

Murder at the Mall

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ISBN 0-9771424-2-6

Printed in the USA

Murder at the Mall

by Lucy Hornstein

A Roger Dodger Mystery Novel

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the wonderful, crazy, supportive writers at NaNoWriMo.org for helping me get through the insane month of November, 2005; Chris Baty for penning *No Plot? No Problem!*, the book that saw me through the highs and the lows; Zette and the incredible people at Forward Motion Writers Community, especially the participants of the 2004 Two Year Novel class, without whom I never would have even tried NaNo; and last but not least, my wonderful husband, who saw way too much of my back as I slaved away at the computer in the family room for thirty long days. Thanks, Bill.

Note

This is a work of fiction and although real places are referred to, all characters are complete figments of my imagination. In particular, no disrespect is intended towards the security forces at the King of Prussia Mall, and the Upper Merion Police Department and its detectives, who are without a doubt the finest in the United States.

Murder at the Mall

Chapter One

“Someone’s been shot!” gasped the breathless teenager as she skidded to a stop in front of the two men.

The two security officers looked at each other wondering what the hell they were supposed to do, each taking in the other’s crisp black and white uniform, shiny dress shoes, brass badge, and non-functioning walkie-talkie mouthpiece clipped to a shoulder strap. They turned to the girl. The younger of the two men, barely into his twenties, noted her low cut jeans as the rest of his mind registered her shocking announcement.

“Where?” asked the second man. He didn’t dare voice what he was actually thinking, which was, alternately, *What do you want us to do?* and *Why are you telling us this?*

“Over by Tiffany & Company,” the girl choked out.

As the two mall rent-a-cops began moving through the huge, light-drenched airiness of the promenade at the King of Prussia Plaza, the younger man wondered how he could get the number of the girl’s cell phone that flapped enticingly at her low-riding belt as she moved several steps ahead of them.

“Can’t you go any faster?” she implored.

“We’re fine, miss”

Neither wanted to admit that they didn’t dare risk falling on their faces by running along the marble floor in their highly polished black shoes, which were more for show than for running through the mall. They walked as quickly as they could without risking their dignity, past the Gap Kids, J. Crew, through the Nordstrom court, past the collec-

tion of overpriced high fashion dress shops, to the opposite corner of the mall, by the court in front of Lord & Taylor, on the second level.

A crowd was beginning to gather in front of Tiffany & Company, where the huge vault-like door stood wide open during business hours, inviting in those with bulging wallets and credit cards with five figure limits while presumably discouraging the riffraff from coming in just to ogle the exquisitely expensive merchandise.

“Excuse me, please,” said the older of the two mall guards.

“Pardon me, please,” echoed the younger one.

“Coming through,” continued the first as they elbowed their way through the clump of gawking shoppers and lunch-hour walkers.

A body lay in the center of the forest of legs. The spreading pool of blood beneath the torso made the scene look like a bad rip-off of a Law & Order television episode.

The two rent-a-cops, mall employees with no authority to do anything substantive, knelt officiously next to the body. The younger thought about reaching out to check for a pulse at the neck, but then decided the motion might constitute “disturbing the crime scene.” The second one appeared to inspect the large, spreading blood stain in the middle of the chest when in fact he was trying to figure out a graceful way to get one of the onlookers to call 911 on a cell phone. The mall security officers were only issued plastic walkie-talkie mouthpieces instead of functioning, charged cell phones, for fear they might use them to make personal calls while on duty.

Finally, one of the people in the murmuring crowd standing around them like ponies on a broken merry-go-round spoke up.

“I’ve got the 911 operator on the phone. What should I tell them?”

Delighted at the serendipitous opportunity to look like he knew what he was doing, the older rent-a-cop looked up.

“Hand me that phone, please, sir.”

The young man wearing an Upper Merion Football sweat shirt, who had very long but surprisingly well groomed hair, sheepishly handed over his cell phone.

Thinking he would look more official with a clenched jaw, the older guard tried to hold his mandible as squarely as he could. This was not

as easily accomplished as he would have liked, given that his face was round and pudgy.

“This is the security force at the Plaza at the King of Prussia Mall speaking,” he began. It seemed important to establish that he was in command of the situation by identifying himself. “There appears to have been a shooting.”

“Where?” asked the disembodied voice of the dispatcher.

“At the mall,” continued the guard.

