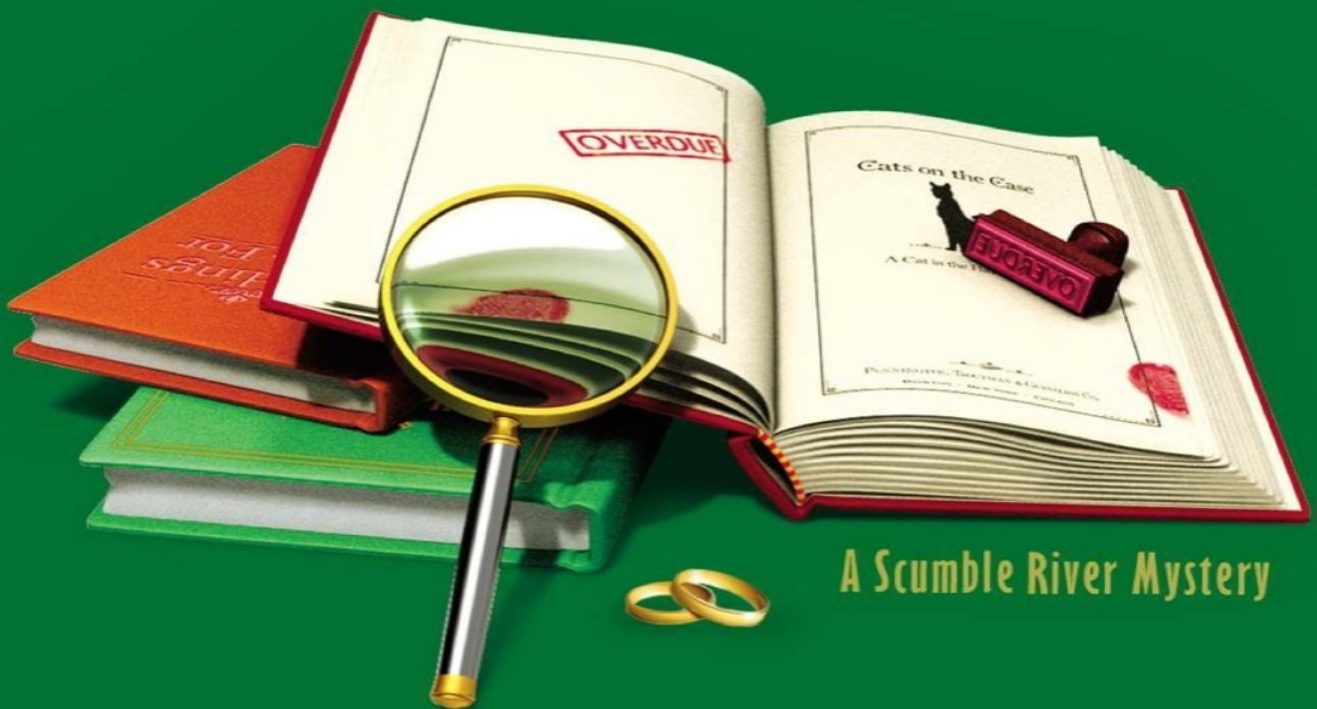




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Murder of a Stacked Librarian



A Scumble River Mystery

DENISE SWANSON

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Murder of the Cat's Meow*



PRAISE FOR THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

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SCUMBLE RIVER MYSTERIES

Murder of the Cat's Meow

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“Not a Monster of a Chance,” short story in

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DEVEREAUX'S DIME STORE MYSTERIES

Nickeled-and-Dimed to Death

Little Shop of Homicide

Murder of a Stacked Librarian

A Scumble River Mystery

Denise Swanson


AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

OBSIDIAN

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In memory of Sally Fellows, an inspirational teacher, thoughtful mystery reviewer, and true friend

Author's Note

In July of 2000, when the first book in my Scumble River series, *Murder of a Small-Town Honey*, was published, it was written in “real time.” It was the year 2000 in Skye’s life as well as mine, but after several books in a series, time becomes a problem. It takes me from seven months to a year to write a book, and then it is usually another year from the time I turn that book in to my editor until the reader sees it on a bookstore shelf. This can make the timeline confusing. Different authors handle the matter in different ways. After a great deal of deliberation, I decided that Skye and her friends and family would age more slowly than those of us who don’t live in Scumble River. So to catch everyone up, the following is when the books take place:

Murder of a Small-Town Honey—August 2000
Murder of a Sweet Old Lady—March 2001
Murder of a Sleeping Beauty—April 2002
Murder of a Snake in the Grass—August 2002
Murder of a Barbie and Ken—November 2002
Murder of a Pink Elephant—February 2003
Murder of a Smart Cookie—June 2003
Murder of a Real Bad Boy—September 2003
Murder of a Botoxed Blonde—November 2003
Murder of a Chocolate-Covered Cherry—April 2004
Murder of a Royal Pain—October 2004
Murder of a Wedding Belle—June 2005
Murder of a Bookstore Babe—September 2005
Murder of a Creped Suzette—October 2005
Murder of the Cat’s Meow—March 2006
Murder of a Stacked Librarian—December 2006

And this is when the Scumble River short story and novella take place:

“Not a Monster of a Chance” in *And the Dying Is Easy*—June 2001
“Dead Blondes Tell No Tales” in *Drop-Dead Blonde*—March 2003

Scumble River is not a real town. The characters and events portrayed in these pages are entirely fictional, and any resemblance to living persons is pure coincidence.

