

*A Mystery*

**BURNT  
ENDS**

*Laura  
Wetsel*

MURDER TASTES SWEETER WITH A SIDE OF BBQ SAUCE

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FOR KANSAS CITY.





## *Chapter One*

**T**HERE IT WAS—SMOKING MEAT, the sweet stench of my childhood. Hickory, molasses, tomato, brown sugar. Kansas City’s love letter to everyone but me.

Darnell, my best friend from our early rehab days, drove us into the parking lot of Rocky’s BBQ Smokehouse, and I gagged on the meat-thickened air. *Don’t toss your waffles, Tori.* The giant statue of Rocky the Pig—“Rocky the Cannibal”—smiled down at me in his chef hat and apron, holding a platter of ribs like he was trying to turn my stomach.

Darnell parked his truck with a displeased grunt. “Seriously, Tor,” he said, wiping the sweat from his bald head. “I said I’d help you move, not run a stakeout in a hundred degrees.”

“Don’t worry.” I took a gulp of Topo Chico to help settle my queasy gut. “My target should be here soon. Then you can help me move into my aunt’s place.” I twisted the zoom lens onto my digital camera and aimed it at a family tottering out of the restaurant with sauce-splattered shirts.

“Fine, then I’m running in for some brisket,” Darnell said. “At least, assuming they’ve got any with the meat drought they’ve been—”

“Hold up,” I cut him off and nodded at a green sedan rolling into the lot. “That’s her.” I pointed my lens at the driver’s door, getting ready to fire away. When a woman stepped out with crutches, I groaned.

“Guess she wasn’t lying.” Darnell shifted the car out of park. “The brisket will have to—”

“Wait.”

Darnell hit the brakes, jerking us forward. “Now what?”

“I want to see if she uses them inside. It would be hard in a buffet line.”

“You’re kidding, right?” He raised his brows at me. “If you go in there with that huge camera, there’s no way she’s ditching her crutches.”

“That wasn’t what I was thinking. I only knew to come here because my target’s sister posted this online.” I pulled out my phone to show Darnell the selfie post of Sasha Wolf with the caption, *Waiting for @GinnyWolf. #RockysBBQ #SisterLove.*

“Okay,” Darnell said. “Am I supposed to be seeing something here?”

I tapped on Sasha’s photo, zooming in on her sunlit head. “See that sunlight shining on her ponytail?”

“Yeah, and?”

“She’s under an atrium, which means I’d have a great shot from the roof.”

“The roof? You’re not seriously thinking of climbing Rocky’s, are you?”

“Why not?” I said, tying my blonde curls into a fist of a ponytail. “You’ve seen me scale walls and trees before. I’m a nimble little freak.”

“I meant about trespassing.” Darnell pointed to his police badge like he might arrest me.

“You know us private eyes don’t have to follow your rules.” I gave him a reassuring smile. “Just have a smoke, and I’ll be back before you’ve even put your butt out.”

“One cig, Tor,” Darnell warned, tapping a pack of Marlboro Lights on the face of his watch. “Otherwise, have fun moving by yourself.”

For a recovering addict, Darnell was a horrible liar. I knew he’d never abandon me, not for anything. Hanging my camera around my neck, I hopped out of the truck into the afternoon sun, where I already felt like I was sucking meat-flavored steam through a cocktail straw. I’d just have to deal with the nausea. I hustled toward the black and orange pavilion,



noting its unclimbable plastic siding and security cameras mounted at the entrance. Maybe I'd have better luck in the back.

I circled around and found luck in the form of a supply truck parked right beside the restaurant. No driver, no cameras, no people. This was my way to the roof.

I hoisted myself onto the hood and made my way up the windshield to the top of the truck. The gap between the truck and building was only two feet, so I made the easy jump. Soon as I hit the roof though, my phone started buzzing in my pocket. This wasn't an ideal time to take calls, so I let it ring out while I got on my hands and knees to crawl toward the atrium.

