding dresses. My skills were in designing, not sewing, and my imagination coupled well with my ability to sketch a concept. Since moving here, I'd made the acquaintance of a local seamstress who worked for me part-time and could make anything I dreamed up. Most of my customers were capable sewers themselves, but my designs often provided the inspiration.

"Welcome to Material Girl," I said. "I'm the owner, Poly Monroe. Adelaide may have mentioned me when she referred you to the store." I addressed Beatriz, not the other woman, though I sensed she wanted my attention too. Not wanting to insult her if she was someone I should recognize, too, I hoped for an introduction.

"Hello," the original woman said. "I'm Beatriz Rosen."

The introduction was unnecessary, but she had no way of knowing that. She held out her hand, and I shook it. My ex-boyfriend, who studied the art of handshakes in his role as an up-and-coming financial analyst, would have described her

handshake as regal—not particularly strong but definitely self-important. She released my hand and gestured toward the other woman. “This is my friend Renee.” Her companion held up her hand in a wave.

I smiled and said, “Nice to meet you.” I turned back to Beatriz. “Adelaide didn’t give me details on your shopping needs. I can give you a tour of the store or make recommendations if you’d like.”

“I need to find a wedding dress,” Beatriz said.

“You found the right part of the store. Is this for a special performance?”

Renee and Beatriz looked at each other.

“You could say that,” Beatriz said. She moved away from us and studied the sketches on the wall.

“She’s getting married,” Renee said, and added, “She’s had a little trouble finding the right dress.”

“When’s the wedding?”

Beatriz turned back to me. “Saturday.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Next Saturday.”

“That’s... soon. Depending on your fabric choices, it will take more time than that to get the required yardage in from a wholesaler.”

Beatriz didn’t seem to hear what I said. She tapped her finger on one of the sketches. “This one. This is the dress.”

I moved to Beatriz’s side and looked at the sketch she’d selected. It was one of my quick drawings, a few simple lines on paper to capture the essence of a massive gown comprised of layers of light, airy fabric. It was a fun gown to draw because it was easy to get across the idea of it, but it would be difficult to make and would require a *lot* of tulle—almost everything I’d discovered in the workroom.

Beatriz looked away from the sketch and scanned the bolts

of fabric in my display. “Do you have something more special than what you have on display? I’m not used to wearing inexpensive fabrics.”

I bristled at the insinuation. Wedding dresses took far more yards of fabric than most garments, and it made sense to use less expensive ones in the underlayers or hidden parts of a dress’s construction.

“For a dress like that, I’d suggest synthetics for the structure and the volume and something more special for the bodice.”

“Like what?” Beatriz asked.

“Something light and airy. Netting, voile, something sheer,” I said. I pointed at the shelf she’d dismissed. “These are the best.”

“What about this one?” Renee asked.

She’d wandered away from us as we spoke, and I already knew she was standing by the vintage fabrics. I turned around all the same. Beatriz crossed the store and ran her hand over the one bolt of vintage tulle I’d placed on display.

“This is beautiful,” Beatriz said. For the first time since she’d entered the store, her attitude of self-importance disappeared. She stepped back and exposed about half a yard from the bolt then ran her fingers over it gently. “This is the one. You can make my dress out of this.”

It wasn’t lost on me that it wasn’t a question.

“That’s vintage tulle,” I said. “It’s not the most durable fabric in the shop. My great-aunt, who started this shop, sourced it from Tulle, France.”

The two women exchanged a glance.

“That’s perfect,” Beatriz said, then, as if the time and skills necessary to complete such a preposterous task were of the smallest consideration, she added, “You can do that, right?”

“Actually, I can’t,” I said, conflicted over the possible loss of

business. “It’s a near-impossible deadline as it is, and I’m not the most skilled sewer—”

A noise by the front gate hijacked Beatriz’s attention. I turned and looked. A man rattled the gate from the stoop outside of my shop. I held up my finger to the two women and said, “Excuse me. He must not have seen the Closed sign.”

When I reached the door, I left the retractable gate in place. “I’m closed for a private appointment,” I said. “I don’t know how much longer we’ll be, but I’ll probably be open this afternoon.”

“Beatriz?” he called past me. He threaded his fingers through the opening of the gate and shook it. “Yo, B. Get over here. I need to talk to you.”

I was too shocked by the idea that this rough-around-the-edges man was the fiancé of Beatriz to say anything, so when Beatriz headed my way, I stepped back to give her room. I hovered a few feet away, though, not loving the vibe.