CHAPTER 1

By the Book

Skye Denison adjusted the stack of books in front of her, making sure that she was completely concealed behind their brightly colored spines. It was the morning of December 23, exactly a week before her wedding, and she was hiding out in the Scumble River Public Library.

She was supposed to be working on writing her vows, but in truth, things had gotten out of hand and she was avoiding all the people who were stressing her out. She'd known from the minute she set the date that her mother would drive her crazy, but she hadn't anticipated that others would join May on that trip. As it turned out, the entire town had an opinion. From the flowers for the church to the menu at the reception, people stopped Skye wherever she went to lobby for their favorite selection.

Didn't they realize that all the choices had been made months ago and it was far too late for Skye to change her mind now? Unless she just called off the whole shebang and went back to her nice, boring regular life. Surely Wally wouldn't mind delaying their marriage another year, or two, or ten. He was a patient guy and didn't deserve the psycho bride she was becoming.

Skye's fiancé, Wally Boyd, the town's chief of police, had been strangely exempt from all the hoopla. It might have been his age—he was forty-three—or the fact that he had been married once before, or because he was male, but no one was making helpful suggestions to him about the decor or the food or telling him what not to wear.

Sighing, Skye closed *The Everything Wedding Vows Book: Anything and Everything You Could Possibly Say at the Altar—and Then Some* and added it to her camouflage pile. Next up was *Yes! I Will! I Do!: Your Step-by-Step Guide to Creating a Wedding Ceremony as Unique as You Are*. She examined the pale pink cover, then flipped it open to the index. As she ran her finger down the column, looking for the chapter on vows, a loud voice drew her attention to the circulation desk.

Chip Nicolet, the owner of the new health club, Guns and Poses, had backed librarian Yvonne Osborn against the counter and appeared to be enthralled with the beautiful woman's many assets. The muscular man's expression reminded Skye of her cat, Bingo, just before the Fancy Feast was spooned into his bowl—hunger, impatience, and entitlement all mixed together in a quivering mass of desire.

Yvonne had been substituting for Scumble River's regular library director since June, and during that time, Skye had noticed that although the temporary librarian had the hourglass figure of a Playboy Bunny, her outlook on life was more like Margaret Thatcher's than one of Hugh Hefner's average cottontails. Apparently, Chip hadn't gotten the memo on that, because he was staring at Yvonne's considerable bustline and nearly drooling.

Happy for a distraction from her wedding woes, but more than a bit alarmed at the man's

belligerent attitude, Skye pushed aside a pillar of books and leaned forward to hear the conversation. She felt a twinge of conscience at blatantly eavesdropping, but anything was better than thinking about the big day looming on her horizon like a dentist appointment for a root canal. Why, oh, why hadn't she eloped like her brother and his new wife had?

Skye saw that Yvonne was trying to shush Chip, but evidently the health club owner had never heard of the "whisper in the library" rule because he boomed, "Come on. Say you'll go out with me."

"No." Yvonne's expression was adamant. "Now move aside and let me do my job."

"I promise you, you'll have a good time," Chip persisted, edging closer.

"I seriously doubt it." Yvonne took a deep breath, causing her chest to expand and Chip to stare. "there a book I can help you find?"

"A book?" Chip looked confused.

"You know, those items lined up on the shelves." Yvonne pointed to the crowded bookcases around the room. "The reason you came into the library."

"I know what a book is. What? Do you think I'm an idiot?" Chip snarled. "I just didn't realize anyone still read them."

"Yes. Many people whose attention span is longer than a television commercial still read books."

"I'll make a mental note of that," Chip jeered.

"That might be difficult for you to do since your pencil is obviously out of lead." Yvonne's voice was cool. "And since it doesn't appear you're here for any of the library's usual services, is there something else I can help you with? Perhaps directions to the bathroom?"

"What?" Chip wrinkled his brow. "Why do you think I need to go to the can?"

"Frankly"—Yvonne placed her palms on Chip's well-developed pecs and pushed, but he didn't budge—"I don't think about you at all."

"Well, you should." His gaze dropped to her curvy bottom. "A hottie like you should be hooking up with someone like me, not acting like a nun. Who are you saving it for?"

"Myself." Yvonne finally managed to step to the side and wiggle past him. "I've found that I'm much better company than most men."

The library was divided into two main rooms, and Yvonne pushed a cart toward the section where Skye was sitting. A few wooden chairs and tables shared the cramped space with jam-packed bookshelves and racks stuffed with magazines. Yvonne stopped a few feet from Skye and started reshelving novels, pointedly ignoring the man who had followed her.

When Chip moved in front of Yvonne and put his palm on her shoulder, Skye's initial twinge of alarm grew stronger, and she dug her cell phone out of her tote bag, ready to call for help.

"Go out with me tonight. There's a new spot in Kankakee that's supposed to really rock," Chip wheedled.

"No." Yvonne glanced down at the wet spot where his fingers had rested and said, "If you're perspiring this much standing still, I'd hate to see you dancing."

"If you ain't sweating, you ain't doing it right," Chip boasted. He smoothed a hand over his shaved head. "If you don't want to go to a club, we could grab a pizza and go to my place."

"No." Yvonne reached around him and slid a hardback into place, straightening the spine before adding, "Thank you, but I have other plans."

"Babe, you don't know what you're missing." Chip flexed his right arm, making his biceps bulge. Although it was winter, he had on a short-sleeved black T-shirt, formfitting jeans, and leather trainer

"I know exactly what I'm missing," Yvonne assured him, narrowing her baby blue eyes. "Just because I don't want to date a Neanderthal like you doesn't mean I'm living a life of chastity."