When I got to the glass, I peered down below at a buffet hall where six dozen carnivores were dressed for the upcoming Fourth of July weekend and savagely stuffing their smeared, sticky faces with brisket, thighs, and ribs. My stomach surged at this familiar scene. I'd been avoiding the barbecue world for nearly fifteen years, and now that I was looking down on it like some floating deity, I remembered why I'd stayed away. Barbecue didn't just upset my stomach. From my head to my chest to my teeth, it made me mad everywhere. But I didn't want to think about why. Not after what I'd done last night.

As I searched the crowd of meat-eaters, I found Ginny, my target, at a table with her sister, her crutches against the wall. I raised my camera to my eye and focused on Ginny's face. She was teasing Sasha, lifting her brows and puckering her lips, and as she stuck out her tongue, a memory flashed in my head—I was a fourteen-year-old again in an inflatable pool of barbecue sauce with my cousin Annie. My hands shook, releasing the camera, but I jolted my neck back before the camera hit the roof.

That memory was another reminder why I avoided meat, but it made sense why the past was on my mind when Annie was the reason I was on this stakeout. She'd filed her case to investigate Ms. Wolf with my agency yesterday afternoon.

I had no idea though who this Ginny Wolf was to Annie as I placed the burning hot camera back on my face and snapped pictures of Ginny, her

crutches, her gold pendant and butterfly tattoo, all material things identifying her.

When she stood up for the buffet, leaving her crutches behind, I videoed the fraudster walking free and easy without them. As I'd thought, another liar.

My evidence secured, I returned to the restaurant's edge and jumped onto the supply truck. I wasn't loud, but I must have made noise inside the truck because the driver's door opened. When I saw who stepped out, I knew an apology wasn't cutting it. This was the largest man I'd ever seen. Not only was he around seven feet tall with brisket-sized arms and an ugly blond bowl cut, his steely blue eyes were fixed on me like he wanted to rip out my throat.

"Hey," his tuba voice bellowed. "You taking pictures of me?"

"No," I said, but my answer didn't put him at ease, because he jumped onto the hood to come after me. I didn't think it wise trying to fight a guy triple my size, so I rolled to the back of the truck, caught its back edge, let myself dangle, and released my grip.

Soon as I hit the pavement, I sprinted.

I had a head start on the driver, but I'd only gone a few strides before I heard his monster feet slapping the ground behind me. Around my neck, my camera thumped against my chest. I tried calling out for Darnell, but the heat and the exertion started making me choke. Behind me, the slapping feet were only getting closer. *You're not gonna make it.*

Just then, my ponytail got yanked, and I was thrown to the pavement. I tried pushing myself up fast, but a boot crushed down on my spine.

"Get off me," I gasped.

I strained to push up again, but the heel only dug deeper between my shoulder blades, cutting off my breath.

"I'll teach you not to spy on people," the voice said, before my camera strap was snatched off my neck. "This is mine now. Better not see you here again."

The boot then lifted, and the thug ran off.

I turned over. “Darnell,” I wheezed, choking to breathe.

Darnell heard me this time and opened his door. “Tori?” he called out. “Are you okay?” He ran over and helped me up.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said, patting my chest.

Darnell’s lip curled in distress at my arm. “Damn, what happened?”

I looked at where he was staring and saw my arm bleeding. Not the worst cut I’d had, maybe an inch long, but I could barely feel any pain. “That truck driver over there stole my camera.” I pointed at the giant, now on the other side of the lot. “I’m getting it back.”

As I took a step forward, Darnell grabbed me by the shoulders.

“I don’t think so,” he said, like he was my dad. “You see the size of that guy? You’re lucky he didn’t crush your skull.”

I tried to shake loose, but I was weak in Darnell’s grip. “Please,” I begged him, “my camera’s priceless.”

“Tor, your life’s priceless.” Darnell opened my door. “Now get in. I got something for your arm.” I obeyed and climbed inside where he wrapped my wound with paper towels. “That should help with the bleeding. Now you stay put while I charge that man with assault and theft.”

