

KILLER

IN THE

BAND

A LOVERS IN CRIME MYSTERY

BY

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PROLOGUE

Eleven Years Ago—Dixmont State Hospital, Outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

“Hard to believe this was once a state-of-the-art psychiatric hospital,” the young Pennsylvania state trooper said to his partner, an older officer who seemed unimpressed with the long history of the century-old hospital that rested on top of a hill overlooking a major freeway and railroad tracks.

Heavily damaged by fire and decades of neglect, the complex’s main building had once been a historic landmark, a toast to what had been considered cutting-edge psychiatric treatment back in the 1800s. More than a century later, the many buildings that made up the facility lay in ruins, decaying, and the grounds were overgrown and covered in trash left by kids, psychics, and filmmakers.

“Only goes to show you how quickly the state of the art can become out of date,” the older officer grumbled. “Do you have any idea how many crazies died here? How many are buried in that cemetery?”

"Which is why it's one of the most haunted places in the world." The young officer uttered a sinister laugh.

"Shut up."

An unmarked police car rounded the curve in the road that weaved up the long hill from the highway down below. Recognizing the woman driving the cruiser, the older trooper muttered something under his breath.

"What is it?" his partner asked.

"Gates."

"Huh?"

Before the older officer could answer, the unmarked car pulled into a parking space next to their cruiser.

"Detective Cameron Gates," the older trooper said in a low voice as he watched the slender woman with shaggy cinnamon-colored hair climb out of the cruiser. "Was on leave most of last year because she—" He made a motion with his hand to indicate drinking.

"Good morning, Fred," she said to the older officer. "I see you're keeping the new recruits well informed on who to know and who to stay away from, as always."

"Detective Gates," Fred said with a stiff smile before introducing her to his partner. "Detective Gates is with Pennsylvania's homicide division."

Struck not only by how attractive she was but also by how young she appeared to be, the young officer shot her a grin. She couldn't have been much over thirty, if that.

With a polite nod to the young police officer, she asked, "What have we got?"

"A dead body," the young officer answered. "A creepy dead body."

"They're going to tear the place down," Fred said while leading her down the battered concrete walkway, around the long main building, and to the abandoned building behind it.

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"I heard all about that," Cameron said, watching to make sure that she didn't trip over rocks or the broken cement on the uneven path. "The owners tried to have the place renovated so that they could build a shopping center a couple of years ago. Ended up causing big landslides down onto Highway Sixty-Five and the railroad tracks at the bottom of the hill. It took the state weeks to clean up the mess."

"So now they're just mowing the whole place down." Fred led her around the corner of the main building. A second abandoned building came into view.

"This is the dietary building," the young officer said. "They found the body in the walk-in freezer."

"A lot of kids hang out here," Fred said.

"It's supposed to be one of the most haunted places in the country," Cameron said. "An abandoned mental hospital. Legends. No one around. Perfect place to bring girls. You scare them and then hold them tight and hope to get lucky—or to get drunk."

"You should know," Fred said with a wicked grin.

Ignoring him, she asked, "Could one have accidentally gotten locked inside and suffocated?"

"Doubt it," Fred said. "They found the freezer door locked from the outside and a broom handle jammed in the latch."

"Sounds like someone didn't want whoever was inside it to get out."

They climbed the steps up to a loading dock. The garage-type doors had been removed, providing a wide open path into the kitchen area. Pennsylvania's crime-scene investigators were already at work examining the area outside and around the freezer; its rusted-out door, which was wide open; and its cavernous interior.

Near the activity, three men and a woman wearing hard hats were giving their statements about how they'd made the discovery to a few uniformed officers.

After showing the officers the gold shield she had clipped to her belt, Cameron waded through the officers and investigators and stepped inside the musty walk-in freezer. Taking note of the rotten food that had been abandoned decades before resting on the rusty shelves, she slipped evidence gloves onto her hands.

Having seen more than her share of dead bodies as a homicide detective, Cameron did not think that much could surprise her—until the medical examiner moved aside to let her see the body slumped in the corner.

Aware of her colleagues around her, Cameron fought to hold back the gasp that wanted to escape from her lips.

She had expected a decayed skeleton—nothing more than bones and rotten clothes. Instead, the dead body that had been reported was just that—a dead body whose flesh was dried and petrified and the texture of beef jerky.

“Never thought we'd find a mummy right here in Pittsburgh, Gates,” the medical examiner, an older man, said with a hearty chuckle.

“Not really, Doc,” she said. “How?”

“Freezer is airtight,” he said. “Electricity was turned off in the eighties, when the place closed down, so it wasn't on. Sealed tight as a drum so that the elements and insects couldn't get to him. Body couldn't decompose. It dried out and mummified.”

Cameron squatted down to peer at him. His thick locks were blond and combed back off of his forehead. Still, even in death, not a strand was out of place. He was wearing baggy white pants and a matching jacket with shoulder pads that had yellowed slightly with age. Dark-brown splatters across his shoulders and on his pants indicated

blood. Under the jacket, he was wearing a blue collarless shirt.

"I see blood," she said. "Cause of death?"