As Yvonne reached around him again, Chip's hands spanned her tiny waist and pulled her against him. "Don't call me a Neanderthal."

"Would you prefer that I call you a caveman?" Yvonne stood perfectly still, seeming unwilling to give him the satisfaction of struggling. "Or perhaps *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*?"

As Chip's face turned the color of the Scumble River fire engine, Skye rose to her feet to intervene but before she could move toward the out-of-control jerk, Chip roared and leaped backward, clutching his groin. Skye's attention had been on the health club owner, but when she turned to look at Yvonne she saw the librarian tucking a pink palm-size stun gun into her blazer pocket.

Chip stared at Yvonne for a couple of seconds, then threatened in a shrill voice, "You'll be sorry for that, bitch. You may look like Jessica Rabbit, but just remember, she was easy to erase." He hobbled out of the library, muttering about women who didn't know their place.

Yvonne met Skye's concerned gaze and shrugged. "He's not the first man to confuse how I appear with who I am."

"I'm sure he isn't," Skye sympathized. She'd learned long ago that being a round woman in a world obsessed with sticklike supermodels wasn't easy either. "Are you afraid he might retaliate?"

"Not a chance. One thing my ex-husband and his business partner taught me was how to take care of myself." Yvonne patted her pocket. "And I have some little friends to help."

"Where did you get that Taser?" Skye asked. "I've never seen one so small."

"Online. Best ninety dollars I ever spent." Yvonne handed the gadget to Skye. "Since you're the psych consultant for the police department, you should convince the city to buy you one. I can give you the details."

"Thanks." Skye examined the tiny device, then returned it to its owner. "I doubt the mayor would approve the expense. He thinks my services are pretty useless."

"Even though he's your uncle?" Yvonne asked. Then, without waiting for Skye's answer, she added, half to herself, "Of course, he actually thinks the entire PD is pretty useless."

Skye opened her mouth to ask what Yvonne meant, but the librarian spoke again before Skye could form the question. "How about requesting the weapon from the school district? As the school psychologist, you probably deal with some fairly violent adolescents."

"True." Skye's eyebrows shot up. "But I'd never Taser one of them." She added under her breath, "Maybe one of their parents, but not the kids."

"Everyone needs to be prepared for the consequences of their actions." Yvonne crossed her arms. "Especially teenagers."

"Right." Skye decided it was time to end the conversation and pulled a book from the pile toward her. "I better get back to writing my vows or I'll be ad-libbing next Saturday."

"Yes, you'd better." Yvonne headed toward the small office wedged into a corner of the library, but said over her shoulder, "I hear your wedding is the social event of the season around here. You don't want to ruin it by being unprepared."

Skye shivered. It was probably just bridal jitters, but she had a bad feeling that something would mar her big day. She only hoped that all of her carefully laid plans didn't unravel like a poorly sewn bridal gown.

CHAPTER 2

A Book in the Hand

Skye stared at her to-do list. Why, oh, why had she thought it would be a good idea to get married the week after Christmas? Not only did she still have holiday gifts to buy and wrap—she also had a million and one last-minute details to attend to for the wedding.

Okay, she knew why she had agreed to the date. As a school employee, she had only two choices if she wanted any significant time off—winter break or summer vacation. Last spring, her mother had insisted summer was too soon to plan a large wedding, and her fiancé had said he wasn't waiting until the next June rolled around. So, December 30 had been a compromise. When she had made the decision, it had seemed the obvious solution. Now, faced with the reality, Skye realized she should have just said no.

At least Wally was handling the honeymoon arrangements, and his father, Carson, was taking care of the rehearsal dinner. Both men had wanted to surprise her, so she had no idea what was going on with either event. And she didn't care. She'd be happy as long as the honeymoon was somewhere warm and private, which Wally had assured her it was, and the dinner was nearby so that no one had to worry about getting home safely, which her future father-in-law had guaranteed.

Telling herself that she was lucky to have the week prior to the wedding off from work, Skye left the library and set out on her errands. Right now, the most urgent matter was buying the rest of her family's Christmas presents.

Since Scumble River was located seventy-five miles south of Chicago, shopping was limited unless you were willing to drive to either Joliet's or Kankakee's malls. Considering it was two days until Christmas, the last thing Skye wanted to do was try to negotiate the kind of madness those retail outlets were currently experiencing.

Which left the Gift Box in Clay Center. The sprawling shop sold everything from wine to jewelry to gourmet food and was the only place within a half hour where she could get the items she wanted.

Fifteen minutes later, Skye was wondering if she'd made the right decision in avoiding the malls. The Gift Box's parking lot was jammed and she'd already circled it twice without finding an empty spot. Finally, she saw brake lights a few cars down and eased into position. Turning on her signal, she gripped the steering wheel of her '57 Bel Air and prepared to do battle for the space. It was almost a letdown when no one else noticed the opening, and she pulled in without having to fight to the death for the slot.

As she expected from the crowded parking lot, the place was packed. Accepting that this would be neither quick nor easy, Skye examined her options. Most of the gifts she needed were little stocking

stuffers. She'd given in and ordered the big presents online. Despite her best efforts to remain a technophobe, she was becoming fairly adept at the computer. Now if she could just figure out all the options on her cell phone—or at least remember to keep it charged . . .