I cleared my throat with protest. “You can’t do that.”

“Excuse me?” Darnell’s eyebrow rose. “Why not?”

“I was trespassing. If you charge him, he’ll report me.”

“So what? He’s dangerous.” Darnell opened his door, and I grabbed his arm with my uninjured hand.

“Do it and I’ll lose my license.”

His eyes widened with fury as he sucked on his teeth. “The things I do for you.”

In case I didn’t know Darnell was mad, he slammed his door and peeled out of the parking lot so fast my backpack flew to the floor of the car, spilling open at my feet. I couldn’t blame him for getting angry about this situation when I was even angrier. As I bent over to gather my stuff, my seatbelt tight against my body, my teeth were grinding hard.

*That asshole stole your camera.*

Darnell lit his fifth cigarette of the hour, and my phone buzzed in my pocket again. This time I pulled it out to check. “Great,” I said. “My boss.”

“Good, you can tell him how your assignment almost got you killed by an ogre.”

I answered the call. “Hey Kev.”

“Hi Tori, got a minute?” Kevin said, sounding nervous or drunk. Or maybe drunk because he was nervous.

“Sure, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Kevin lied. “We got a case request last night about an accidental death case. The widow’s saying it wasn’t an accident and specifically requested you, but I can give it to someone else if you’d still rather stick to fraud cases. Thought I’d ask you first.”

“Why is she asking for me?” I said, my stomach hardening for a punch, though I knew the answer to my own question.

“I think it has to do with your last name,” Kevin said. “Aren’t you related to Kansas City’s Favorite Uncle?” Hearing that nickname made me gag like I’d smelled bacon. “Tori?”

“Yeah, he’s my uncle.”

“Well, Luis Mendoza was a cook at the Uncle Charlie’s location in Leawood. His widow claims she’s getting death threats and that the police aren’t looking into it . . .” Kevin’s voice stirred beneath the *buh-dump* of my heartbeat. Turned out getting my camera stolen wasn’t the worst part of my day. I just needed to stop hearing about this case before I smashed something.

“Don’t want it,” I said, before hanging up and shoving the phone in my pocket. Darnell stayed quiet while I took staccato breaths. *You’re fine. You’re fine. You’re fine.*

It wasn’t until we reached Victory House, the sober house I was leaving for my aunt’s, that Darnell turned to me and broke the silence. “So what did your boss say to get you so worked up?”

I was still in disbelief at my hysterical reaction that the words came out like I wasn’t the one saying them. “He asked if I wanted a case at Uncle Charlie’s.”

“Uncle Charlie’s? Man, good call turning that down. Your family’s your worst trigger, and you’ve only been sober two years.” Darnell reached into the back seat for a fresh Topo Chico, which, though warm, was still a Topo Chico. He handed me the bottle.

“Thanks,” I said. With the black bottle opener ring I wore on my thumb, I popped off the cap and started chugging down the prickly bubbles. It wasn’t a drug, but the sparkling water did calm me down.

“Was it about Luis Mendoza?” Darnell asked.

I nodded, while swallowing.

“I remember that case,” he said. “Memorial Day. Guy was on heroin, fell, hit his head, passed out in the cooker. Ruled an accident.”

I sipped the bottle with more restraint. “Sounds like his widow doesn’t agree with that story.”

“Denial’s the first stage of grief.” Darnell smashed his cigarette into the ashtray he’d taped to the dashboard. “Guess she’s stuck there.”

“Yeah, you don’t got to tell me about grief.”

“You know,” Darnell said, nodding at my bottle of water, “you shouldn’t drink that so fast. You’ll give yourself indigestion with all that carbonation.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got my resources.” From my bag, I pulled out an orange bottle and pointed to the label for Naltrexone, my anti-narcotic prescription.