"Beauty of mummification is that it does preserve evidence." He pointed to the scalp. "There's evidence of blunt-force trauma to the head."

Cringing, Cameron reached down to pick up one of his hands. In spite of the decay, she was able to make out cuts and bruises on it. "Hopefully, for his sake, he was dead before he was sealed up in here. It could have taken days for him to die if he'd had to wait to run out of air. Any ID?" She proceeded to search his pockets.

"None," the medical examiner said. "No wallet. No money. No driver's license. Nothing."

Resting next to his legs was the neck of a guitar. The broken strings hung loose like chopped-off vines. After confirming that the instrument had already been recorded and photographed by the crime-scene unit, she slipped it out from under the dead man's hand and found that the neck of the guitar had been violently broken off of its body. On the exposed wood of the neck were stains that were the same brown hue as the stains on the dead man's white suit.

"Where's the rest of it?" she asked while searching the floor, and then she spotted the shattered body of the black guitar behind the dead man.

"Could this have caused the head wounds?" Cameron asked the medical examiner.

"Won't know until I get him back to the lab."

Cameron knelt down to peer closely at the victim's fingers. Despite his condition, she was able to see the callouses on his hands. Pleased to have made one discovery, she sat back on her haunches. She took in his clothes, which at one time—during his life—would have been considered very stylish. But then they were old and discolored.

"We may not know his name, but I do know one thing about John Doe," Cameron said. "He was a musician."

"Whoever beat him to death couldn't have been a fan," Doc said.



Three Years Later—The Russell Ridge Farm and Orchards, Chester, West Virginia

Does she have any idea how close she is to being Monster's lunch?

Suellen Russell was staring out the bay window, across the front porch, and out across the lush green yard at Ellie. The plump white cat was lazing on her back in the bright summer sun. Little was the cat aware that Monster, a playful young border collie, had her in his sights. Several feet away, under the cover of the hedges that lined the spacious yard across from the horse pasture, the border collie was bellying his way in the direction of the feline.

Just at the right moment, Monster launched himself. On cue, Ellie sprang up from the ground, twisted around in midair, landed on her feet, and flew across the yard and up the big maple tree. Her movements were so graceful that they seemed choreographed.

Laughing, Suellen tore herself away from the window and returned to her baby grand piano to work on her next original symphony piece. She so wanted to have it completed in time for rehearsals for the next season at the Philadelphia Philharmonic, where she had been the symphony conductor for the last twelve years. As part of her agreement with the company, the prestigious philharmonic featured and performed her original works.

She was living her passion and her dream.

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Don't worry, Suellen, you'll get it done before you go back to Philadelphia for the winter season. You always do.

She cringed at the thought of returning to Philadelphia. Her husband, Clark, had died that spring. Feeling like a zombie, she'd simply gone through the motions of the last six weeks of the season before running home to the farm where she had grown up—her favorite place to escape the stress of the big city. As much as she loved the excitement of the metropolis, she was still a farm girl at heart.

In a matter of weeks, her period of mourning would have to end. She'd have no choice but to return to Philadelphia and to the empty house she used to share with her husband.

Her phone rang, which was a welcome interruption. Turning her attention back to the landscape, Suellen answered the phone.

"Suellen?"

She searched her mind, trying to put a name to the familiar voice from long ago.

"It's me, Catherine," she said.

"I'm sorry—"

"Cat!" she said with a giggle. "Cat Calhoun. Used to be Foxworth, back in another lifetime. All of my respectable friends call me Catherine now."

"Cat!" Suellen replied. "My God. I didn't even know you had my number out here at the farm. What have you been up to?"

"Well, you do know that Harrison and I finally got married—"

"About time," Suellen said. "How long did you two live together before that happened?"

"Five years," Cat said. "We moved in together about nine months after the group broke up. Got married when I got pregnant. We now have three kids. I'm teaching music at a private school here in State College."

"Is Harrison still an on-air radio personality?"

"You mean 'DJ,'" Cat said with a laugh.

"Since they don't use record discs anymore, they're 'radio personalities.'"

"Don't tell me that Suellen Russell is politically correct," Cat said. "Nope. He gave that up when he became a father. Now he's grown up, and he owns his own public-relations firm. Can you believe it? Two middle-aged rock 'n' rollers now driving SUVs and juggling gymnastics and soccer practices?"

"And I'm conducting symphonies and rubbing elbows with the artsy crowd," Suellen said.

"You always were one of the artsy-fartsy set," Cat said. "You only pretended to be a rock 'n' roller because you knew that that was where the money was. You didn't have me fooled for a minute."

Suellen heard a deep sigh on the other end of the line. "What is it, Cat? What's wrong?"

Cat hemmed and hawed and then said, "Did you ever hear from Dylan Matthews?"

"No," she said. "As a matter of fact, a few weeks before that last concert, he gave me a binder with a bunch of songs in it, all songs that he had written—"

"Do you still have it?"

"I think so," she said. "It was all music. No lyrics. He wanted me to write the lyrics for him. Said he was going to send them in to an agent—"

"Probably the same agent he screwed us over for," Cat said with a growl in her tone.

"I was really surprised," Suellen said. "I never thought he was musically talented enough to write songs."