Squeezing through the congested aisles, she headed for the baby section first. Her brother, Vince, and his wife, Loretta, were expecting their first child on January 9, and Skye wanted to get something for the newest member of the family. Loretta and Vince had decided not to reveal the infant's sex before the birth, so the gift needed to be appropriate for either a boy or a girl.

This area was less crowded than the rest of the store, and Skye took her time studying the assorted items. Everything was darling and it was difficult to choose, but she finally selected a layette set packaged in a pale yellow box shaped like a house. A sign hanging on the window of the door with a satin bow read WELCOME HOME BABY! The mailbox said SPECIAL DELIVERY. And the roof lifted off to reveal a long-sleeve yellow nightgown, nightcap and pair of booties—all with white trim accented with tiny black polka dots.

Skye had picked up a shopping basket by the door, and she slipped the layette set into it before making her way to the shelves displaying gifts for men. Because her fiancé was the son of a Texas oil millionaire, or maybe billionaire, and could buy himself whatever he wanted, finding a present for him was difficult if not downright impossible.

She had ultimately decided on a subscription to the Beer of the Month Club. Unlike her male relatives who would drink whatever was on sale, Wally was picky about his beer, so she knew he'd enjoy the monthly assortment of lagers, ales, and ambers from different U.S. microbreweries. But she wanted to get him something more. Something that wouldn't be consumed and tossed out with the recyclables. Something permanent.

Almost immediately, she spotted a shelf of Ford Thunderbird collectibles. Wally's father had given him a sky blue T-bird for his fortieth birthday, and Wally was extremely fond of that car. An item with the Thunderbird emblem would be the perfect Christmas present.

Skye bit her lip as she scanned the possibilities, torn between a stainless-steel card case and a Ford Thunderbird fiftieth-anniversary watch. The case was more within her price range—about thirty bucks—but she liked the watch more. Shrugging—what was another hundred dollars on her credit card?—she tucked the watch into her basket and moved on to the jewelry counter.

She'd planned to buy a scarf slide for her mother. May had recently begun wearing scarves, but found it difficult to tie them correctly. When the silk rectangles and squares inevitably came undone, she grew frustrated, and if May was frustrated, she tended to share that experience with everyone around her.

The area in front of the glass cabinet was mobbed, but Skye scooted into a space vacated by a large man clutching a foil-wrapped box. She immediately spotted what she wanted and plucked a gold tube with an intricate knot design from the display. She checked the price—twenty-two dollars, well within her budget.

Before she could ease away from the case and allow someone else to take her spot, the person behind her said, "Skye, what are you doing here?"

Skye turned and recognized the speaker as Anthony Anserello, a nice-looking young man with sandy hair, sincere brown eyes, and a shy smile. He worked part-time for the PD and part-time for his father, who owned an appliance-repair business.

"Hi, Anthony." Skye made room for him beside her. "Probably the same thing you are."

"Last-minute Christmas presents?" he asked, edging into the space she'd created.

"Yep." Skye extended the package containing the scarf ring. "I'm getting this for Mom." Once he

admired the gift, she put it in her basket and asked, "Who are you shopping for?" When he didn't respond right away and his cheeks turned red, she teased gently, "Someone special? Or maybe more than one someone special?"

"Just one," he answered quickly. "Judy. She gets back tomorrow."

Judy Martin was the director of the Scumble River Library and had been away on sabbatical studying at the University of North Carolina for the past six months. In her midtwenties, Judy was young to be running a library on her own, but the salary was too low to attract a more seasoned librarian. The Scumble River school district had similar difficulties attracting experienced applicants.

"I bet you can't wait." Skye smiled at Anthony. "Are you meeting Judy at the airport?"

"Uh-huh," he mumbled, then added, "I'm not the only one who will be glad to see her."

"Oh?" Skye knew that the young librarian was popular among her patrons and staff, but was Anthony referring to something else?

When he didn't continue, Skye prodded, "Who else is anxious for Judy to come back to town?"

"Probably everyone who uses the library." Anthony frowned. "Ms. Osborn has been so mean about stuff. I've heard a lot of grumbling."

"Really?" Skye was puzzled. As far as she'd noticed, the library had been running smoothly. "Like what?" Heavens, what in the world was there to complain about? Well, now that she thought about it, probably the same things people complained about when they were unhappy with the schools: issues the employees had little control over and the administrators were never going to change.

"Judy looks the other way when the kids get a little rowdy," Anthony said, shoving his baseball cap to the back of his head. "And she lets the overdue fines slide if it's just a day or two."

"And Yvonne doesn't?"

"No." Anthony wrinkled his forehead. "She enforces every little rule."

"You can't blame her for that," Skye admonished. "It's hard filling in for someone who's as well liked and respected as Judy."

"Yeah. Judy's great." Anthony tapped his fingers on the glass countertop. "But did you see the rant about Ms. Osborn in the *Star*?"

"No." For the past several weeks, Skye had been too busy to read the local newspaper.

"It was in that column where people can call in anonymously, whine into an answering machine, and the editor decides which of their complaints to write up."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, someone said that Ms. Osborn better mind her own business or she'd regret it."

CHAPTER 3

Lost and Foundering

Sunday was a whirlwind of activity. Skye started her day with nine o'clock Mass, then hurried home to wrap her presents for the Leofanti party. Her mother's family celebrated on Christmas Eve with a huge potluck and gift exchange, while her father's side picked a Saturday in early December for their more sedate get-together.