“I told you this was going to take a while,” Beatriz said. “We can talk when I’m done. I don’t know what else you want.”

“For you to answer your phone. I’m not kidding, B. This is serious.” He glanced past her at me.

In an attempt to look busy, I reached into the pocket of my black trousers and pulled out my phone. There were two missed-call notifications from a number I didn’t recognize. I dismissed the notifications and checked my social media feeds.

“I know this is serious,” Beatriz said. “It’s the rest of my life. You don’t think I would have said yes if I didn’t mean it, do you?”

“Hard to say,” the man said. “We’ve known each other a long time, but this whole small-town thing doesn’t seem like you.”

Something about the conversation sounded more ominous than romantic, and while I wasn’t thrilled about Beatriz

keeping my shop closed indefinitely, I also wasn't thrilled about this public altercation taking place on my doorstep.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket and approached the couple. "I'm sorry to interrupt," I said. "Beatriz, if you've made your decision, I can ring up the fabric and recommend a few seamstresses who can interpret my sketch."

"I'll be done here when I'm done," she told the man then added, "We'll talk later." She left him by the gate without saying goodbye. I wouldn't bet on the survival of their marriage.

While Beatriz headed back to Renee, I started to close the door. The man turned away from me and stared out at the street. He looked annoyed at the prospect of killing time in a small California town, but if Beatriz was going to be my client, I didn't want to offend her partner-to-be.

"She probably wants you to leave so you don't know anything about her dress," I said. "It's tradition."

"Don't let her fool you," the man said. "Beatriz Rosen doesn't care about tradition. She doesn't care about anything but herself. The sooner you learn that, the better off you'll be." He turned his head, spit on the sidewalk, then jogged down my steps and walked away.



# 2

ALREADY, I REGRETTED HAVING AGREED TO THIS APPOINTMENT. There had to be a story behind Adelaide's referral, and I couldn't wait to learn what it was. Adelaide wouldn't have pushed a celebrity bridezilla on me even if she knew it would involve a hefty sale and a load of publicity. That wasn't her style.

My phone buzzed again. I pulled it out and saw the same unfamiliar number as the other missed calls. I sent the call to voicemail and tucked the phone away then headed to my wrap stand to get an index card and a pen. I tucked both into my apron pocket and joined Beatriz and Renee by the display.

"Like I was saying, I'm not the most skilled sewer. I can recommend someone if you'd like, but I can't speak for anyone's schedule. I imagine you'll pay a premium to have someone fit you into their calendar at this late date, and—"

"Price doesn't matter," Beatriz said. "This is my wedding, and my fiancé wants me to have whatever I want."

"Yes, but we still need to review the fabric choices, and there's not a lot of time to order something. And your seam-

stress will need as much time as possible to interpret my sketch, draw up a pattern, and have something ready for a fitting before next Saturday.”

Beatriz acted as if I hadn't said anything. “I want the whole thing made of the exclusive tulle.”

“You've seen the tulle. It's very sheer. It would take over a hundred yards to build up enough to be discreet.”

Renee laughed. “Beatriz Rosen, discreet! As if.”

Beatriz shot her a *shut up* glance and addressed me. “I want *over* a hundred yards of tulle.” She turned to Renee. “That sounds good, right? For the press release.” She turned back to me. “Make sure you use at least that much.” She turned to Renee. “Wait until Ursula hears. She's going to love that.”

“Is Ursula one of your bridesmaids?” I asked. “You don't need to source their dresses, too, do you?”

Renee snickered, and Beatriz said, “You don't have to worry about the bridesmaids' dresses. They're coming from a boutique in Los Angeles.”

I should have been sad that Beatriz hadn't come to me for the fabric for her bridesmaids' dresses, but instead, I felt relief. I knew enough about the world of weddings to know that no matter how far in advance a bride planned, something always fell to the last minute.

Beatriz glanced at the tulle, and her expression softened. “Can you give me a swatch? In case I need to match something.”

“Of course.” I pulled a pair of shears from my apron and clipped a small piece of tulle from the end of the bolt. “Let me get your number,” I said. “I'll reach out to a few of my contacts about making your dress. Between the two of us, we might be able to find someone who can take this job.”