What Darnell didn’t realize, though, was that the pills inside weren’t Naltrexone. In fact, I’d stopped taking those a few months ago because they were making me too groggy to work. The pills I had were OxyContin, my opioid of choice, my gateway to heaven and hell.

Darnell gave me an incredulous glance. “That stuff treats heartburn too?”

“What can I say?” I chased down two oxies with a gulp of water. “It’s a miracle drug.”

As I chugged the bottle down to its bottom, my mind returned to Kevin’s call and what had happened last night. After I’d seen Annie’s case request, I got so upset I stole all the oxies from the girl next door and hit them

hard. Then my anger boiled over, and I looked up my treacherous family online, discovered Luis Mendoza's suspicious death at the drive-in only a month ago, and saw an opportunity to finally get my revenge. That was why I submitted a case request to myself as Luis's widow yesterday.

In that drug-induced euphoric state where I felt invincible, my big plan was to investigate Uncle Charlie and bring him down. Now that I was only mildly drugged-up, though, I saw the danger in my vision. Because even if my gut knew Luis didn't die by accident, it also knew I couldn't investigate the truth. Like Darnell always said, my family was my worst trigger. And seeing as I was already hiding my recent relapse from him and my aunt, I didn't need to make my situation any worse.



## *Chapter Two*

OFFERED TO GIVE DARNELL A hand moving my stuff into his truck, but he wouldn't hear none of it. Not with my bloody arm. So I cooled off in the AC instead and rode the warm wave of those two oxies I'd taken while reassuring Rebus in his cat carrier. "Don't worry, Reeb's," I told him in my mothering voice. "We're going back to Aunt Kat's. Remember? You grew up there as a kitten."

But he didn't care what I had to say. Instead, he scowled at me with his mismatched eyes—one yellow, one blue—and once we hit the road, his grumbling escalated to a growl that didn't let up until Darnell pulled into the driveway of the canary yellow house with the dark purple door.

"Man." Darnell blinked at the house. "Your aunt sure likes purple."

"That's an understatement," I said.

I looked at the porch with its lilacs, dream catchers, and windchimes, and a lump formed in my throat. Though I visited Aunt Kat all the time, I hadn't lived here since she took me in as an orphaned teenager. Now I was back, broke and desperate after Victory House gave me the boot for relapsing, and I had to make sure she never found that out. Otherwise, she'd definitely send me back to rehab, and I really didn't need to go through that drama again. I was planning on resetting myself tonight, anyway, by throwing the rest of the pills down the toilet. I just wanted to escape myself a little while longer.

The purple door opened, and my purple-haired aunt hopped onto the porch in her paint-smattered smock. “Tori,” she shouted, waving her hands. “You and your friend can set your things on the porch. Nobody inside but you.”

I nodded, and she went back into the house.

“Sorry,” I said to Darnell. “She smokes weed all day for her back pain and gets paranoid around cops.”

“I get it, but you gonna be okay around her pot?”

“Yeah, never did like the smell.”

After Darnell unloaded my stuff on the porch and left, I took a seat on a box of books while the fan overhead tickled my neck hairs. This occasion called for another Topo Chico, and I reached over to grab a new one, popping its cap off with my thumb ring. It was one of those days when I might drink the whole crate.

“He gone?” Aunt Kat called out from behind the screen door.

“Yeah, you’re safe.”

Aunt Kat came out onto the porch barefoot, arms open and ready to squeeze me until her bloodshot eyes bulged at my arm gash. “Holy cow, you’re bleeding.”

“Yeah, but I think it’s stopped.” I patted the blood-soaked wad of paper towels. “Took a spill moving stuff.”

“You need to disinfect that immediately.”

“Probably.”

I downed the rest of my water and picked up Rebus in his carrier to follow my spindly aunt into the lavender living room stinking of citrus skunk. When I unlocked the cat cage, Rebus darted under the plum couch to cry. Aunt Kat dropped to the ground to comfort him.

“Poor kitty,” she said, tapping the hardwood floor with her violet nails. “I’ve got some grass-fed raw beef, if that’ll cheer him up.”