Skye had decided to forgo sending cards and decorating the house this year, but she'd drawn the line at skipping the tree—which had turned out to be a smart decision. Whenever she took a moment to inhale the fresh pine scent and enjoy the twinkling lights, she regained a small piece of her sanity. And she needed every little bit she could recapture.

Although it was both the weekend and a holiday, Wally was on duty at the police station. Theoretically, as the chief he worked eight to four Monday through Friday, but with such a small force, he often ended up covering for an officer who was sick or had a family emergency. With only six full-timers, it took just one case of the flu or a vacation to create a staffing problem. The two part-timers were supposed to fill in the gaps, but they often weren't able to take the shift since they both had other jobs.

Skye had been counting on Wally's help with last-minute wedding tasks, and she was not happy about his absence. In her opinion, he should have ordered someone else to come in to the PD. She wasn't sure if he'd agreed to work because he was too nice a guy to force one of his officers to give up a holiday they were originally scheduled to have off, or if he just didn't want to be around during the eleventh-hour bridal madness. Probably a little bit of both.

Either way, she was once again coping with all the chores alone. So as soon as she finished wrapping the presents and had cleaned up the scraps of paper and bits of ribbon that littered the sunroom floor, she moved into the kitchen to begin her next project. Opening the Tiffany blue leather organizer, a gift from Wally's father, she flipped to the GUEST tab and started phoning people who hadn't yet responded to the wedding invitations. Of the nearly two hundred invitations that had been sent, thirty-seven recipients had disregarded the request to RSVP.

Skye would have been happy to assume they weren't attending, but the wedding planner at the Country Mansion restaurant where the reception was being held had insisted that Skye contact the slackers. Thirty-six calls and three hours later, she stared at the remaining name on her list. Should she or shouldn't she? In most cases, it was her policy to let sleeping Dooziers lie.

The Dooziers were hard to explain to anyone not from Scumble River. They had their own little kingdom on the water's edge, and as with so many imperial dynasties, the crowned heads did as they

darn well pleased. They felt that rules didn't apply to them, whoever wasn't a part of the royal clan deserved what they got, and they were entitled to whatever tribute they could grab. Their philosophy was render unto the Dooziers the things that were the Dooziers'. And in their mind, everything that wasn't nailed down belonged to the Dooziers.

Strangely enough, Earl, the monarch of Doozierland, had adopted Skye. She wasn't sure if it was because he saw her as the ambassador between his realm and the rest of the world—a role she had often had to assume within the school system—or because he'd saved her life on more than one occasion. Whatever his reason for taking a shine to her, she had felt obligated to invite him and his family to her wedding.

Doing so had infuriated Skye's mother. May had begged her not to include the Dooziers, claiming that they would ruin everything, but Skye had stood firm. They were her friends and they'd be hurt if they didn't receive an invitation. Besides, Skye figured the family would show up anyway, and forewarned was forearmed.

Of course, they hadn't sent back their RSVP and she had to decide whether it was worth the hassle to call them. Any conversation with Earl had more land mines than the perimeters of the DMZ in Korea. Did it really matter if she didn't know if one family was coming or not? Unfortunately, she was forced to conclude that it did, because the Doozier party could consist of anywhere between two—Earl and his wife—and the whole tribe.

Sighing, Skye dialed the last number she had for them, a disposable cell. Like so many others, the Dooziers didn't have a landline. However, unlike most people, their reason had more to do with keeping off the government grid and less to do with a fondness for modern technology.

Skye wasn't sure how the Dooziers obtained their electricity, but she would bet her engagement ring that it wasn't from Commonwealth Edison—at least not with the power company's knowledge. And she knew for a fact that they didn't use Waste Management to collect their garbage, because if they did, their trash wouldn't be decorating their front yards and backyards.

After a half dozen rings, Skye was ready to hang up when Earl's groggy voice buzzed in her ear. "Miz Skye, issen that you?"

"Yes, Earl, it's me all right," Skye assured him. "How are you doing?"

"Well, I was fine when I was a-sleepin'," Earl drawled, "but now that I'm awake, I'm not so good."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Earl." Skye glanced at the kitchen clock. It was a few minutes before three. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm okay, but that crazy biddy that rents the property next door woke us all up at five this mornin' complainin' about old Blue."

"Blue?" Skye asked, unsure whether Blue was one of Earl's animals or one of his kin.

"Youse know, my bluetick coonhound."

"Right." Skye vaguely remembered the animal. "What did he do?" Earl's house was on several acres and separated from his nearest neighbor by a section of trees, so she doubted the dog's offense was something as simple as barking.

"He musta got outa the pen, 'cause she claims he was over to her place humpin' her daughter's fancy pooch." Earl snickered. "Blue's like his daddy; he likes a good f—"

"I'm sure he does," Skye interrupted, not wanting to discuss the sex life of Earl's dog—or for that matter any other member of the Doozier family.

But before she could change the subject, Earl added, "She's got the fella on the other side of her land shittin' a brick, too. That female really needs to back off afore I—"

"I'm sure she does," Skye said, cutting Earl off again. "I'll let you get back to sleep. I just called t

see if you're coming to my wedding."

"Sure I is, Miz Skye," Earl answered. "~~Me and Glenda and the kids wouldn't miss it fer anything.~~"

"Great." Skye put a check after their name on her list. "How many of you are coming?"

"Let's see, now." Earl paused. "Me, Glenda, MeMa, Junior, Bambi, and Cletus, so that's six." He hesitated, then added, "I's sorry that Elvis and his wife and kid can't make it. They's got to go to her pa's barn raisin'. And now that Elvira's workin' in the city, she don't come home much anymore."