“Where at the mall, sir,” continued the voice, its exasperation barely concealed.

“In front of Tiffany & Company. On the second level of the mall, near Lord & Taylor.” It sounded like he was trying to give a blind date directions on where they were going to rendezvous.

“Do you need an ambulance, sir?” the voice went on. It was impossible to tell whether there was any sarcasm or not behind the obvious question.

Looking down at the body again the older guard nodded to the younger, sending him a telepathic message to go ahead and see if there was a pulse. In the movies and on television, this was accomplished by someone’s laying a hand somewhere on the side of the neck, waiting for an undefined but adequate period of time, and then declaring with great solemnity, “He’s dead.” (It helped tremendously if there was someone in the sufficiently immediate vicinity with the given name James, so that the full announcement could be made: “He’s dead, Jim.”)

The younger rent-a-cop tipped his head at his partner. Leaning forward just enough to think he wouldn’t be heard whispering but not so far that he would fall headlong onto the victim’s bloody chest, he whispered, “What?”

Trying to clear his throat inaudibly while holding the commandeered cell phone, the second fake cop murmured, “Check for a pulse.”

“Oh. Right. Ok. I’ll just check for a pulse.”

Seeming to stall for time before touching the mound of motionless flesh before him, he added, “Did they say that a pulse should be

checked for?” He nodded to the phone in the other man’s hand to indicate the 911 operator.

“Yes. That’s what they said should be done. Check for a pulse.”

“I asked if you needed an ambulance.”

The voice came through the phone loudly enough for the innermost members of the surrounding crowd to hear quite clearly.

“That’s how we’ll know if we need an ambulance,” continued the older guard. Wasn’t that perfectly obvious? “Everything is under control here,” he continued. When things were pretty clearly out of control, the most important thing was to assert that they were under control, as learned from the administration of George W. Bush.

When the younger guard finally got up his nerve to touch the body, he reached out and tried to find the side of the neck. The victim was not a slender man, and upon being shot had fallen to the ground with his head slumped against his shoulder. The guard had to wedge his fingers in between rolls of flesh, wiggling and twisting this way and that, aware that the harder he tried not to look like an idiot the more idiotic he appeared.

Finally the older guard reached down and grasped the limp wrist of the body as it lay on the highly polished marble floor. Lifting it carefully but without the faintest idea what he was doing, he felt all around the wrist. Placing it gently back on the floor, he composed his face while trying to figure out how the hell he was going to get out of this.

Suddenly there was a great ruckus at the top of the escalator to their right, at the other end of the Lord & Taylor court. Two enormously obese men in oversized blue jumpsuits bearing the logo of the local ambulance company politely pushed their way through the crowd while holding their heavy orange plastic boxes high over their heads, careful not to bonk unsuspecting bystanders on the head with their equipment.

“Move aside, please,” said Tweedle Dee. His midsection looked like his jumpsuit had been fitted with a life preserver.

“Coming through,” added Tweedle Dum. “Medics here. Please make way.”

The two mall rent-a-cops got to their feet as fast as they could while retaining whatever dignity they had left. The younger one began

waving the paramedics over, as if the huge crowd of gaping onlookers wasn't clue enough as to the location of their target. The two blue Michelin marshmallow man look-alikes waddled through the throng of people until they finally stood over the bloody body.

The man was clearly dead. His eyes were open, seemingly staring at the crowd around him, but with a curiously detached gaze that looked more like he was thinking, *My, doesn't the purple glass in the skylight over that rotunda look pretty*, rather than *What the fuck are you looking at, moron?*

Undeterred, the first blue man eased his considerable weight down onto one knee. Expertly palpating for the carotid pulse at the neck, he frowned, then rose carefully, like a grandmother elephant arising from a chaise lounge after too long a tea party.

"We're not needed here." Reaching into his coverall, he fished out a cell phone and flipped it open with one hand.

"Yeah. Dispatch. Code five here. They need police, not us. Right. Ok. Thanks."

He snapped the cell phone closed and looked at the crowd arrayed before him, with the two mall rent-a-cops front and center.

"Go away, everyone. Nothing here to see."

The crowd declined to disperse.

Taking his cue from the medic, the older of the two mall employees turned to the same assembly and spoke much more loudly than was necessary to be heard, given the way the sound echoed off the marble floors and glass store windows.