“Nah, he’ll be on a hunger strike until he feels like hunting.”

“Well, he’s not going outside while he’s a guest in this house. I don’t want him bringing any of those pests in here like he used to do.”



“He can’t go outside anyway right now since he’d only run back to Victory House.”

“Right.” Aunt Kat gave a nod. “Cats do have that homing instinct, don’t they?”

I looked around the living room to see if anything had changed. There was the purple couch, the purple rug, the purple table with the purple pipe, vape, and bong. But the display case was empty, meaning my aunt’s American Girl doll collection was missing. Guess I couldn’t be too offended she’d hidden them when I’d appeared on her doorstep with only one day’s notice—and I *had* actually relapsed. I’d told her Victory House wanted me out because they needed my room for someone else and thought I was ready to be on my own. Clearly, Aunt Kat suspected I could be lying.

“Is that supposed to be a Scottish cow?” I gestured to her new painting of a long-horned, shaggy cow in a kilt playing bagpipes, its strokes of violet, magenta, and cyan so thick the paint could be yarn.

“Yeah, I was commissioned to do a Highland Cow with bagpipes,” Aunt Kat said. “It’s fun, don’t you think? Thought I’d hang it in here a few days before sending it to the buyer.”

There was a knock at the door, and my aunt jumped to her feet. “Tori,” Darnell shouted. “You left your mail in the truck.”

“I did?” I rummaged through my backpack. Only two envelopes. “Mustn’t have scooped everything off the floor.”

“Feed it through the mail slot,” Aunt Kat instructed. Three envelopes plopped into a basket beside the front door.

“Thanks for helping me pay my bills,” I said.

“Anytime.”

Aunt Kat grabbed the mail and held up a star-spangled, glittery envelope without a stamp. “Going to a party?” She handed it to me with an elfish twinkle in her eye.

“Yeah, must be a social thing for NA that someone threw in my mailbox.”

But I already knew what was in the envelope before I ripped it open, and as I pulled out a card written in my attempt at florid handwriting, my

face flushed to see it again. Aunt Kat leaned over my shoulder, and I shoved the invitation back into the envelope before she could read it and worry.

“What is it?” she asked.

“You’re right. It’s an invitation.”

“From who?”

“A friend you don’t know.”

“No, I saw your reaction.” She shook her head at me. “You’re hiding something, I can tell.”

“Fine,” I said, since I knew she’d only pester me until she got her answer. “Go ahead and find out.” I handed her the envelope. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing—” Aunt Kat pulled out the card, and it leapt from her hands like it was cursed. “My gosh! Why on earth is Charlie inviting you to his Fourth of July Barbecue tomorrow?”

“Technically, you don’t know it came from him. There’s no return address or postage.”

“Then who sent it?”

“How should I know?” I plopped down on the couch to consider how to best deal with my aunt’s curiosity. If she knew I’d invited myself, she’d be suspicious and would probably consider that I was using again. “You know,” I began, popping another bottle of Topo Chico with my thumb ring, “my boss just offered me an accidental death case at Uncle Charlie’s. The widow requested I investigate what happened to her dead husband.”

“What? Why would she want you?” Aunt Kat reached for the overstuffed ashtray. “And why are you getting this invitation at the same time? That can’t be a coincidence.”

“Exactly.” I took a swig of water. “I don’t have any online presence saying I’m a PI with my agency, so I don’t know how the widow knew my name. As for the invitation, I have no idea how it got to Victory House either. Maybe someone in the family’s been watching me.”

“Watching you? Tori, don’t you give me a panic attack with that kind of talk. Please tell me you turned that case down.”

“I did. Thought it would be a bad idea getting involved with the family.”

“Of course it’s a bad idea.” Aunt Kat flicked her lighter at a joint. “It’s been years since Charlie screwed you over.” She took a drag. “He’s nothing but trouble.”