“There's no need to spend your time doing that,” Beatriz said. Her eyes softened, and she reached out and put her hand

on mine. Her entire demeanor changed. “I appreciate everything you’ve done by closing your store so I can shop in private. And I know what I’m asking for is ridiculous. This is a big moment in my life, and I only want to work with people I can trust. I’ve heard enough about you to know I can trust you.”

She held my gaze and removed her hand from mine but smiled, an endearing smile that had the effect of dissolving the barrier between us and making me feel like a friend.

I felt my resistance weaken, but it wouldn’t be fair to lead her on. “I love fabric, and I’m happy to work with someone on the dress I sketched, but my skills aren’t in construction. A week is an impossible deadline for even the most skilled seamstresses, and like you said, this is an important moment in your life. I don’t think you want to entrust something so important to, well, to someone who isn’t a professional. I hope you understand.”

I held my phone in my hand while I spoke, and Beatriz’s eyes stayed on the screen, not on me. When I finished speaking, she shifted her attention to my face and studied me for a few seconds.

“I’m staying at the San Ladrón Hotel. If you can’t reach me there, leave a message with the concierge, and I’ll get back to you.”

“It would help if I had your direct number,” I said.

Beatriz glanced at my phone again and gave me her number. Renee looked surprised. I quickly unlocked my phone and typed it in.

“You should have asked Adelaide to find you rooms at the Waverly House,” I said. “They’ve been newly refurbished using all original antiques. I hear the Jefferson Room is the most exquisite.”

Renee sniggered again.

Beatriz cast her a cutting glance and said, "I'll have to ask her about it," in a strained voice.

Beatriz then pointed at Renee's handbag and held out her hand. Renee looked confused for a moment, then opened her large bag and pulled out a pale-pink folder. She extracted a photograph and handed it to Beatriz, who handed it to me. It was a glossy photo of Beatriz in midleap. I flipped it over and scanned her bio, past performances, and measurements.

She tapped the photo. "That has everything you'll need. You should keep that out of sight. We wouldn't want anyone to know I was here."

I forced a smile and slid the glossy photo under my cash register. Most of the stores on Bonita Avenue had switched over to fancy iPads and card readers, far more convenient than the big, clunky register that had been in the store since it opened. And truth be told, I had a digital interface set up, too, but I liked using the vintage register. It connected me to the history of the store, and even if my great-aunt and -uncle were no longer living, it helped me feel that they were with me. I wondered what they would think of Beatriz and her hundred-and-one-yards-of-tulle dress and about whether they would have agreed to close the store for this private consultation in the first place.

The three of us walked to the rear exit. Beatriz waved and climbed into the same black sports car that had dropped them off. Renee took the driver's seat. A few seconds later, they were gone.

I strode through my store to the front door, retracted the black gate, and flipped the Closed sign to Open. I peered through the window at the diner across the street, but the young couple who'd been at my store earlier were gone. It was interesting; of the two potential customers, only one of them had initially appeared to have a love of fabric, but because of the appointment arranged through Adelaide, I'd ended up with

the less passionate one. *Too late to regret the decision now*, I thought. I had an impossible wedding dress to create.

After moving the bolts of vintage tulle to the stockroom, I replaced them with a collection of polyester net. I didn't even know if I had one hundred and one yards of vintage tulle for Beatriz's dress or if Beatriz would know if I used a substitution, but that was the least of my problems. I was less concerned with materials than with finding someone to make it, and I knew if there was any way Beatriz's dress was going to be finished by her wedding, I was going to have to beg. And by the time I closed for the day, I had a pretty good idea who I was going to call.

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"No," Giovanni said definitively.

Once upon a time (six years ago) in a land far, far away (Los Angeles), Giovanni had been my boss. He was a cheap businessman who owned To The Nines, a somewhat tacky dress shop that specialized in inexpensive pageant dresses. It wasn't my first choice of employment after graduating with a design degree from FIDM—the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising—but of the one hundred and thirty-nine jobs I'd applied for, it was the one that offered me employment.

Working at To The Nines had been an education in itself. My love of evening wear came from my great-aunt Millie. Long before I was awarded a scholarship to FIDM, she took me shopping for vintage gowns in antique malls and taught me how to deconstruct them and create patterns from the pieces. She taught me about fabric, construction, beads, trim, and feathers—and that a finished dress was more than the sum of its parts.