"You heard the man. Everyone move along."

He tried with only moderate success to inject a tone of menacing authority into his voice.

"Now!" he added, louder.

After another eternal moment those at the back of the crowd, who couldn't see all that much anyway and were sort of wondering why everyone had stopped there in the first place, finally began slowly moving away. Then the next layer of people, who had heard that something had happened but not exactly what but it must be good because of the size of the crowd, also moved off to continue their mall walking and window shopping. Once the fringes had dissipated, the people who knew that there was a dead body lying there divided themselves

into those who decided they really had better things to do than stand around long enough for all the people still in front of them to leave so they could get a good look at the sight, and those who were so morbid that come hell or high water they weren't leaving until they had seen the bloody tableau up close and personal. Into this only slightly diminished mass of humanity marched the real police.

"Move aside, folks," said the taciturn patrolman in his navy blue uniform, complete with functioning walkie-talkie on the shoulder, holstered gun, and wicked looking night stick. His voice was easily heard, though not overly loud, and with a tone that clearly meant business (of some kind.) As he reached the center of the grouping where the bloodied body lay on the now slick white and green marble, the crowd stepped back gingerly before him. He was holding a roll of yellow crime scene tape in his hand, and he seemed torn between inspecting the corpse and looking around trying to figure out where he could secure his tape to mark off an appropriate perimeter.

Finally another man pushed his way into the middle of the scene. Although he was of medium height and build, he tried to carry himself with a presence that bordered on dangerous. Unfortunately, his kind brown eyes and severely receding hair line evoked more Basset Hound than Doberman.

"Detective Dodger. Good to see you," the patrolman greeted him.

"Hi there, Officer," he responded, slightly embarrassed at not knowing the guy's name. He must be new. There wasn't a scratch or crack anywhere on the new leather gun belt. "What have we got here?"

How the hell should I know? I just got here, was what the young policeman wanted to say, but successfully subdued the urge.

"Looks like a random shooting, sir," he said.

Roger looked around at the people arrayed before them, all of who had been on the scene longer than both he and the patrolman, and some of who might actually have some idea of what had transpired.

"Did you question anyone here?" he asked.

The young patrolman stood there trying to look more thoughtful than stupid, although his thoughts centered on how not to appear stupid.

"Not yet, sir. I was going to secure the crime scene first."

Roger regarded him without amusement.

“And how exactly were you going to do that with all these people standing around?”

The young guy stood there for another moment trying to think of what to say. Finally he decided he should do something other than just stand there. He turned to the crowd and began shooing them away as if they were pigeons in the park with whom he didn't want to share his sandwich. He flicked the roll of yellow tape in his hand for emphasis.

“Ok, folks. Move along right now!”

The grouping moved back, en masse, all of three feet.

“NOW, folks.” He made another shooing motion with the roll of yellow tape. “Get along with your business. There's nothing to see here.”

Heads craned to see the corpse that wasn't there to be seen.

The detective sighed to himself and slid his cell phone out of his pocket. Punching the number for headquarters, he hummed as he waited for one of the girls to pick up.

“Yah?” came the young female voice. Only the detectives in the field had this number, so they knew they were safe answering the phone informally.

“Can you please get a couple of cars full of guys who know what the hell they're doing over here to the mall, right away. I'm on the second level just outside Tiffany & Company with a shooting victim, a couple of mall rent-a-cops who think their ass is a hole in the ground, two giant blue paramedics, and a newbie patrol guy who doesn't have a clue.”

“Holy shit! Someone got shot?” returned the incredulous voice.

Roger sighed. Losing his patience would accomplish nothing.

“Just get the cars over here, would you?”

“No, really. You mean someone got shot? Like that guy over at the Home Depot a couple of years back?” She just wouldn't let it go.

“No. The guy at Home Depot was still alive. This guy is not.”

“No shit! A dead guy at the mall, huh. Hey! I have to call Channel 10 News.”

“No you don't! Just get a hold of Dispatch and get me some people here. NOW!!”

It was the second exclamation point that got her attention.

“Yes sir. Ok, Detective Dodger. Roger that, sir.”

Roger conveyed his lack of amusement with as icy a silence as he could muster.

“Ok, sir. I have Dispatch on the line. They’re sending all cars now.”

