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INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING MYSTERY AUTHOR

The  
Wrong  
Side

of

Murder

A NIKKI BRYANT COZY MYSTERY

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Wrong  
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of  
*Murder*

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## PROLOGUE

### **PINE GROVE HIGH SCHOOL - TWENTY YEARS AGO**

*How is it possible? How can he act like nothing is wrong when our world is falling apart?*

Fifteen-year-old Nikki Bryant scowled across the school lunchroom at Ryan Spaulding.

Oblivious to the virtual daggers fired in his direction, Ryan pushed his eyeglasses up on his nose and took a sip of his soft drink before turning his attention to a chart in his chemistry book. The shapely student next to him tucked a lock of her dark hair behind her ear and bowed her head to listen to him.

Sitting across from Nikki, Suzanne balled up her empty potato chips bag and discarded it into a nearby trash can. “Are you going to eat those chips?”

Nikki let out a frustrated breath. “Take ‘em.” She tossed the bag onto her friend’s lunch tray.

“Careful. You’re going to break them. I hate potato dust.” Suzanne glanced over her shoulder in search of what had her

friend's attention. "Ah, Jodi Gibbons." She rolled her eyes. "No wonder he broke up with you."

"I broke up with *him*."

"If you broke up with him, then why are you so upset to see him with Jodi?"

Nikki stammered. "Because I care about him." She slumped over her lunch tray. "He's going to be my *brother*."

Suzanne spit out the soda she was drinking. "What did you say?"

"Mom and Mr. Spaulding—I guess now I'll start calling him Dad. He says I can call him Harrison. We all went out to a fancy restaurant on Saturday night, and they announced that they're getting *married*."

Nikki's friend's eyes bulged. "How did that happen?"

"They've known each other for years," Nikki said. "They both chaperoned the Valentine's Day dance last month—"

"You were supposed to be Ryan's date."

"I was his date. If he was sixteen and had his license and a car, none of this would have happened. That makes this his fault." Nikki threw up her hands. "Anyway! They danced together and one thing led to another. Four weeks later, they're engaged, and Ryan is tutoring Jodi Gibbons in chemistry." She took a big gulp of her soda. "It's not fair!"

"Well, that does it. You can't date Ryan now because he's going to be your brother."

"*Step*-brother! We're not blood relations."

"It's still creepy. If you care so much about him, why did you break up with him?" Suzanne glanced over her shoulder at the boy and girl on the other side of the lunchroom. The pretty brunette was laughing at something the lanky boy had said. "Well, it's good to see that your *brother* has no problem dealing with all the drama."

"He's *not* my brother." Nikki narrowed her blue eyes.

Together, they watched as their science teacher, Mr.

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Trumbull, a tall man with long, lean muscles and a winning smile, stopped at the table where Ryan and Jodi were working. He leaned over to ask a question and watched while Ryan answered. With a smile, Jodi gazed up at the teacher. Nodding approval, Mr. Trumbull moved on.

Suzanne said, "Any boy would consider himself lucky to have Jodi lick his wounds and other parts of his body."

"Like he stands a chance with Jodi Gibbons," Nikki said. "She's a sophomore. She's got her driver's license."

Suzanne leaned toward her and lowered her voice. "My sister Claire waits tables at the diner next door to the insurance company where Jodi's mom works. She found a used condom in the trash can in Jodi's bedroom. Jodi laughed in her face when she tried to ground her. I mean, like how can she ground her? Her mom works two jobs. She bartends on the weekends. Jodi can do whatever she wants. Who's going to stop her?"

Her voice trailed off when the principal, accompanied by two sheriff's deputies, entered the lunchroom. The principal craned his neck until he spied the student he was seeking.

As with the other students in the room, Jodi Gibbons looked up in curiosity. The principal hurried to her table and spoke to her in a low tone. She put her books into her backpack.

Her curiosity piqued; Nikki's eyes met Ryan's. Wordlessly, she asked him what was going on. His response was a shrug of his shoulders.

One could have heard a pin drop when the principal escorted Jodi to the sheriff's deputies, who escorted her out.



"What's going on with Jodi?" Nikki asked Ryan as soon as she caught up with him outside the school after they had dismissed classes for the day. She saw the shock in his blue eyes.

“Her mom is dead.”

Guilt over her feelings of jealousy washed over Nikki. Having lost her father a few years earlier, Nikki was all too familiar with the heartbreak that the girl had to be experiencing. “Was it an accident?”

Slowly, Ryan shook his head. “Someone murdered her... at their house... during the night.”

Nikki’s face screwed up with puzzlement. “What do you mean during the night?”

“Brandon’s dad is a sheriff’s deputy. He told him that when her mom didn’t show up for work, they called. When no one answered, one of the insurance agents went to check on her. She saw her through the bedroom window. The police said she was murdered during the night—hours before Jodi left the house to come to school.”