Giovanni cared about none of that. He cared about making dresses for the lowest possible cost and cutting corners on

design to shave off minutes in the construction process. He'd been known to buy damaged bolts of fabric at a steep discount and have me design around the flaw, and in one memorable case where he damaged the fabric himself, I covered the flaw in gemstones three times as costly. We'd stayed in contact since I quit, equal parts me needing help from his workroom and him never doing a favor without asking for an agreed-upon favor in return.

"What do you want, Giovanni?" I asked. Having long since learned what it took to get a yes out of my former boss, I cut to the chase.

"What I want and what I am capable of providing in exchange for what you want don't matter this time."

"Why is that?"

"We're under deadline for a celebrity wedding next weekend. Go ahead and laugh if you want, but I always told you we were more than a pageant dress shop."

"*What* celebrity wedding?" I demanded.

"I can't say. I signed a confidentiality clause. But this celebrity came to *me*, and I'm not one to turn down a lady of the stage—"

"Was it Beatriz Rosen?"

Giovanni was temporarily speechless. "Who told you?" he asked. "I warned the workroom girls not to say anything. It figures they'd call you. Which one of them spilled the beans?"

"Women," I corrected automatically. Along with being a cheapskate, Giovanni was a passive misogynist. He had arguably the most talented workroom of seamstresses in all of Los Angeles, a melting pot of Armenian, Korean, Mexican, and Persian cultures, all skilled in their own right, but to the boss man, they were *girls*. I'd corrected him so often it had become habit.

If he responded, I didn't hear him. It was one thing for

Beatriz to find my shop after having been referred by Adelaide. San Ladrón was only so big, and word of mouth was our best source of advertising. But for Beatriz to have sought out Giovanni's workroom, the home of my previous job, back in Los Angeles? That felt beyond coincidental.

"Nobody violated your confidentiality agreement. I guessed. Did Beatriz say anything when she came in? About me?"

"*Somebody's* become a narcissist since moving to the small town."

"This wedding dress I'm asking for help with? It's for Beatriz Rosen. She was in my shop this morning. She liked one of my sketches and hired me to make it. She said she didn't need bridesmaids' dresses, she was getting them from"—I remembered Beatriz's words and cringed as I repeated them—"a boutique in Los Angeles."

"She called us a boutique? That's fabulous! I wonder if she'd mind if I used that as an endorsement."

"Considering she asked you to sign a confidentiality clause over the dresses, I wouldn't go booking a billboard on Sunset Boulevard."

Giovanni's actions often had me rolling my eyes, but this time I couldn't fault him for being on edge. Depending on when Beatriz had hired him to produce her bridesmaids' dresses, he was under a crazy time constraint of his own.

"I thought you had a staff," he said.

"I have a seamstress who works here part-time. She has her own clients. I can't expect her to drop everything and make this dress on an impossible deadline."

"You should have thought of that before you took the job."

"I didn't take the job. I told her I would make some calls."

"Right. Was it the money or the fame? Maybe you learned something from me after all."

"Goodbye, Giovanni."

I disconnected and set my phone on the counter. It was seven thirty, and I was hungry.

I opened my refrigerator to see what options I had, and two furry beasts charged out of the bedroom and skidded into place beside me. Pins, a gray tabby, looked up at me and meowed. Needles, his brother, similarly marked except in orange, swatted at Pins's head and nosed his way closer to the fridge.

"There's nothing in there for you," I said. I closed the door and prioritized the cats' needs over my own, splitting a can of cat food into two ceramic bowls. I'd made the bowls at a local pottery event, decorating them with each cat's name, but Pins liked the bowl that said Needles and vice versa. Turned out kitten siblings were just like humans—always wanting what the other one had.

I went through the motions of looking for something to eat for another five minutes before picking up my phone and calling my friend Charlie. She owned an automotive garage about half a block down the street, and she never, ever, ever worked past five. I imagined her with her feet up on her desk by now.

"Yo, Polyester. What's up?"

Charlie was one of the few people I didn't correct when she called me Polyester. It was my name, given to me after being born on a bed of polyester in the very store I now ran, but to the rest of the world, I went by Poly. Charlie had a no-nonsense way about her, a tough-girl demeanor she'd actually earned by having a not particularly easy childhood. I respected what she'd built for herself with her auto garage and liked how she didn't automatically bow down to the powerful people in San Ladrón. She had her own thing going, and that was how she liked it.

"I'm hungry. And thirsty. And something happened today that I'd like to talk to someone about."



“Does this have to do with your ex?”