Hearing the sirens in the distance waxing ever louder as they drew nearer, Roger hung up. For the one million, six hundred seventy-two thousand, four hundred eighty-third time this lifetime, he cursed his fun-loving parents for having saddled him with the name Roger Dodger.

The young patrolman had finally pushed the crowd back to a distance sufficient for the yellow crime scene tape to be attached to the mall railings and door handles of Tiffany & Company, allowing Roger some space to inspect the scene.

The pudgy body was dressed in a brown business suit that looked like it had come from Sears. The deep red of the enormous bloodstain in the center of the chest clashed with beige and green windowpane shirt pattern. The tan striped tie was flung over the left shoulder as the body lay slumped on its right. The eyes were slightly open, as was the mouth. Roger noticed the undisturbed bulge of a wallet in the left hip pocket. No robbery here.

Roger reached into his own hip pocket and fished out a pair of latex gloves. He hated the damn things. They always made his hands break out, but ever since the Chief had seen the guys on television use them, he had insisted that the entire Upper Merion detective force use them at every crime scene. Roger thought it was more than a little ridiculous. There weren’t going to be any fingerprints recovered from this victim’s clothes or personal effects. Still, the chief had to be kept happy. That’s why he was the Chief.

Delicately Roger lifted the jacket away from the pants pocket and extracted the victim’s wallet. He opened it up and peeked into the currency compartment. Two twenties, a five, and two ones. There were no pictures. Another slot yielded one Master Card and—aha—a driver’s license. Name: Wayne Anderson. Age: fifty-four. Address: 456 Forge Road. That was just across the street from the mall in one of the older King of Prussia developments, where the small bungalow style houses

formed a stately loop behind what used to be a McDonalds. There had been a triple stabbing over there last year. Some disgruntled guy came and stabbed a girl who wouldn't go out with him. Then he killed her sister and the sister's little girl. His permanent address was now "Death Row, Graterford." It made for some impressively exciting headlines in the small township whose crime blotter consisted almost exclusively of shoplifting from the mall.

"Time to go see Mrs. Anderson and give her the bad news," said Roger to no one in particular. Upper Merion's police department was so small that detectives didn't have partners per se. *At least not the way they did on Law & Order*, thought Roger morosely. What he wouldn't give to spend his days with a lovely buxom brunette like Mariska Hargitay. Hell, any daughter of Jayne Mansfield could partner with him any day. The best he could hope for was one of the other three detectives to come ride shotgun if he happened to be chasing some lead into Philly for the day, which happened as often as he won the lottery (which was never, given that he didn't play it.)

He caught himself, realizing that although he could daydream about Mariska Hargitay all he liked, it was the Ice Princess he had to come home to. Excuse me: "Doctor" Ice Princess. Ah well. If it wasn't for her and her trust fund, there was no way he would be able to afford to live here. Long live old Philadelphia money!

There was nothing else of interest in the wallet. Gingerly pulling the jacket away from the cooling body, Roger fished around the inside pockets. He removed several pamphlets and a few folded flyers of various colors, then fished out a collection of business cards from the jacket's other pockets. He glanced through them quickly.

One pamphlet was for a seminar entitled "Finding your Dream Job," dated yesterday, taking place at the King of Prussia Crowne Plaza hotel. Right across the street from the old Wanamaker, it had been a Holiday Inn in its last incarnation. Roger hadn't seen inside it yet, but because meetings and seminars were a big part of its business, he was sure it must be impressive. More pamphlets and the multi-colored flyers were for various other job seeking type workshops, coaches, seminars and retreats. One was for a resume doctor service. The business cards were a mix of other "transition services", as the booming new

industry capitalizing on the desperation of the swelling numbers of middle aged unemployees was called, and other job seekers endlessly networking. What sense did it make for unemployed people in their fifties to share business cards with other unemployed people in their fifties? Was one supposed to bring all his friends along for the ride if he got a job? Roger didn't think so.

Enough already, thought Roger as he turned to check out the rest of the scene. He noted that the cavalry had arrived at last as he saw a half dozen Upper Merion police officers taking notes while speaking to onlookers.

"The crime scene unit is on the way, Detective," one of them said as soon as he noticed that Roger had gotten back to his feet. "Did you find anything on him?"

Roger sighed. "Not really. Looks like a member of the fifty-something displaced middle management class. All he was carrying were some flyers and pamphlets for job fairs and resume doctors. You know; the people who prey on your desperation while taking what's left of your money."

