

REAL MURDER (A Lovers in Crime Mystery)

By Lauren Carr

Chapter One

Eighteen Years Later—Tomlinson Run Park, New Manchester, WV

“Would you like another breast, Tad?”

Dr. Tad MacMillan studied the last two bites of white meat on the chicken breast in the middle of his paper plate before answering the robust woman standing over him with a foil pan in one hand and a pair of tongs clutching a fried chicken piece in the other. He was already on his third piece.

“Come on, Tad.” His wife, Jan, urged him from across the picnic table. Her attention was divided between her husband, their three-month-old son fussing in the baby carrier on top of the table, and her long blonde hair that had abruptly become too hot on her neck. “You know you want it. That’s what church picnics are for. Eating until you bust.” She clenched a hair clip in her teeth and gathered her hair together with both hands.

Entertained by the funny looking object sticking out of his mother’s mouth, Tad Jr. giggled.

Tired of waiting for his response, the woman plopped the plump breast onto his plate and moved on to the next table to foist the remaining chicken on other picnickers.

“I’m trying to save room for Cameron’s hot fudge lava cake,” Tad said while searching the parking lot for his cousin and his wife, “if she ever comes.”

After taking the clip out of her mouth, Jan continued to make funny faces at the baby, who giggled harder. “Not to mention the ice cream that Josh is supposed to bring.”

“Where are they anyway?”

“Cameron got a lead on a murder case she was working and took off this morning.” After securing her hair up on top of her hair, Jan picked Tad Junior up out of the carrier. “Josh decided to work on an opening argument that he’s giving tomorrow. He didn’t want to come without her.”

“Just like newlyweds.” Tad dove into the next piece of chicken. “I remember when you refused to go anywhere without me at your side.

“Now I don’t even notice when you aren’t there,” she confessed. “I never thought we would get this old and settled.”

“Can you really picture me being settled?” Tad let out a laugh before peeling the crispy skin off the chicken piece on his plate.

“I just hope TJ takes after me instead of you in that regard,” Jan said.

“You’re not the only one.”

While hugging their son, Jan looked across the picnic table at her husband, Dr. Tad MacMillan, the town doctor and Hancock County’s medical examiner. His salt and pepper hair brought out his blue eyes heavily framed with laugh lines. They may have been old and settled, but his laid back style and charismatic ways still caught her off guard sometimes.

Taking in the their friends and family that littered the park for the church picnic, Jan found it hard to believe that less than a decade earlier she had resigned herself to the fact that she would never marry, let alone have a journalism career, and a fussy baby, who just threw up down the back of her shirt.

While the older members of the church congregation were helping themselves to seconds and thirds of the picnic fare, the younger and more athletic picnickers were racing paddleboats across the park’s lake. Joshua Thornton’s sixteen-year old-son Donny, the only remaining child at home, was included in that group. The boys were racing the girls.

“Faster! Pedal faster!” Donny yelled at his friend Woody.

“I’m going as fast as I can!” The chubby teenager who rarely exercised anything except his fingers while playing computer games was put out with being coerced into this activity in the first place. At least since he was partnered with Donny, a linebacker on Oak Glen High School’s football team, he stood a chance of winning the race.

“Beat you!” the girls squealed from the shore where they turned their craft around.

With a curse, Donny kicked at the pedals and sat back to let the sun shine on his face.

The paddleboat rocked when Woody leaned over the side to peer into the water. “Hey, what’s that?”

“What?” Donny replied without opening his eyes.

“Down there.”

“Down where?”

Woody nudged him in the arm. “In the water. It looks like a car.”

Opening his eyes, Donny sat up. “So someone tossed their old car into the lake. Happens all the time.”

“Do the police dump their old cruisers in the lake, too?”

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Joshua Thornton pulled his SUV into the Medical Center parking lot in Beaver, Pennsylvania, and rolled into the space next to the state police cruiser, which he recognized as belonging to the district chief.

Good. Someone who’ll be able to tell me what’s going on.

Thinking about the most likely possibilities of why he had received a call from the state police barracks that Cameron was in the emergency room, his heartbeat quickened along with his pace through the hospital entrance.

She'd been shot. Can't be too bad though. If that were the case, they'd have sent a police officer to come get me. They wouldn't have made a vague phone call.

Joshua didn't see anyone he knew in the emergency room reception area, He was like everyone else who walked in. It was a big difference from the East Liverpool City Hospital in Ohio, which was on his side of the state line, or rather closer to his area of West Virginia. There, someone would have been waiting at the door to fill in Hancock County's prosecuting attorney.

But at the Medical Center in Beaver, Pennsylvania, Joshua Thornton was simply another nervous family member of someone who had been brought in by ambulance.

"Excuse me." He rapped on the glass window to the reception desk. "I'm looking for a patient. Detective Cameron Gates with the Pennsylvania State Police?"

"Are you family?"

"I'm her husband."