“My who?” I bent down to scratch Needles’s head, and he looked up at me and whined. *Don’t interrupt my dinner, Mom.*

“Your ex-boyfriend, the finance guy. He brought his car in today for a tire rotation and asked about you. I’m surprised it took you this long to call me.”

I lowered myself onto a wooden kitchen chair and stared out the window at the now empty street. “Carson?” I asked. “What’s he doing in San Ladrón?”

“Don’t know. He said he’s been trying to reach you. He asked if you changed your number.”

“I’ve been getting calls from an unfamiliar number, but... hold on.”

“I don’t do holds. Meet me at the Broadside in half an hour.”

“No,” I said. “The Waverly House.”

“Stalemate.”

“Fine, but I’m starved. Make it fifteen minutes.”

There were reasons Charlie wouldn’t want to meet at the Waverly House, but those weren’t my concern at the moment. As soon as we hung up, I checked my call log. The unfamiliar number had a Los Angeles exchange. A voicemail notification popped up, and I tapped the replay icon and heard a voice I’d never expected to hear again.

“Geez, Poly, what did you do, block my number? Call me back when you get this. I have something to tell you. It’s important.” There was a long pause. “This is Carson Cole.”

Carson was, indeed, my ex-boyfriend. We’d met in our college years and dated straight through graduation and into our first jobs, which for him had been a paid internship for a financial management firm and for me had been at To The Nines.

Carson had expected us to marry, and for me to raise our

children and run my boutique on the side while he slayed the world of investment banking. I'd known things were not good long before I inherited the fabric shop, but that event served as the catalyst for our breakup. He never had understood my desire to relocate from the big city to the small town and continue what my family had built.

I was curious. What could be so important that Carson had called me seven times to tell me? I touched the screen and accidentally called him back. And immediately hung up. And then answered the incoming call from his new number.

"This is Poly," I said formally.

"It's Carson."

"Hi. I know you've been trying to reach me, but I'm heading out now and don't have a lot of time to talk. Is everything okay?"

"Sure. Yes. Peachy keen."

"What?"

"Can I see you tomorrow? Take you to lunch or something?"

"Carson, I run the fabric shop. I don't close to eat lunch."

"You haven't hired salespeople yet? That's not a sustainable business model, Poly. You need employees. Is the store failing? Do you need money? You didn't default on your loan, did you?"

My reasons for initiating the breakup came back to me. "Listen. I'm on my way out to meet a friend for dinner, and I don't have a lot of time."

"I can join you—"

"No, you can't. I'll see what I can do about lunch tomorrow."

I grabbed a black leather cross-body bag and slung it over my long-sleeved black T-shirt and wide-legged black trousers. I'd adopted black as my wardrobe choice back when I first started working at To The Nines, a strategy against the assault of glue and grime I picked up in the workroom, and the freedom of not worrying about my clothes had stuck with me

after I quit. I slid my feet back into chunky rubber-soled loafers, grabbed my keys, and left.

The sun had dropped, but streetlights illuminated Bonita Avenue. The Broadside Tavern was across the street from the fabric store, and unless Charlie had left the moment she hung up with me, I was going to beat her there. I was standing on the sidewalk, waiting for a break in traffic so I could cross, when I overheard tense voices. I turned to the right and saw a man and a woman on the corner.

The streetlamp closest to them was out, so I couldn't see them clearly, but I recognized them all the same—it was Beatriz and her fiancé. They appeared to be arguing. He leaned forward and pointed his index finger close to her face, and she had her arms crossed over her chest. Her beret was at a cocky angle, shielding most of her face from me. I was caught in the mesmerizing trance of witnessing someone else's personal drama when the man grabbed Beatriz's arms and shook her. She seemed unprepared for his physical assault, and her head bobbed on her neck.

“Hey!” I called out.

The man turned his head toward me but didn't speak.

“Leave her alone!”

The man pushed Beatriz back toward the building and took off down the street.

# 3

I RAN TOWARD BEATRIZ. HER BERET LAY BY HER FEET. SHE LEANED against the brick wall, and her breath came in quick, shallow bursts.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

She stared at me with wide eyes. Her pupils were dilated, and she seemed unable to speak.

“Beatriz, I’m Poly Monroe from the fabric store. Did your fiancé hurt you?”

“I’m okay,” she said in a shaky voice. She looked down the street after him, but he was long gone. She reached up and patted her hair then, realizing her beret had fallen off, scanned the ground for it. I bent down and retrieved the hat then dusted it off and handed it to her.