"Uh-huh." Skye made a note. "Six it is." Then, before Earl could continue the conversation, Skye said, "So, I'll see you next Saturday. Bye."

Hanging up the phone, Skye briefly felt sorry for Earl's neighbor, but she was soon distracted by her wedding to-do list. Next up was the caterer. The woman had told Skye that although she wouldn't be answering the phone on Sunday or Monday, Skye should leave a message with the final head count.

Once that call was made, Skye checked to see what else she needed to accomplish before going to her parents' house at five thirty. Due to the holiday, she couldn't contact any of the other vendors to confirm the details, so she decided to make the zuppa Inglese for the party.

It was a testament to May's frantic state of mind that she had assigned a crucial component of the meal to her daughter. The zuppa Inglese was the Leofanti family's traditional Christmas dessert—like a trifle, but richer and more calorie-laden. Skye had baked the pound cake the day before, so all she had to do was whip up the vanilla pudding, and while it chilled, blend the rum and apricot jam. After she'd layered the cake, pudding, and rum mixture into a pedestal bowl, she would whip the cream for the top.

By the time Skye was done, she had half an hour to change clothes and load the car. Wally was meeting her at her folks' since he had to work until six. Normally, he'd have been off at four, but the officer taking the afternoon shift had begged to come in a couple hours late because it was his daughter's birthday.

When Skye pulled into her parents' driveway, the outdoor display took her breath away. Despite the triple threat of the wedding, Loretta's pregnancy, and the holidays, May had still gone all out with decorations. Skye'd been avoiding her mother as much as possible—talking on the phone rather than visiting—so she hadn't been to the house since Thanksgiving. Now she stared in awe.

Her father had made a full-scale plywood sleigh and reindeers for the front lawn. In the driver's seat a life-size Santa held the reins. Mountains of brightly wrapped boxes filled the rear of the sled, and elves clambered over the piles. Wreaths and candles lit all the windows, and the garage doors were covered in green and red to look like giant packages.

Of course, May's concrete goose had gotten a new outfit. It wore a red dress, white apron, and fur cape with a red-and-white bonnet. Skye patted the bird's head as she walked past. One good thing about the holidays was that her mother's fowl wasn't wearing clothes that were a thinly veiled message to Skye.

The inside of the house was as festooned as the outside, with a tree in every room—sometimes more than one. As Skye entered the utility room, she saw that the washer and dryer tops were filled with coats and purses, and footwear littered the floor. With cream-color carpeting in the rest of the house, May didn't allow anyone past the dinette with his or her shoes on.

After slipping off her own ankle-high boots, Skye padded into the kitchen. Several of Skye's aunts and female cousins were busy preparing the meal, and she called quick greetings as she eased through the congestion to put her gifts under the huge fresh pine in the living room.

The men were gathered around the television watching *Lethal Weapon* or *Die Hard* or *Batman Returns*. Skye wasn't sure which, but it was one of those movies set during Christmastime where

things were blown up and people were shot. Her uncle Dante, the town's mayor, was screaming at the hero, "Kill 'em all!" and Skye tapped him on the shoulder.

When Dante grunted his acknowledgment of her presence, Skye said, "If I were you, I wouldn't talk to the characters on the screen." She winked at him. "Tests have proven they can't hear you."

He rolled his eyes, snorted, and turned his attention back to the show. Skye sighed and returned to the kitchen to help with the food. She'd given up on ever achieving equality of the sexes at these gatherings. There was no use mentioning that the women were doing all the work while the men sat around and drank beer. As her dad would say, it was what it was.

More and more of the family arrived, and Skye began to watch the clock. Why wasn't Wally here? Had something happened to him? She chewed her lip. Should she call him? Resolving to give him a few more minutes, she went back to her assigned task—putting ice cubes in the plastic glasses next to the cans of soda lined up on the counter.

Finally, at six thirty, May pulled Skye partway down the hallway and whispered, "Where's Wally?" Skye mentally squirmed under her mother's stare, but answered in a nonchalant voice, "Don't get your tinsel in a tangle, Mom. He probably went home to change clothes. He'll be here any minute."

"People are getting hungry." May gestured toward the living room.

"Go ahead and let them start eating. Wally won't mind."

"Well . . ." May trailed off as the phone rang. She took a step back toward the kitchen and snatched the receiver from the base. After she exchanged pleasantries, she listened for a few minutes, then hung up and said to Skye, "That was Sylvia at the PD." May worked as a dispatcher at the Scumble River Police Department, so she knew all the other women who manned the police, fire, and emergency desk. "There's been a fatal accident and Wally was called to the scene."

"Did she say who was killed?"

"No. They don't have an ID." May shook her head.

"How awful."

"Yes." May frowned. "I just hope it's not someone we know." She shrugged, then added, "Wally told Sylvia to tell you he'll call when he has a chance. I guess that means he won't make it to the party. His first Christmas Eve with the family. I'm sorry, honey."

Skye nodded, then pasted a smile on her face. "That's okay. It's not his fault."

May put her arm around her daughter and they walked back to tell the others the news. Everyone was sympathetic, and Skye knew that Wally would be there if he were able, but she couldn't help wondering if this was what it would be like being the wife of a police officer. More to the point, was she prepared for all the missed holidays and lonely nights?