Nikki blinked. “She was there?”

He nodded his head.

“And she didn’t call the police or anything?”

Bewilderment filled his face.

“You were eating lunch with her. How did she seem?”

“Normal. Totally normal.”

Nikki’s hand landed on her hip. “How would Jodi not notice that her mother, who lives in the same house, was dead? Even if she wasn’t involved, how could she get up and come to school as if nothing had happened? If you ask me, Jodi was in on her mother’s murder up to her pretty eyeballs.”

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Susquehanna Club—Keystone Awards Banquet Dinner - Present Day**

Nikki Bryant groaned. Crossing her left leg over her right knee, she pulled up on the beaded blue gown to expose her foot, which was squeezed into a five-inch open-toed stiletto. She reached down to tug on the back to regain the circulation to her foot.

“They’re about to call your name,” Nikki’s older sister, Julie, told her from her seat on the other side of the banquet table.

On the stage, the awards presenter read the last nominee from the list of nominees. “*Pizzas and Murder: The Mandy Baker Case*. Directed by Nikki Bryant. Produced by Nikki Bryant of Elmo Productions for WKPG-TV.”

Nikki grasped her foot and pulled it up to get a closer look at her toes as a spotlight swept across the banquet room to land on her.

A clip from her documentary about the disappearance and murder of a young wife and mother while delivering pizza

flashed across the screen at the back of the stage.

“My toes are turning blue.”

“You only have to wear them for one more hour,” her sister said. “It won’t kill you to be elegant for once.”

“And be crippled for the rest of my life.” Nikki turned to her date, Ryan Spaulding. “Tell Julie how quickly a limb can die after its blood circulation has been cut off?”

Kathleen Bryant-Spaulding, Nikki’s mother, grasped his wrist in a silent order not to respond. “Do we have to have this conversation now? They’re about to name the winner. Nikki, forget about your feet and enjoy your moment.”

“How can I enjoy my moment when my feet are dying due to lack of blood circulation? Do you know what happens when your limbs die? They fall off. I don’t want my feet to fall off.”

“And the winner for best investigative journalism...”

Four hundred fellow journalists, producers, directors, and their friends and families glanced around the room to see the anxious anticipation of the five nominees. The evening had been a gold star night. The Bryant family’s television news station, WKPG-TV had picked up many awards at the Keystone Media awards for excellence in media. Station owner and manager, Nikki was proud of her staff.

The year before, Nikki Bryant had given up her successful career on the west coast to return to Pine Grove, Pennsylvania, to run her family’s television station.

She went from chasing news stories across the country to counting numbers in the weekly ratings overnight. What shows were drawing on viewers to make sponsors happy? What ones weren’t?

There was a lot that Nikki hated about being the boss. But she couldn’t deny that the thing that drew her home was the realization that she would control what stories she investigated.

The disappearance of one of her sister’s friends, Mandy



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Baker, was at the top of that list. *Pizzas and Murder: The Mandy Baker Case* was her first documentary made without the support of a major news organization. There was an additional sense of pride that came with getting closure for the family and friends and colleagues of a beloved murder victim.

“Breathe.” The husky male voice in her ear startled her out of her thoughts. She turned her head to see Ryan grinning at her.

Their eyes locked.

He was the real reason she had left Nevada to return to her small-town home.

He had moved his chair closer to hers at a round table in the banquet hall. His handsome face was so close to hers that she could feel his hot breath on her bare neck where he had brushed a lock of her long blond hair back over her shoulder and down her back. “You’ve got this.” He winked at her.

“I have no feeling in my feet.”

“You won!” With a shriek, Nikki’s mother, Kathleen Bryant, jumped in her seat.

Julie wiped tears from her eyes. Clapping with enthusiasm, her husband Clint wasn’t far behind.

“I’ve never been so proud of you.” Ryan stood up and helped Nikki to her feet. He kissed her on the lips.

*Damn! Now I’m going to have to walk across the banquet hall to that stage and up those stairs with no feeling in my feet!*

“What are you waiting for?” Kathleen waved her hand in a gesture for her to go up onto the stage. “WKPG just won another award for your documentary! Your documentary won!”

“Go get ‘em, tiger,” Harrison Spaulding smiled.

Her heart pounding, Nikki took her time weaving through the tables to the stage. *Why did I ever let Julie talk me into wearing these damn torture devices masquerading as shoes? This must be her revenge for that time I squealed on her to Mom about her kissing Perry Nichols when she was supposed to be baby-*

*sitting me.*

At the steps leading up to the stage, Nikki gathered up the front of her blue off-the-shoulder gown to tackle the first step. Despite her best effort, only the toe of her shoe caught the step and she stumbled forward. Anticipating trouble, she had regained her footing without doing a face plant on the stairs.