“I was on my way to have dinner with a friend. Why don’t you join us?” I asked spontaneously.

“I can’t,” she said. She seemed to be very much alone on the street corner, and I waited to hear what she might offer as an excuse. “Too much attention.” And, with more conviction, she added, “I’ll be fine.” She turned and left.

I didn't like the situation one bit. I watched as Beatriz climbed into the driver's seat of the same black car she'd arrived in earlier and drove away. I was a stranger to her, and my invitation might have sounded opportunistic. I'd had enough brushes with celebrity when I lived in Los Angeles to know that these were people just like the rest of us, but I knew in a town like San Ladrón, Beatriz Rosen's presence might turn into a sideshow attraction. I wondered, not for the first time, why she'd chosen here for her wedding. I would have to ask Adelaide tomorrow.

The overseen confrontation between Beatriz and her fiancé stayed with me as I crossed the street on foot, and by the time I entered the Broadside Tavern and located Charlie at the bar, I had to do something. I held up my index finger to her and called Beatriz's number. She didn't answer. The number rang four times, and a voice came on. "You've reached Renee Davis. Leave a message."

This was Renee's number? I remembered how Renee had looked after I asked for Beatriz's private number and how her expression changed when Beatriz gave it to me. Now I understood her reaction. I left a message.

"Renee, hi. This is Poly Monroe from Material Girl. I thought this was Beatriz's number." I paused and thought about how to best phrase my reason for calling Beatriz. "I just saw Beatriz and her fiancé arguing on the corner. I know she doesn't want to bring unwanted attention to herself while she's here, but I was worried about her." What I wanted to say was that Renee needed to intervene and get Beatriz away from this man, but it didn't seem appropriate for a voicemail message. "She seemed like she could use a friend. You can reach me on this number if the store is closed."

I returned my phone to my messenger bag and joined Charlie at the counter. She'd already ordered for both of us,

and a bottle of beer sat on the counter in front of the vacant stool to Charlie's left. I hung my bag from a hook under the bar. The owner had lamented the lack of female patrons, and I'd convinced him handbag hooks were a start in wooing them.

It had become something of a post-workday ritual for my friends and I to meet up for drinks and/or dinner when we closed, and that normally included Genevieve Girard, the proprietor of the local French-themed tea shop. Last month, Genevieve had surprised both Charlie and me with the announcement that she was closing her shop for a month and renting a furnished apartment in Paris. Two days after she left, postcards started arriving, and if not for the tea shop, I wouldn't have been surprised if Genevieve had extended her stay indefinitely.

"Yo," Charlie said. "You look less like polyester and more like a rumpled cotton bedsheet. What's up?"

"I've had a day." I took a sip of my beer. "Remember I told you I had an appointment?"

She nodded.

"She was twenty minutes late. Then she waltzed in and asked me to make her a custom wedding dress in eight days. And not just *any* wedding dress. A hundred-and-one-yards-of-tulle wedding dress."

Charlie, to her benefit, didn't ask the obvious questions about my sanity or my sewing abilities. As a fellow business owner, she went a different route. "How much would you make off a job like that?"

"That's irrelevant. I turned the job down. It's an impossible deadline."

"Humor me. How much?"

"Based on the materials alone, it would be a fifteen-thousand-dollar dress. That doesn't account for the surcharge of

completing a rush job or the fact that I'm not a seamstress and would have to hire help to make it."

"Aren't you wasting time by sitting here with me?"

"I just told you I turned down the job."

Charlie cocked her head. "And that was okay with the bride?"

I thought back to the conversation with Beatriz. "She didn't say much about it. I felt a little guilty, so I offered to call around to see if I could find someone else to do it."

"But she bought the fabric from you?"

"Yes."

"Did she take it with her?"

"No. She left me with her measurements and told me price was no object. You don't think she still expects me to make it, do you?"

"That's exactly what I think."

"But it's impossible!"

"Right. That doesn't mean she doesn't expect you to do it."

"I said no. More than once. She has to know I meant it." I spun my bottle of beer around in a circle, blurring a wet ring of pooled condensation that had accumulated on the old wooden bar. I took another sip then set the bottle down and pushed it away. If I kept on swigging beer instead of fielding Charlie's questions, I would be drunk in an hour.