“Yeah, maybe the widow’s working with whoever invited me,” I said. “If Luis didn’t die by accident—”

“Like he was murdered?” Aunt Kat’s forehead puckered up. “Then even better you turned it down. You know you’re not supposed to be working murders anymore, especially ones involving Charlie.”

“That’s why I was good and turned it down,” I reassured her. “But I wouldn’t be surprised if Uncle Charlie did murder this guy. You know I’ve always suspected he had a hand in Dad’s death to steal the drive-in.”

“I know,” Aunt Kat sighed. “And I want to be honest with you right now. I don’t think you’re wrong about that either.”

I leaned forward. “What?”

“Well, I’ve always kept my thoughts on this subject to myself, but seeing that you’re doing so well managing your addiction and anger issues, I think I owe it to you to tell you my theory.”

“Your theory on what?” I exclaimed, my pulse shooting up. “That Uncle Charlie killed Dad?”

“I’m sorry, are you okay to hear this? I really don’t want to set off your temper.”

I took a deep breath. “Yes,” I said, more composed, “go on.”

“You were too young to remember, thank goodness,” Aunt Kat continued, “but Charlie and I saw what happened to Billy when your mom left and how he turned to heroin. Probably would have killed himself if not for you, and he was clean for a long while, but Charlie understood Billy’s addictive nature. What I think happened is Charlie got so jealous of Billy’s success that he deliberately got Billy hooked on drugs again.”

My face was fever-hot, hearing this. “What do you mean?” I pressed her. “How did Uncle Charlie get Dad addicted to heroin again?”

“This is making you upset, I can see it in your face—”

“Tell me.”

Aunt Kat sighed again. “I don’t think it was an accident what happened with that scalding sauce falling off the barbecue cooker onto Billy’s hands. My hunch is Charlie planted it there on purpose because he wanted Billy addicted to painkillers.”

“Oxies,” I stated as if I wasn’t on them now.

“Right, and you know better than anyone how addictive they are. Billy tore through his first bottle in a blink, and that’s when Charlie began dropping off heroin baggies in Billy’s mailbox. I wouldn’t be surprised if Charlie cut that stuff with something deadly either, if only to be sure he’d got the job done.”

I strangled the Topo Chico bottle as if it was my uncle’s neck. “What do you mean he dropped off baggies in the mailbox?”

“I saw Charlie’s car at the mailbox,” she said, “and found a baggie of heroin inside after he’d gone. I told Billy about it, but by then he was hooked and didn’t care. Then he overdosed soon after that. The way I see it, Billy poisoned himself to death, but Charlie gave him the poison.”

“So he could steal the drive-in,” I said under my breath.

I thought back to that Fourth of July weekend, half my life ago, when Swensons Barbecue became the most popular joint in KC, with cars lining up for hours to get a taste of that smoky, sweet brisket.

Weeks later, Dad was dead, and when his will turned up, revised days before his death, it blew all our minds because it said Uncle Charlie was the heir to the barbecue business. Aunt Kat argued in court it couldn’t be right, claiming there was a different will that said I was supposed to inherit my dad’s business when I came of age, but with my uncle’s connections in high places, he got away with his scheme.

So Uncle Charlie cut me out of the business and got super rich off my inheritance. His role in my dad’s relapse, though, was a new twist to the tale.

Now my chest was heaving, especially with those two oxies I’d taken. Though opioids were supposed to calm you down and make you feel all cozy warm inside, they could also, depending, incite explosive rage. This

situation called for it. Everything in me was at a boiling point—my heart rate, my blood pressure, my breath. I needed a release.

A shrill scream tore out my lungs, and I smashed my bottle on the coffee table, spraying water and glass everywhere.

“Oh my God, Tori,” Aunt Kat said. “Are you okay?”

I was still panting short breaths as I looked up from the mess to my aunt’s terrified blue eyes. “Sorry,” I muttered, “I’ll clean this up later.” I got up and made for the door.