The other officer didn't smile. "Tell me about it. I spend my life in fear of becoming one of them."

Roger was surprised. "Really? I haven't heard any layoff rumors."

"They say you never do. That it just comes out of left field and kicks you in the balls."

"I hope not," Roger replied.

The officer nodded his massive head. "Just keep on hoping, buddy. Just keep on hoping." With that, he turned back to the well groomed long haired Upper Merion football player and said, "Now then. You said you saw some kids running down towards the Eckerd?"

Roger turned to go. There were always kids running in the mall, and the overpriced but delicious ice cream from Cold Stone Creamery was also in the direction of the Eckerd. If they hadn't sealed the doors to the mall within five minutes of the shooting, there was no way they could be certain the perp was even still in the mall. He turned back to the pessimistic cop.

"Hey, Jake. Did the mall rent-a-cops happen to seal the building after it happened?"

The older guy gave him a sardonic grin. “Are you kidding? They didn’t have a clue. And the only way to ‘seal’ the doors in this place is to go around to every one and lock each of the eight outer doors at every separate mall entrance. If they had started doing that the moment the first shot was fired, they’d only have gotten to about three doors so far. Do you know how many separate entrances there are to this place?”

Roger was stumped. “No. I must admit that I don’t.”

Jake didn’t know either, but now there was no way around it. “Well—a lot. That I know.”

Roger tried not to smirk. “Let me know what, if anything, you find out from anyone here. If anyone did see something, see if you can get a description. You know the drill.”

“Yes, sir. I know the drill. Will do, Roger Dodger.” Everyone always had the last smirk on Roger.

“Did anyone find a bullet, by the way?” he asked as an afterthought.

Jake looked around. “Nope. If anyone had found something like that you’d better believe you would have heard about it.”

Roger sighed. “Oh, well. Keep looking and let me know.”

“Got it,” replied Jake, already concentrating on his next interviewee, the teenage girl with the low riding jeans who had fetched the mall guards. It was much easier for him to concentrate on her than on Roger.

Roger turned to go. His first obstacle was getting past the yellow and black crime scene ribbon that was festooned around Tiffany & Company like brightly colored toilet paper on Mischief Night. On Law & Order, Benjamin Bratt always lifted it casually as he leaned slightly to one side to step under it. Out here in the real world, it drooped down in the center to a level just between Roger’s knees and his crotch, making him guess whether it was more efficient to step over or lift and go under it. If he tried to go over, he ran the embarrassing risk of it being just a tad too high, tripping over it and falling on his face, whereas when he tried going under it he always misjudged how far over he had to bend. Sticking his ass out like that did nothing to make him look like Benjamin Bratt.

After somehow surmounting the ribbon obstacle, Roger took the escalator back down to the first level of the mall and went outside to find his car. He pulled his stereotypical off-white light-weight rain-coat that screamed “police” to any fashionista a little tighter around him, trying to ward off the seasonable chill of early November. His police-issued cream-colored Chevy was sitting right where he’d left it, in front of the Neiman Marcus valet parking pull-up. He ignored the supercilious glances of the parking valets as they waited to take the cars of Neiman Marcus patrons over to the small lot reserved for their exclusive use, as they tried to look bored instead of secretly thrilled at the prospect of getting behind the wheel of a Hummer, even just for forty-five seconds.

Roger got into his car and began maneuvering through the parking lot. He was in an area common to the Plaza and the Court at King of Prussia, enabling it to become gridlocked from four directions at once. As he pulled around past the Neiman Marcus valet section he counted three Hummers among the sport utility vehicles, all of which were either made by Lexus, Mercedes Benz, or Porsche. A Porsche SUV; now that was an oxymoron, thought Roger. He scooted around Goddard Boulevard, past Costco on the left and the Court on the right, then turned right onto Allendale Road. What had been a straight shot up to Route 202 a few years back now had two more lights in between, the better to regulate traffic into the mall.

He crossed over Route 202 and drove into one of the original King of Prussia housing developments. The small brick bungalows were set well back from the narrow road that wound around in a large circle. By now the land alone must be worth ten times what the houses had gone for originally, thought Roger. He drove slowly around the loop looking for number 456. He found it on the far side, away from the bustling Route 202, almost under the enormous metal latticework of a pair of the Philadelphia Electric Company’s high voltage towers.