Charlie knocked on the counter to get the attention of Sam, the bartender. Sam was a twentysomething who looked fortysomething, the result of living hard in his teens. He fit the Broadside in the way Tiki Tom fit the Hawaiian ephemera shop next to Material Girl, as if working here had been his destiny all along.

"Those burgers coming today or what?" Charlie asked.

"You said well-done," Sam said.

"Right. I said well-done, not hockey puck."

“You’re a real pain in the a—”

“Language,” said Duke, the owner, rolling his wheelchair out of his office. “I’m trying to class the place up.”

“Sorry, Duke,” Sam said. He shot Charlie a scowl. “I’ll go check on them.” Sam draped his towel over the shoulder of his stained white T-shirt and went to the kitchen.

Duke rolled his chair out from behind the bar and made his way to the internet jukebox. A few seconds later, Willie Nelson’s voice filled the interior. Sam returned with two red plastic baskets filled with burgers, fries, and small metal condiment cups of ketchup and mayo. He set the baskets in front of each of us and walked away.

Conversation temporarily ceased while I assembled my burger and took a bite. Hot juices dribbled down my chin, and I swiped them away and took another bite before swallowing. I was starving. Charlie bit into her burger with similar gusto. After three bites, I set my burger down and ate two french fries then considered what was bothering me.

“The thing is, I don’t think she should get married.”

“Who?”

“My bridezilla. I think she’s making a mistake. Her fiancé came to the fabric shop this morning, and he wasn’t exactly nice to her. And just now, I saw them arguing on the corner.”

Charlie leaned back and picked at the label on her bottle of beer. “That’s not your problem,” she said. “Unless they were arguing about the cost of your fabric.”

I rolled my eyes at her jab. “When she was in my shop, she said her fiancé wanted her to have whatever she wanted. She said price was no object. But that’s not how he acted. He sounded demanding. And just now, they had a physical altercation on the corner.”

“He hurt her?”

“Not exactly. She had her arms crossed, and he grabbed



them. I called out to them, and he pushed her into the wall and left.”

“He pushed her, or he let go of her and she leaned back against the building?”

“I don’t know. It could have been either, I guess.”

“Was she hurt?”

“No. She said she was fine, but I know what I saw—”

“You *don’t* know what you saw,” Charlie said. “You’re making an assumption that he was a bully and she needed help.”

“Maybe she did,” I said. “Maybe she’s in a bad situation and needs someone to help her get out.”

“It’s not your business, Polyester. You can’t change somebody else’s life for them if they’re not ready for things to be different.”

For the next several minutes, conversation lapsed while we finished our burgers and fries. The Broadside was a busy tavern with a steady stream of patrons coming and going. Duke had made changes to the menu and atmosphere to draw a more family-friendly clientele, but the local motorcycle club continued to use it as their meetup location. Somewhere around eight, the crowd shifted from families to bikers. Charlie was more at home in that element, but tonight, she left with me.

“Are you turning into a pumpkin, or do you want to come over and hang?” she asked.

“Actually,” I said, checking the time, “I’m going to the Waverly House to see if Adelaide is available.”

“That’s my cue to leave.”

“You can come along if you’d like.”

“Not tonight.” She stepped back a few feet and added, “Thanks for the invite.” She turned around and left.

Charlie had recently learned some details about her biological parents, and I suspected she was still coming to terms with

what they meant to the version of herself that existed as an independent woman. I didn't prod around her history, and I was pretty sure that was the basis for our friendship. She had a reputation around San Ladrón for being elusive but was still the go-to mechanic for when your engine made an unexpected noise. I knew Charlie hadn't had the easiest of childhoods, but she was the first to admit that her life wouldn't be close to what it was today if the hard knocks of life weren't behind her.

San Ladrón was the kind of small town that, to outsiders, felt like the setting for a sweet cable-TV rom-com. Streetlights modeled after turn-of-the-previous-century styles provided light for the main stretch of Bonita Avenue. Volunteers from the Senior Patrol, San Ladrón's over-sixty-five crime-observing deterrents, casually strolled through town, inviting window shoppers to stay and patronize the businesses instead of letting the downtown area look like a ghost town after dark.

The city council had voted to keep street parking free, which kept a steady stream of visitors from the greater Los Angeles area coming for day trips. San Ladrón was about a thirty-minute drive east of the metropolis but felt like a different world.

I crossed the street and followed the sidewalk to the corner Circle K then turned left. The Waverly House was the jewel of San Ladrón.