“Where are you going?” She snatched my arm. “You’re red as a chili pepper. I’m sorry I upset you. I only thought you should know the truth at some point.”

“I’m fine.” I shook myself free. “I just need a moment.”



## *Chapter Three*

SNAPPED OPEN MY FOURTH Topo Chico of the hour and paced on the porch. The rehab doctors said not to blame others for your problems, but this wasn't my case. My uncle was the reason my life got destroyed. I couldn't blame Aunt Kat for wanting to protect me from the truth all this time, so I wouldn't burn my uncle's hands off myself. But now that I knew my intuition had been right all along, I wasn't sure I'd be able to restrain myself.

The bottle jiggled in my hand as I thought of my uncle on billboards, smiling a usurper's grin while holding my dad's barbecue burger, the same burger that had got my dad murdered by his own brother—if Aunt Kat's story proved to be true. Now I really understood Hamlet.

*You could still get revenge.*

After all, my uncle deserved to suffer for what he'd done. It wouldn't even be hard when I knew in my gut—the place that never lied—that Luis didn't conveniently fall into a cooker and destroy evidence of his track marks. More likely, someone killed him and covered up their murderous tracks, and whether that was my uncle, a cousin, or some bitter curb server, I knew exposing a murder at the all-American drive-in would discredit, if not crush, my uncle's fraudulent barbecue dynasty. No more Kansas City's Favorite Uncle.

I also knew Aunt Kat and Darnell would lose their minds over what I was about to do, but I messaged Kevin anyway. “Okay, I’ll take the case,” I texted him.

Already, I was feeling much better.

When I went back into the house, Aunt Kat was again on her hands and knees in front of the couch. “Here, kitty, kitty . . .”

“I took the case,” I announced drily.

“You what?” Aunt Kat whipped around to face me. “Didn’t you hear what I said? Charlie is dangerous.”

I ignored her panic. “Can I please borrow your car?” I still didn’t have one since my accident two years ago. Though I’d been borrowing a friend’s car at Victory House, that wasn’t an option anymore.

“No, you’ve come too far,” Aunt Kat said. “I won’t be enabling trouble.”

“Don’t worry, I’m armed.” I dug into my backpack and pulled out my police-strength stun gun to show her. Though I hadn’t used it since catching the Amity Woods Killer some years ago, I still carried it with me.

“Your safety’s not my only concern.” Aunt Kat rubbed her temples in distress. “What about another relapse?”

Her question was a dart of anxiety to my chest. I could see in her expression, though, that she didn’t believe I was on drugs now. If she did, she’d be tearing up. Unlike me, she wasn’t very good at hiding her feelings.

“I’ll be careful,” I repeated. “But I need to get to Leawood and talk to Luis’s manager so I’m ready for the party tomorrow.”

“You’re not going to that party.”

“You’re not stopping me.” I gave her a firm look. “But if it makes you feel better, I’ll keep you in the loop. You could even give me some pointers seeing as you know your brother better than I do.”

“I shouldn’t have told you anything,” Aunt Kat moaned as she picked up a glass pipe and lit the bowl in defeat.

My phone dinged. It was a message from Kevin with an email attachment from Luis’s widow, Isabella Mendoza, the same email I’d written last night.

“Clue number one.” I cleared my throat to read the message aloud. “Dear Bullseye Services, I am writing because I have received anonymous threats and am too afraid to go to the police. My husband, Luis Mendoza, died on Monday, May 30, at Uncle Charlie’s Bar-B-Que Drive-In in Leawood, Kansas. The coroner stated that Luis had been abusing heroin when he fell, hit his head, and died of a traumatic brain injury.

“However, this cannot be true because Luis never used drugs. He was a good man. Please, I must find out what happened to clear his name. I have included a \$3,000 cash advance and am requesting that Victoria Swenson investigate because I believe she is related to the drive-in’s owner, and would have additional resources for solving the case. I do not wish to meet in person because I fear I am being watched. If you need to contact me, or require more money, you can write me at this email address. Thank you, Isabella Mendoza.”