The house was of nondescript red brick. The driveway was freshly tarred with Sears brand driveway sealant, indicated by the three discarded plastic tubs of gooey black material waiting for the trash collectors at the curb. The lawn was well groomed, with short grass tending more towards yellow than green now that the weather was get-

ting cooler. Must have over-fertilized it through the summer, thought Roger. There was shrubbery abutting the house on the three sides that were visible from the road as it turned in its easy loop, but no flowers or flower beds. Low maintenance but not unattractive was Roger's overall first impression.

He parked his car on the street and trudged up the driveway, past a silver 1999 Honda Civic with an orange cat sitting on the hood, and a 2001 beige Ford Taurus. The bushes next to the path leading to the door were somewhat overgrown, forcing Roger to take a few steps in the soft soil between the paving stones that made up the front walkway. Facing the front door at last, he took a deep breath before ringing the bell. This was the worst part of his job.

He pushed the doorbell button, then considered panicking when there was no immediate sound. Was it broken? No; after a brief pause an electronic rendition of the Westminster chimes rang out behind the red painted wooden door. There was another pause before approaching footsteps could be heard.

Finally the door creaked open to reveal a short, fat, fifty-something woman with long bright platinum blond hair with quarter inch gray roots. Her blue jeans were a bit too tight around the middle, as revealed by the midriff poking out from beneath an orange t-shirt that was also a smidge too small. Orange polished toenails stuck out from a pair of black flip flops. She looked at Roger expectantly.

"Yes?" she asked. Her voice was surprisingly high pitched for her age, making her sound like a petulant five year old.

"Detective Dodger, Upper Merion Police Department, ma'am," began Roger. Unable to come up with anything less abrupt, he asked, "Are you the wife of Mr. Wayne Anderson?"

"Yes, I am. My name is Emily Anderson. Why? Is something wrong?" He couldn't tell if she sounded afraid or if it was just the childish voice that gave the impression of fear. Must be hell to have that voice, he thought. Never to have anyone take you seriously on the phone when you tried to make a reservation for dinner or buy something from a catalogue. Always being asked, "Is your mommy home, dear?" when you answered a call. Then again, being married to that voice probably wasn't any picnic either. He could see it getting on his

nerves after about five minutes. Not that the Ice Princess—excuse me; “Doctor” Ice Princess—and her nasal whine were all that much better. Abruptly he pulled his mind back to the task, and the woman, at hand.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. May I please come in?” Perhaps it would be easier to tell her if she were sitting down.

“Of course, Detective. Come in.”

She beckoned him to come into the house and indicated that he should sit. A floral patterned chintz covered couch with matching love-seat and recliner arranged straight out of a department store furniture ad overfilled the room.

“Please sit anywhere.”

Roger sat down carefully on the edge of the couch. Emily sat across from him on one side of the love seat.

“What is it, Detective?” She sounded like Snow White. Roger had to struggle momentarily to keep a straight face, picturing her trilling to the birdies as she sent her seven little husbands off to work. No more, he thought. That sobered him up quickly enough.

Taking a deep breath, he blurted, “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but your husband was just shot at the mall.”

She sat perfectly still, her face completely motionless. Not one muscle fiber so much as twitched. He wasn’t sure she’d heard him.

“What did you just say?” she asked.

She probably had heard him, but just couldn’t believe what she had heard. Not an unexpected response in these situations, thought Roger.

“I said that your husband, Wayne Anderson, has been shot. In the mall. Today. Just now.” The silence lay between them, spreading like the bloodstain on the chest of the body at the mall. Aware of the awkwardness but uncertain how to alleviate it, Roger forged ahead. “He’s dead.”

Still no reaction at all. Shock? Probably.

“I’m sorry,” Roger felt compelled to add, trying to erase the silence. Finally her face moved. She smiled.

Roger was flabbergasted. What the hell kind of reaction was that?

“Oh, Detective. Obviously there has been some ridiculous mistake.”

Roger had no idea what was going on.

“I’m afraid there’s no mistake, ma’am. We found his wallet, complete with his driver’s license. That’s how we got this address.”

Her silent smile was unnerving.

“What are you talking about?” he finally asked.

Emily smiled sweetly.

“Wayne?” she called in the general direction of the back of the house. “Could you please come in here?”