"He did teach himself to play the guitar."

"But he couldn't read music," Suellen said. "I never thought—"

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“Did you ever look at those songs?”

Suellen laughed. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t. He gave them to me right before I came back to the farm that summer. I never even got a chance to look at them. After he screwed us at the Fourth of July concert, he cornered me in the parking lot. Of course, I was madder than a wet hen. Crying. I was a royal mess.”

“We all were.”

“Well, would you believe that he had the balls to ask me to finish the songs for him? He offered me a job as a ghost-writer, I guess.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I got the impression that he had sent the songs to this agent who had signed him but she didn’t handle instrumentals. There was one song in particular that he really wanted me to put words to. He kept saying that it would be the song that would make him a star. Not us, mind you. Him.” She laughed. “I told him where to stick his job offer. He said he wanted the songs back, and I told him to send me the address of where to send them to—”

“Because he was leaving that night to drive to Hollywood,” Cat said.

“But he never contacted me with the forwarding address, and I never sent the songs. They’re here in the house somewhere.” She paused. “Why are you asking me about him? Did he call you?” She laughed. “Don’t tell me...Is he living under a bridge someplace? Would serve him right.”

“I think he’s dead,” Cat said in a low voice.

“You think—”

“Harrison and I were watching one of those crime-watcher shows,” Cat said. “And they had this segment about a body that was found at that mental hospital out by where we did that Fourth of July concert. No identification at all. They showed an artist’s rendition of what the guy would’ve

looked like, and Harrison swore that the image looked like Dylan. He wanted me to call you to see if you ever heard from him.”

“Couldn’t be Dylan,” Suellen said. “He left for Hollywood right after that concert.”

“And he took his guitar. Right?”

“Dylan took that guitar everywhere with him.”

“They found a guitar with the body.”

Suellen was silent.

“Found in an abandoned mental hospital minutes from where we last saw him,” Cat said. “Guitar found with the body. The face in the artist’s picture looks a lot like Dylan’s.”

“Has Dylan ever—”

“No.”

“What about Wendy, his sister?” Suellen asked. “I assume she left with him. Did they find her body, too?”

“They didn’t mention a woman’s body in that show,” Cat said. “I’m looking for Wendy but not having any luck. I haven’t seen her since Dylan abandoned us.”

“He wouldn’t have abandoned his sister. If they found Dylan’s body, then where is Wendy?”

“Maybe she killed him,” Cat said. “She never was wrapped too tight.” She uttered a sigh. “Suellen?”

“What, Cat?” Suellen’s mind was racing as she tried to remember the order of events after that Fourth of July concert.

At the beginning of the night, they’d all had so much hope for their futures, but the concert had turned into a nightmare that had shattered friendships—all because of the selfish ambitions of one individual.

“You said it was a crime-watcher show. How did Dylan, if it was Dylan, die?”

“Murdered. They said on that show that based on forensics, he was killed sometime between 1986 and 1990.”

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"And the last time any of us saw him was July 4, 1988," Suellen said. "Right in the middle of that window."

"Exactly. Suellen, Harrison and I were talking...Dylan's been gone all these years. None of us have heard from him. If it is him, he's been dead for decades, but no one knew it. If we tell the police it's him—"

"Might be," she said. "We don't know that for certain. Dylan wasn't the only guy with a guitar who ever went missing."

"What if it is? If we call the police and it ends up being him, the police are going to ask all types of questions. With that big fight after the concert and the things that were said—"

"They'll think it was one of us," Suellen said. "You saw the picture, Cat. Sounds to me like you and Harrison are pretty certain."

"Maybe it's not," Cat said. "Point is, I'm thinking that a lot of time has passed since that night. We all have lives now. You married very well. How's Clark?"

"Clark died four months ago," Suellen said.

After an awkward silence, Cat said, "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"So am I."

"Clark's son—"

"Tony is running his father's company now," she said. "My stepson and I have a good relationship."

"So you have a good life," Cat said. "So do Harrison and I. It would be a shame if everything that we've all built up since Dylan betrayed us got all shaken up because he went and got himself killed. The police will start asking questions. Everything that everyone said in the heat of the moment that night will be dredged up, when for all we know, Dylan picked up some hitchhiker who killed him and stole his van. Or maybe it isn't him at all."

“Are you saying you don’t want me to call to see—”

“I think that’s best, don’t you, Suellen? And if by some chance someone does recognize Dylan and calls the police, we’ll all agree to say that we were all together all night after that concert, drowning our sorrows in a bar until we went our separate ways the next day—long after Dylan had taken off to go to Hollywood.”

“We alibi one another,” Suellen said with a nod of her head. “What if it was one of us who killed Dylan that night?”

“What if it wasn’t?” Cat replied. “Dylan dumped us like garbage and publicly humiliated us. Now, after all these years, if we come forward to identify that body they found, one of us—if not all of us—could end up losing everything because of that backstabbing son of a bitch. Would that really be fair to any of us?”

Suellen responded with silence.

“What are you going to do, Suellen?”

“Go back to my life,” she said. “Thanks for calling, Cat. Good-bye.”