There was a gasp throughout the banquet hall. Ryan jumped out of his seat to make his way to her but stopped when he saw Nikki stand up and look back over her shoulder to their table.

Her eyes swept past Ryan to Julie, who was covering her face with her hand. The message between the two sisters was clear. *Sorry, Sis. This ain't working.*

Nikki turned around to face the audience. With as much grace as possible in a floor-length gown, she sat down on the steps.

A murmur rippled through the audience while everyone asked each other what was she doing.

Still clutching the award that he was supposed to hand off to the winner, the presenter cast questioning glances backstage. "What should I do?" he asked in a stage whisper.

The answer to everyone's question came when they saw Nikki slip the torture devices from her feet and place them on the step next to her. Then, she rose to her bare feet, smoothed the gown over her slender frame, adjusted the off-the-shoulder sleeves and sweetheart bosom, and finger-combed her long hair.

Her composure recaptured, she turned to make her way up the steps and across the stage.

With a laugh, Ryan was the first to clap. Equally impressed, his father rose to his feet to join in. Applause broke out across the banquet hall in appreciation of Nikki Bryant's take-charge attitude in what could have been a humiliating moment for many.

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The presenter was laughing by the time Nikki reached him to take possession of the trophy.

“I finally made it.”



Exhilarated after her victory, Nikki was not ready to go home when the awards banquet ended. Julie and Clint had to race back to Pine Grove to relieve the babysitter watching their four children and Elmo, Nikki’s boxer dog.

“We promised Katie’s mother that we’d have her home by midnight,” Julie said while checking the time on her cell phone. It was ten-thirty. Pine Grove was ninety minutes away. It looked like she wasn’t going to keep her promise.

Kathleen and Harrison had to leave also because they were driving. “Our nightclubbing days are a thing of the past,” Harrison said while climbing into the driver’s seat of his Range Rover. “But you two kids have a good time. You’ve earned it.”

Kathleen gave Nikki a warm hug. “Don’t worry about Elmo. We’ll pick him up from Julie’s and drop him off at Ryan’s.” She arched an eyebrow. “I assume you’re staying there tonight.”

“Would you rather I wake you and Harrison up stumbling in at three in the morning?”

“Of course not.”

Nikki was thankful that she and Ryan had thought ahead. They had driven to Harrisburg the day before, spent the night in a hotel, and had spent the day sightseeing. In Ryan’s SUV, they made their way back to Pine Grove at a leisurely pace while discussing their weekend getaway. Ryan would steal admiring glances at the cut-glass trophy that Nikki clutched in her lap.

When Nikki saw the sign for The Tap Lounge ahead of the Pine Grove exit on the freeway. Upon seeing the sign, she recalled a local restaurant reviewer’s claim that the food pre-

pared by an incredibly talented local chef served at The Tap Lounge was exceptional.

*No time like the present to check that out.* She suggested they have one last drink before returning home. The time on the dashboard read midnight. The bars didn't close until two o'clock.

"What the award-winning Nikki Bryant wants, she gets," Ryan said.

The Tap Lounge was a fixture at the edge of the small Pennsylvania town. During the previous generation, the urban neighborhood was marked by abandoned factories and low-income housing. Shopping plazas were home to empty storefronts. The only places that seemed to succeed were bars that were busiest at the beginning of the month after their regular patrons received their welfare and unemployment checks.

During the last decade, someone purchased and converted one of the abandoned manufacturing plants into a warehouse and distribution center for an international online shopping center. The injection of a new employer into the local economy was all the area needed. Contractors purchased broken-down homes to renovate and sell to the influx of young families moving into the area.

Enjoying a facelift with the rest of Pine Grove's east side, The Tap Lounge replaced its dive bar atmosphere with casual rock-country. Local bands would entertain patrons in the casual lounge on the weekends.

Nikki saw evidence of the area's former life in the older homes squeezed into postage-stamp-sized lots across the street. She could hear the low rumble of a train engine approaching in the distance. The major intersection at the end of the block included a set of train tracks, which unofficially acted as a dividing line between the east and west sides of Pine Grove. The west side of Pine Grove was home to the historic section made up of tony shops and boutiques, and grand historic homes,

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like the Bryant Bed and Breakfast.

At midnight on a Saturday night, the Tap Lounge's parking lot was almost vacant.

Ryan warned her as they stepped out of the SUV. "Take your trophy in with you. You don't want it to end up in a pawnshop."

"Maybe I'll get lucky, and they'll steal my shoes." Nikki walked on the tiptoes of her bare feet to take Ryan's hand at the entrance. Without the five-inch heels, the dress pooled at her feet. She had to hold it up in front of her to prevent walking on the hem.

The inside was dimly lit. An elderly couple was nursing a pitcher of beer and a bowl of pretzels in the corner.