CHAPTER 4

Read Something into It

Because many of Skye's relatives wanted to go to Midnight Mass—which was strangely scheduled at eleven o'clock—the Christmas Eve party wound down early. After everyone left, May refused Skye's offer to help clean up and sent her away with a plate of food for Wally.

Fog started to roll in during Skye's short drive home, and she was relieved to pull into her garage. Juggling a box of gifts, the covered dish of leftovers, and her purse, she made her way carefully into the dark house.

It was almost as cold inside as outside. Her thermostat was programmed to set the furnace to sixty-five degrees at ten p.m.—her usual bedtime—and as soon as she deposited her load on the hall bench she hurried to turn up the heat. While she poked the little button repeatedly, Bingo wound his way around her ankles, purring loudly.

Once the temperature was set to a toasty seventy and the leftovers were in the refrigerator, Skye grabbed the phone and called Wally's cell. When it went straight to voice mail, she left a message that she was home and for him to come over no matter the time. She wanted to spend a part of Christmas Eve with him, even if it meant a very late night.

Determined to stay up until Wally arrived, Skye changed into her flannel pajamas and settled on the white wicker love seat in the sunroom. Bingo was in his usual position on the matching chair's floral cushion. She shook her head at the black cat. He was an expert at the law of energy conservation. Apparently his knowledge of the first law of thermodynamics—energy can't be created or destroyed—led him to the conclusion that he should use as little of it as possible.

Skye patted Bingo's rump, then leaned back to watch *It's a Wonderful Life* for the eight hundredth time. Just as Clarence earned his wings, she heard the front door open. Clicking off the TV, Skye sprang to her feet and ran to greet Wally. He was shrugging off his duty jacket as she skidded into the foyer, and when he saw her, he tossed the coat on the bench and opened his arms.

Skye flew into his embrace and snuggled against his muscular chest. He smelled of hard work and Stetson aftershave. That, and the chiseled planes of his handsome face, indicating that he was a little on edge, made him even sexier than usual.

For a long minute, Wally held her close without speaking; then he turned up her chin and said, "I'm really sorry I missed your family's Christmas Eve party. Was your mom mad? Did she give you a hard time?"

His warm brown eyes held a look of concern. May had not been in favor of Skye marrying Wally. She had disapproved of his age, his religion, and his divorced status. Only after he had obtained an

annulment and promised to consider converting to Catholicism had May relented and given them her blessing. As to her final objection, the age issue, she had finally admitted that a lot of men older than Wally fathered children.

“No, Mom was fine,” Skye assured him. “In fact, she sent you supper if you’re hungry.”

“I’m starved.” He released Skye. “I haven’t had anything to eat since noon.” He loosened his tie. “Not only did it take the tow truck operator forever to drag the car out of the river, but we had to wait for the coroner, too. Reid was in the city, and with traffic it took him a good ninety minutes to get back.”

“I can imagine.” Skye’s ex-boyfriend Simon Reid was both the coroner and the owner of the local funeral home. He and Wally had settled into a polite professional relationship, but neither exactly liked the other.

“And after all that, we had trouble locating the next of kin. We finally called the number on a business card we found in the accident victim’s wallet. And—”

“If the car was in the water,” Skye interrupted him, “I’m surprised it was dry enough to read.”

“It was one of those laminated ones with a magnetic backing.”

“Ah.” Skye nodded. “How did you decide that card had a personal connection to the woman?”

“The company it was advertising had the same last name as the victim,” Wally explained, then continued his original thought. “The number on the card was answered by the victim’s ex-husband’s partner, and he gave us the ex’s home phone number. The holidays complicate everything.”

“Tell me about it.” Skye’s voice was tinged with sarcasm. “Remember? I’m the one trying to deal with our wedding details while everyone else only wants to think about Christmas.” She nudged Wally toward the stairs. “Why don’t you go take a hot shower and change into your sweats while I heat up dinner for you?”

“That would be great.” Wally ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. “This was not how I planned to spend the evening, and I’m just plain tuckered out.” He wrinkled his forehead. “Maybe I’m getting too old for police work.”

“Hardly.” Skye shook her head. Wally would be forty-four in February, and the slight gray at his temples only made him more attractive. “Anyone would be tired if they pulled a double shift and spent the last six or so hours out in the cold and wind on an empty stomach.”

He shrugged, then trudged up the steps. Fifteen minutes later, they were seated at the kitchen table and Skye watched him inhale his dinner.

When Wally paused to take a swig of Sam Adams, she said, “Was the accident victim someone local?”

“Yes and no.” Wally buttered one of the Parker House rolls that Skye had snagged and hidden away for him. May had used her mother-in-law’s famous recipe, and the crusty brown buns had disappeared faster than a magician could palm a quarter.

“Which is it?” Skye frowned. “Yes or no?”

“Well, she’s been living in Scumble River for the past six months, but she wasn’t from here and she was moving away in a couple of weeks.”

“Oh.” Skye racked her brain for anyone she knew who fit that criteria, but when she came up empty, she asked, “So who was it?”

“Yvonne Osborn.” Wally pushed back his empty plate and drained the last of his beer.

“Oh, my gosh!” Skye felt her chest tighten. “I was just talking to her yesterday.”

“At the library?”

“Uh-huh. I was there working on my vows when that jerk who owns the new health club asked her

out. And when Yvonne said no, he got really mad and grabbed her. I thought for a minute I'd have to run down to the PD and get one of your officers." Skye wrinkled her forehead. "If she hadn't Tasered him, I don't know what would have happened."