Adelaide wasn't just a fellow resident of San Ladrón; she was also a friend. We were of different generations—her having known my great-aunt and great-uncle, who'd first opened the fabric shop—but we were kindred spirits, and I knew she wouldn't refer a client to me if she didn't think it would be mutually beneficial.

I'd recently helped her with an annual fundraiser that secured her operating budget for the upcoming year, and now the Waverly House was very much in demand. You couldn't

drive past the historic Victorian mansion turned museum without seeing a wedding party posing in the luscious gardens. The funds raised had been significant enough that Adelaide had convinced the board to expand, purchasing the property next door and converting it into a nondenominational chapel. The Waverly House had always been a destination spot for rehearsal dinners and wedding receptions, but with the addition of the chapel, they had the space to conduct services as well. Their bookings had doubled overnight, and the guest rooms in the floors above the restaurant and banquet hall were reserved to full capacity through the end of the year.

The tradition of booking the Waverly House for rehearsal dinners and wedding ceremonies on the immaculately landscaped gardens outside had been around for decades, but the chapel had given the property a fresh, new offering. I knew from talking to Adelaide that the chapel calendar had booked up in a weekend, giving her operating budget a boost.

Tonight, the mansion was decorated like a gingerbread house. Tiny white lights lined the eaves, windows, and turrets of the blue-and-white exterior. The porch had wooden swings on either side of the front entrance, and an employee dressed in the uniform of white shirt and black trousers stood next to the swing on the left, punching up the cushions.

A wedding party spilled out from the entrance, laughing among themselves. The bride wore a traditional white gown, and the group of women behind her wore identical dresses in vibrant magenta taffeta. Men in black tuxedos accented with purple satin bow ties and cummerbunds followed. I should have known it was a bad time for a pop-in visit. I stayed on the sidewalk and passed the main entrance. The door to the chapel was propped open, and light leaked onto the path leading up to the entrance. Faint music trickled out, vaguely familiar but not immediately identifiable. I headed toward it, welcoming the

opportunity to poke my head in and see what tomorrow's bride had selected as her color palette and floral display.

But when I reached the entrance, I stopped short. Pale-blue-ribbon bows sat in a pile on the floor. White roses, which appeared to have been bound in the center of the bows, were likewise discarded in piles, and some of the blooms had turned brown. It looked as if someone had intentionally destroyed the decorations.

I entered the chapel to get a better look at the mess. The music, initially pleasant, now felt ominous, like the soundtrack for a creepy fun house.

"Hello?" I called. "Is anyone in here?"

I went farther inside and heard a *thump*. The music skipped and replayed the last second or so on repeat. It was a record with a scratch. I strode down the center aisle to the sound system, with the intention of switching the record player off, when I found something more disturbing than the music.

Lying on the floor by the first row of chairs was the body of the man who'd been arguing with Beatriz Rosen earlier today, on the ground with a pool of blood forming on the ivory carpet underneath him.



END OF EXCERPT. Find out more at [dianevallere.com/tulle-death-do-us-part](http://dianevallere.com/tulle-death-do-us-part).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

National bestselling author Diane Vallere writes smart, funny, and fashionable character-based mysteries. After two decades working for a top luxury retailer, she traded fashion accessories for accessories to murder. A past president of Sisters in Crime, Diane started her own detective agency at age ten and has maintained a passion for shoes, clues, and clothes ever since. Find out more at [dianevallere.com](http://dianevallere.com).





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## ALSO BY

### Samantha Kidd Mysteries

Designer Dirty Laundry

Buyer, Beware

The Brim Reaper

Some Like It Haute

Grand Theft Retro

Pearls Gone Wild

Cement Stilettos

Panty Raid

Union Jacked

Slay Ride

Tough Luxe

Fahrenheit 501

Stark Raving Mod

Gilt Trip

Ranch Dressing

### Madison Night Mad for Mod Mysteries

“Midnight Ice” (prequel novella)

Pillow Stalk

That Touch of Ink

With Vics You Get Eggroll

The Decorator Who Knew Too Much

The Pajama Frame

Lover Come Hack

Apprehend Me No Flowers

Teacher's Threat

The Kill of It All

Love Me or Grieve Me

Please Don't Push Up the Daisies

Sylvia Stryker Outer Space Mysteries

Murder on a Moon Trek

Scandal on a Moon Trek

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Costume Shop Mystery Series

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Dressed to Confess