“Is that a joke?” Aunt Kat scrunched her eyes together. “Who the heck sends that much up front?”

I nodded and regretted my empty bank account. This was why I had no choice but to move in with my aunt today.

Since Kevin discussed a new case with the client before assessing payment, I had to pretty much drain my savings, and \$3,000 was enough for Kevin to move forward with the investigation without meeting the client.

“Mrs. Mendoza did say she was scared,” I said. “Desperate people will pay whatever it takes.”

“Rhetorical question, dear.” Aunt Kat released a puff of smoke that for a second masked her disappointment. “Seriously, why are you pursuing a case that’s obviously a trap?”

“Because I’m an investigator and angry enough to punish my uncle for killing my dad and destroying my life. Sound reasonable enough to you?”

Aunt Kat swallowed, the guilt resurfacing in her rosy cheeks for having told me the truth. “I understand you’re mad, but you got to know you can’t bring Charlie down.”



“We’ll see about that.” I took out my phone. “But if I can’t use your car, I’ll start wasting what little money I have ordering rides.”

Aunt Kat didn’t call my bluff. She set the pipe down, opened her purse, and dropped the car keys on the coffee table. “Here. You’ll do what you want. Always have. Always will.”

“Thanks.” I slipped the keys into my pocket.

“You might want to bring a cooler with you though,” she added. “The AC broke last week, and I haven’t got around to fixing it yet.”

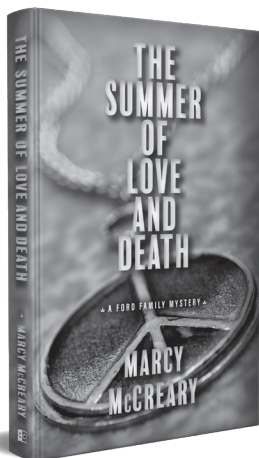
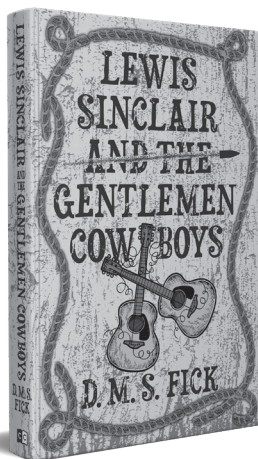
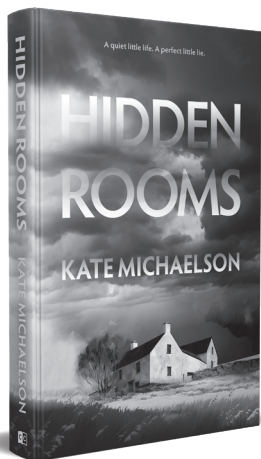
“Hey, I don’t mind sweating.” I gave her a smile. “But seriously, thanks for the wheels.”

I’d need them for the ride I was going on.



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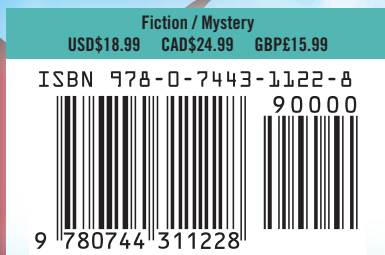
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# IS BLOOD THICKER THAN BARBECUE SAUCE?

**W**hen private Investigator Tori Swenson gets an accidental death case that looks a lot like a murder committed at one of her uncle's barbecue drive-ins, she decides it's time to get revenge on her estranged relatives who cut her out of the family fortune. Pretending to want a reunion, Tori appears at her uncle's Fourth of July party to secretly investigate her family. The case takes a sinister turn when her uncle suddenly dies, and Tori becomes not only a suspect in her uncle's death, but also the killer's next target. To uncover who dethroned the barbecue king, Tori will have to face her own fiery demons while pursuing a killer who wants to make dead meat out of her.

  
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