"Yvonne used a stun gun on someone Saturday morning?" Wally's expression was thoughtful.

"Uh-huh."

"Did the guy leave after that?"

"Grudgingly. He said something like 'You'll be sorry' and called her a bad name." Skye bit her lip.

"He's a big guy, so it was sort of scary."

"Interesting." Wally narrowed his eyes.

"Why?"

"Well . . ." Wally shook his head. "I better not speculate."

"Come on." Skye punched him lightly on the arm. "It's not like I'm going to quote you to a reporter or take an ad out in the *Star*."

"Okay, but don't mention anything to Trixie," Wally cautioned.

"I promise." Skye's best friend and her matron of honor, Trixie Frayne, was writing a mystery, which meant that she considered any crime that took place in Scumble River fodder for her plot.

"The thing is that something about the accident scene seemed hinky to me."

"How so?"

"That's the problem." Wally got up and put his plate in the sink. "I can't put my finger on it, but something just doesn't seem right."

"Hmm." Skye could sympathize. As a school psych, there were times when her gut told her there was a problem that her psychological tests were not detecting. Unfortunately, like Wally, she needed proof in order to do anything about it.

Wally opened the refrigerator and peered inside.

"Are you still hungry?" Skye asked as he stared at the contents.

"Sort of." Wally snagged the Tupperware container that held the remaining zuppa Inglese and pried off the cover. "What's this?"

"It's a dessert." Skye joined him. "The Italian version of a trifle, only more fattening. Want to try it?"

"Sure." Wally got a spoon from the drawer and sat back down.

"I'm going to make some hot chocolate." Skye grabbed the milk carton from the fridge and turned the flame on under the teakettle. "Would you like some?"

"No, thanks."

While Skye measured unsweetened cocoa powder, sugar, and a pinch of salt into a saucepan, she considered what Wally had told her about the accident, then asked, "Where did the car go off the road?"

"That one-lane bridge, where Kinsman crosses over the river."

"The same spot I went off when that lunatic was trying to kill me?" Skye felt her stomach clench at the memory of the day she'd been forced to drive her car over the side of the bridge in order to save herself from a murderer.

"Almost exactly." Wally ate a spoonful of dessert. "I keep telling the mayor the city needs to widen that bridge or at least pave it."

The surface of the bridge consisted of narrow planks of wood that vehicles were supposed to position their tires on in order to cross safely.

"I agree, but Uncle Dante will never spend the money on it." Skye paused, recalling something that

the librarian had mentioned in passing. “In fact, Yvonne said that Dante is going around saying the police department is useless.”

“That’s nothing new.” Wally scooped the last crumbs of the zuppa Inglese onto his spoon. “He’s been complaining about the police department budget breaking the city bank for as long as he’s been mayor.”

“So you don’t think he’s up to something?” Skye poured boiling water over the dry mixture and stirred.

“Who knows with Dante?” Wally got up and put the empty bowl next to the plate in the sink. “It sounds as if you and Yvonne had quite a conversation.”

“We did.” Skye added milk to the pan. “You sure you don’t want a cup?”

“Nah. I’d rather have this.” Wally opened the fridge, grabbed another bottle of Sam Adams, and opened it. “What else did you and Yvonne talk about?”

“That men judge women by how they look and teenagers need consequences.” Skye poured the hot chocolate into a mug, then drizzled vanilla extract over the surface. “Oh, and that her ex-husband taught her how to take care of herself.”

“I wonder why he felt the need to do that.” Wally swigged his beer.

“I’m not sure.” Skye sipped her cocoa. “At the time, I wondered whether he was the person who had instructed her on self-defense techniques, or the reason she needed to learn them.”

• • •

Skye woke to rain pelting her bedroom windows. Wally slept peacefully beside her, and she debated whether to wake him up to give him an early-morning Christmas present. He’d been too exhausted last night to do more than snuggle for a few seconds before he fell asleep—which, considering her ghost problem, was probably for the best.

When Skye had inherited the house from Alma Griggs, she’d been both thrilled and dismayed. Thrilled that the elderly lady had thought so highly of her that she had entrusted Skye with her beloved home, but dismayed at the building’s state of disrepair and the cost of renovating it.

Soon afterward, it became apparent that there was more wrong with the house than just a leaky roof and rusty pipes. The real drawback of the place was that the previous owner had never really left. And Mrs. Griggs’s spirit clearly didn’t like it when Skye entertained men in her home. Either that or she disliked Wally. Skye wasn’t sure which, since he was the only guy she’d dated since moving into the haunted house.

As long as she and Wally only kissed and cuddled, everything was fine. But the minute they went any further, something in the place inevitably blew up, ignited, or malfunctioned. Having spent a small fortune on remodeling, and with the home-improvement loan to show for it, Skye was determined to live there once they were married. She had even tried to purge the house of the ghost.

Skye and Trixie had performed a ritual that Skye had found on the Internet, which involved salt and burning sage branches. However, instead of leaving, Mrs. Griggs had pushed the television off its stand, smashing it to smithereens. After that, Skye had been afraid to try another cleansing.

Since Father Burns had been skeptical and refused to do an exorcism, and Trixie had suggested that maybe Mrs. Griggs just didn’t approve of premarital sex, Skye had been avoiding the situation. It was tricky, but somehow she had maneuvered things so that she and Wally made love only when they stayed overnight at his cottage. This had cut down considerably on her need to go to confession, but it hadn’t been pleasant for either of their libidos.

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