"If you're here to eat, the kitchen is closed," the woman tending the bar announced with her back to them. "It closed at ten o'clock."

"That's okay," Ryan said while eyeing another person in the lounge. "We've already eaten."

He caught Nikki's attention and jerked his chin toward a booth across from the end of the bar. Nikki looked over to see a woman slumped over with her head resting in her arms folded on the tabletop.

"Is she okay?" Ryan went to check on the ill-looking woman while Nikki took a seat on a bar stool. As the head of the local office of the state crime lab, he had the training needed to aid someone in a medical emergency.

The woman replied without turning to them. "No, she's not. She's had too much to drink and passed out."

"I hope you're not letting her drive home." He rested his fingers on her neck to check her pulse.

"I'll drive her home like I always do." She turned around to take their orders. Her eyes grew wide upon seeing the couple looking like they had just stepped off a Hollywood red carpet. Her exceedingly slender frame was out of proportion with her

abundant breasts. She wore a white button-down shirt over jeans and a green half-apron tied around her waist. Her face was gaunt, with frown lines around her mouth and eyes.

“That’s nice of you. Most bartenders call a cab when a customer has too much to drink.” Nikki noticed a puzzled expression on Ryan’s face. He flicked his eyes to the face of the unconscious woman.

“She’s not a customer. She’s the bartender.” She tossed coaster napkins onto the bar. “What would you like?”

Satisfied that the woman was simply sleeping off an overabundance of alcohol, of which she reeked, Ryan returned to take a stool next to Nikki. “It’s your night.”

Nikki paused in admiring the trophy she had placed on the bar before them. “You pick it, Ryan.”

“How about a dessert liquor to close out the night?” He ordered two Irish cremes straight up.

The woman in the green apron cast glances in their direction while pouring the drinks into liquor glasses. “What did you do to win that?” She nodded her head in the trophy’s direction while placing the drinks before them with bony fingers.

“Nikki won the Keystone Media award for an investigative report that solved a thirteen-year-old murder case.” Ryan held up the glass in a toast. “To Nikki Bryant, investigator extraordinaire.”

She clinked her glass against his. “I never could have done it without the cooperation of the state police crime scene unit, which has the best leader in the state.” She winked at him.

“Good for you.” The woman behind the bar spun around to finish washing the glasses in the sink at the end of the bar.

Nikki and Ryan exchanged questioning glances. What had they done to deserve the resentment they had noticed in her congratulations. Nikki studied the woman behind the bar. There was something familiar about her. The lines on her face

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hardened with frustration.

Ryan took a sip of his drink. "By the way, you know Dad and Kathleen's twentieth wedding anniversary is coming up. They made the mistake of mentioning a party to Julie and she's throwing a monumental event. Dad says the guest list is now up to two-hundred-and-forty-nine people."

"Two-hundred-and-forty-nine?" Nikki narrowed her eyes.

The woman opened the register and counted the bills in the drawer.

"You know Cousin Oscar never brings a date to anything," he said with a lift of his shoulder.

As Ryan continued talking about what he predicted would become the fiasco of the season, Nikki watched the woman put the money into a cash bag and fill out a bank deposit form. There was something about her face and the way she moved. Recognition formed in her mind.

"Judy?" The name spilled from Nikki's mouth.

The woman in the green apron continued to count the bills.

"Judy who?" Ryan asked.

Nikki jerked her chin in the woman's direction stuffing the money into a bank bag. "Isn't that Judy Gibbons, the girl whose mother was murdered in high school?"

Ryan followed the line from Nikki's eyes to the woman. When she turned around, recognition crossed his face. "*Jodi* Gibbons."

Startled, she stopped while Ryan shook his head at Nikki. "You were always bad at names," he said under his breath.

"No, I'm not."

She strode toward them. Her dull eyes narrowed. She drew her mouth in a straight line. "Yeah, it's me. Jodi Gibbons. What do you want to make of it?"

A smile crossed Ryan's lips. He patted his chest. "It's me.

Lauren Carr

Ryan Spaulding. I helped you with chemistry.”

It would have been easy for Jodi to fail to recognize her former friend. He bore very little resemblance to the awkward skinny teenager with thick eyeglasses and braces. He had matured into a handsome young man with long lean muscles, twinkling blue eyes that had been corrected by Lasik surgery, and a brilliantly winning smile.

“That was a lifetime ago,” Jodi spat. “Back before they convicted me of murder.”

“I never heard about you getting arrested,” Ryan said.

“No, I wasn’t granted the privilege of facing my accusers and proving my innocence. No, they tried me in the court of public opinion and convicted me of killing my mother.”



Who murdered Jodi Gibbons' mother while she slept in the next room? Did she really sleep through her mother's murder, or is she protecting someone? Can Nikki Bryant prove Jodi Gibbons innocent in the court of public opinion?

Read *The Wrong Side of Murder* to find out!