Saying those words still sounded strange to him. It had been less than ninety days since Cameron had accepted his marriage proposal. He had concealed the diamond ring in the bottom of a hot fudge sundae. After licking off the fudge, she slipped it onto her finger and hadn't taken it off since, except to put on her wedding band.

"She's in emergency room three. Through those doors and to the right." The receptionist hit a button to release the security lock on the door and let Joshua into the ward.

He spotted Lieutenant Miles Dugan in the hallway on the other side of the door.

"Joshua..." The lieutenant rushed forward to clasp his hand. "She's going to be fine. They're giving her an MRI right now, but she's been conscious and talking. The doctor says it's a concussion."

Joshua tried to concentrate on his words, which were being drowned out by the moaning and calls of pain in the next room, where a man was handcuffed to the gurney. Nearby, a uniformed police officer was watching an attractive nurse set the man's broken leg.

“Crazy bitch! Police brutality. I’m suing! I get a call to a lawyer, don’t I? That crazy bitch almost killed me!”

“What happened?” Joshua tore his eyes from the cursing man to the police lieutenant, who was guiding him into the next examination room. The empty gurney showed signs of having been occupied.

“I’m sure Cameron told you about a case she’d been working on—the rapist who killed a woman in front of her four-year-old daughter?”

Joshua nodded his head. “One of those cases that’s been keeping Cam up at night. Those are the ones that get to you.”

“They should be bringing Cameron back soon.” Lieutenant Dugan gestured for him to take the chair in the corner next to the gurney.

Joshua recognized the brown spring jacket folded up in the chair. When he picked it up to move, the bright light overhead caught on the shiny gold of his new wedding band.

“This morning,” Dugan was saying, “Cameron got a lead on where her prime suspect was.” Aware of the suspect in the next room, the lieutenant lowered his voice. “She was after a jilted boyfriend who had disappeared off the grid right after the murder. One of his old pals, looking for the reward for information about his whereabouts, called to say that the suspect was staying with his new girlfriend at an apartment complex up on the North Side. Cameron went to check it out. She knocked on the girlfriend’s door and as soon as she flashed her badge, the perp bailed out the bedroom window and went down the fire escape. The girlfriend tried to hold her back. By the time Cameron reached the window, he was on the ground and running across the parking lot.” A smile broke across the police lieutenant’s face.

“What happened?” Joshua asked. “What did she do?”

Lieutenant Dugan laughed.

Fingering the gold band on his left ring finger, Joshua imagined what Homicide Detective Cameron Gates would do if she were on the second floor watching her perp getting away. "Are you telling me that she jumped off the second-floor fire escape to bring him down?"

"Witnesses say she landed right on top of him. They both hit the pavement like a ton of bricks and were unconscious when the uniforms got there." Dugan gestured at the examination room next door. "As you can see, he broke her fall."

Not believing Dugan, but knowing his new wife, Joshua realized it was entirely possible and shook his head. "She's crazy." He was torn between being as amused as her boss and being scared for his wife's safety when she behaved so recklessly.

"That's what makes her so good," the police lieutenant said.

"Well, it's about time my silver fox got here!" Cameron sang out when the nurse brought her into the room in a wheelchair.

Trying to appear serious, Joshua fought the grin that came to his face when he saw her dressed in her brown slacks with a teal polo shirt. She had a scrape across the width of her forehead and a gash on her right cheekbone.

"This is my handsome groom that I was telling you about," Cameron told the nurse who insisted on helping her out of the chair and into the bed.

"Congratulations," the nurse said to Joshua. "When did you get married?"

"Forty-five days ago." Recalling how beautiful Cameron looked while standing at the pulpit in his church, and seeing how beautiful she was grinning at him from where she was sitting on the edge of the gurney, Joshua smiled.

After assuring them it would take about an hour for the results of the MRI, the nurse left. At the same time, the lieutenant moved on to the next room. "I'm going to see about getting our murder suspect released and down to the station for processing."

Once they were alone, Cameron turned to Joshua. Her auburn hair curled and waved in every direction to where it fell at the bottom of her neck. The green specks in her hazel eyes seemed to flash at him. "Go ahead." She flashed him a wink. "Let me have it."

Sighing, Joshua stood up. Imprisoning her between his arms, he towered over her in the bed. She gazed up at him while he leaned over to kiss her tenderly on the lips. "I'm glad you're all right."

"So am I." She ran her fingers through his silver hair that fell in a wave down to the top of his shirt collar. His face was so close to hers that his breath feathered across her cheek. It tingled the open wound.

"I'd order you to be more careful if I thought it would do any good," he said.

"I'm as careful as I can be," she said.

"What if you had missed when you jumped off that fire escape?"

"I didn't."

"What if you did?"

"But I didn't."

He sighed again. "Cam, I buried one wife. I don't think I could go through burying another."

"Same here," she replied. "Losing my first husband almost killed me—and I'm not only talking about emotionally. I'm not going to let you go through that, and I don't intend to go through it again myself."

He kissed her aching forehead. The touch of his lips on her wound both excited and hurt her. "I guess this means we'll have to make a pact to go together."

"Works for me." She pulled him down to kiss him fully on the lips. With her arms wrapped around him, she felt the vibration of his phone, which was clipped to his belt. "Let it go to voicemail," she whispered when he pulled away to answer it.

“It might be Donny,” he said. “I was in such a hurry to get here that I didn’t bother calling him at the picnic.” He read the caller ID. “It’s Tad.” He pressed the phone to his ear. “Hey, Tad, what’s up?”

“Are you home?” Tad asked him.

“I’m with Cameron,” Joshua said.

“Are you coming to the picnic?”

Joshua checked the clock on the wall overhead. It was midafternoon. By the time they got to the picnic, people would be leaving. “I doubt it. Why? Is there chicken left over? You can send it home with Donny.” He flashed a grin at Cameron who fell back onto the gurney with her fingers laced behind her head. “Cameron and I will eat it.”

“I think you better get over here to the park.”

The serious tone in Tad’s voice jolted Joshua. “Why?”

“The kids found a car at the bottom of the lake,” Tad said, “and there’s a body in it. Josh, it’s a police cruiser—the police have already determined that the license plate matches with the cruiser Mike Gardner was driving when he’d disappeared.”

Joshua felt as if he’d been kicked in the gut.

Seeing the expression on his face, Cameron rose up onto her elbows when he promised Tad that he would be right there before hanging up. “Josh, what’s wrong? Is Donny hurt?”

“Donny’s fine,” was all Joshua got out before Lieutenant Dugan and the doctor stepped into the doorway.

Lieutenant Miles Dugan introduced the doctor to Joshua and Cameron before turning over the reporting to him. “Detective Gates, we did a thorough MRI of your head and couldn’t find anything.”

Joshua choked back a laugh.

Cameron jerked her aching head toward him. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

The doctor continued, "We found no intracranial bleeding. That doesn't mean that you have none. You could have some slight bleeding that didn't show up. You were unconscious and you did have memory loss. You do have a concussion, and we recommend that you take it easy for a few days, maybe up to two weeks."

The doctor directed his attention to Joshua, "You'll need to watch her. She'll want to sleep while her brain heals. Keep checking on her, and if you see any trouble waking up or memory loss get her to the ER."

"That's easier said than done," Joshua replied.

The lieutenant added, "The doctor has recommended that with this type of injury you take two weeks sick leave."

"Weeks?" Cameron squawked.

The police lieutenant was firm. "You have the time. We can't have you out there in the field if you've got a potential brain injury." He gestured at Joshua. "You only took a couple of days off when you got married. Go home. Take a honeymoon. Enjoy being a newlywed."

"And don't go jumping off any tall buildings," the doctor added.

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Cameron waited until they were in Joshua's SUV before asking the question that had been on her mind ever since he had taken the phone call in the examination room. "What's going on? Why do you have to go running over to the park? Is someone in trouble?"

"Something like that," Joshua answered while staring at the SUV's dashboard without seeing it. "A guy I grew up with...we were friends. Mike had a son the same age as Tracy." His face contorted as he recalled it. "She went to senior prom with him. Hunter." He turned to her. "His dad was a deputy. Hancock County."

She reached out to grasp his hand resting in his lap. "What happened?"

“He disappeared eighteen years ago,” Joshua said. “We were shipping out to Naples and had come home to see Grandmomma. The day before we left, I ran into Mike. He said he was investigating the murder of a hooker and asked me to go with him to meet a CI. I blew him off. When I saw him driving off, I got such a bad feeling about it—but it was too late. He was gone...” He looked up to gaze out the window. “No one ever saw him again. I didn’t even know he had gone missing until nine months later when Tad mentioned it in a letter. When I found out that the last time he’d been seen was that day, I contacted the county sheriff—from Naples. I called all the way from overseas to ask about the disappearance and they had no idea what dead hooker I was talking about. According to the sheriff, there had never been any prostitutes in Hancock County, dead or otherwise.”

“Did they find his body? Is that why Tad called? They found his body in the park?”

Staring straight ahead, Joshua nodded his head without saying a word.

She reached up to cup her hand under his chin and forced him to look at her. “You do know your friend’s murder is not your fault, don’t you?”

“I blew him off, Cam.”

“You were moving overseas,” she said. “You were preoccupied. You had kids and a wife and a lot of responsibility.”

“Not so much that it gets me off the hook from being a friend,” Joshua said. “Mike asked me to go with him. He must have sensed he was in over his head and was asking for my help.”

“If he was in over his head, he should have backed off.” Cameron sighed. “That’s in the past. There’s nothing you can do to change what happened. The question is what you’re going to do now.”

She stared at him until she drew his eyes to her. When he turned to peer into her brownish-green eyes, his expression softened. She leaned across the seat to him. “I’m off for the next two weeks,” she said. “You know what happens when I get bored.”

He answered with a soft kiss on her lips that grew in intensity until they were startled by a sharp knock on the windshield.

“Hey, Thornton, can’t you at least wait until you get her home?” Lieutenant Dugan ordered with a laugh.