

THE ROOT  
OF  
MURDER

A LOVERS IN CRIME MYSTERY

BY  
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EXCERPT



It was cold, dark, and drizzly. The thought of a murder victim laying alone in a muddy field in such weather struck a morbid cord as Cameron pulled her white SUV up to the edge of the crime scene tape.

To say that Cameron Gates investigated homicides in Pennsylvania while making her home a state away in West Virginia was not as strange as it may seem. Tucked in the tip of West Virginia's northern panhandle, Chester was only a couple of miles from both the Ohio and Pennsylvania state lines. More often than not, Cameron found herself pursuing leads and suspects in the neighboring states.

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An exceedingly slender man with a shiny new gold detective's shield clipped to his coat's lapel gingerly made his way along the muddy road to meet her when she threw open the driver's side door. He stuck out his hand. "Lieutenant Gates, I'm Detective Tony Seavers. Just assigned to homicide. Captain Doyle told me that we were going to be working together."

Clasping his hand, Cameron took her time to look him up and down. The "working together" phrase was telling. The state police officer had gained a reputation of not playing well with his immediate supervisors. She had been given a heads up via the grapevine that Detective Seavers had filed a grievance against his previous boss after being reprimanded for using his cruiser to conduct personal business.

"Lieutenant Gates." She paused to remind herself of her promotion, which was still fresh. It had been due only to Joshua's prodding that she finally took the lieutenant's exam. "And yes, the captain did ask me to show you how things are done in homicide." She didn't miss the frown that crossed his face at the reminder that she was aware of her position over him. She leaned into the SUV to extract a pair of evidence gloves from her case. "Any ID on the vic?"

"Nothing in his pockets," Detective Seavers told her while leading her down the road to where the crime scene investigators had erected a tent over the body to preserve as much evidence as possible from washing away in the rain. "He seemed to be wearing dress shoes and slacks. Not a homeless guy."

Cameron stopped and looked at the field and woods surrounding the scene. The field was surrounded by thick woods and far from any main roads. "Did you find a car?" She shivered when a drop of icy water rolled down the back of her neck and between her shoulder blades.

"Still looking but can't find any so far."

She picked up the pace to the tent offering shelter. “How did he end up here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Someone dumped him.” The detective followed her.

“Which means the primary crime scene is someplace else.” She took a couple of steps before stopping. Tony slipped in the mud while trying not to collide with her.

“We’ve got tire tracks,” Cameron followed the path of the tire tracks in the mud. “It looks like whoever dumped him turned onto the dirt road leading back to this farm and then turned off onto the access road and followed it back here.” She squinted through the darkness into the thick woods. “That’s a round-about way. Why not just pull over off the road and dump him in the ditch? If they were lucky, he’d decompose, and his body would be eaten by scavengers?”

“If they didn’t want him found, they wouldn’t have dumped him in a hayfield next to a farmhouse and set him on fire,” he said.

“Exactly. The killer wanted him found.” In the tent, Cameron knelt next to the medical examiner, a middle-aged woman, and tried to look over her shoulder at what appeared to be a charred mummy. The body had been wrapped in something before being set ablaze. “What have we got, Vivian?”

“A body wrapped in a comforter, which was soaked in gasoline and then lit.” The medical examiner peeled back what was left of the blanket to reveal a charred body. She pointed to his arms, which were clutched close to his chest, with his fists under his chin. “We might be able to pull fingerprints. At the very least, we can get dental x-rays.”

“Based on what I can see of what’s left of his clothes, he’s well dressed.” Cameron tugged at the thick material under his arm that went up to his armpit. “My guess is that he has a family, or at least someone who will notice that he’s missing. Tony, check with missing persons.”

“Sure.” He took out his computer tablet to make a note.

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“Any idea of COD?” Cameron asked the medical examiner.

“Do you see the smoke coming off his charred corpse?” Vivian said with a smirk.

“Can you tell if he was dead before or after he was set on fire?” Cameron asked.

With a sigh, Vivian said, “I’ve got to get him back to the lab and—”

“—and open him up. I know. I know.” Cameron patted her on the shoulder before standing up.

“Have the invitations gone out for the wedding yet?” Vivian asked.

“The wedding isn’t for another two months,” Cameron said.

“But I am on the list, right?”

“You’re on the list.” Cameron prepared to step from under the tent’s shelter. “Tony, come with me to interview the witnesses who found the body.”

Together, they trudged across the field toward the farmhouse.

“Are you getting married?” Tony asked her along the way.

Cameron laughed. “No, my stepson J.J. is getting married the last weekend of March. He owns Russell Ridge Farm and Orchards.”

“Wow.”

“He and his sister Tracy have decided to become partners. They’re renovating the old Russell mansion to open a restaurant. He owns the mansion, and the dairy farm and orchards will provide most of the food that will go straight from the farm to the table. Tracy’s a gourmet chef and caterer, so she’ll provide the menu. They’re planning the grand opening to be with J.J. and Poppy’s outdoor wedding and reception.”

“Fancy.”

“It will be a reception to die for,” she said. “My step-daughter is the best cook in the tri-state area. *That’s* why everyone is fighting for invitations to this wedding.”

Vera was waiting for them at the back door of the farm house. Surprise crossed her face upon seeing the slender woman in shaggy brown hair wiping her shoes on the worn doormat. “You’re a homicide detective?”

“That’s why they gave me this shiny gold badge.” Cameron took her detective’s shield from her jacket pocket and showed it to her. “Lieutenant Cameron Gates and Detective Tony Seavers with the state police. May we come in?”

The older woman opened the door and invited them inside. “I know. I know. Women are doing everything nowadays. It’s just you’re so pretty and it’s so dangerous being a police officer.” She backed up upon seeing the weapon Cameron wore on her hip. She turned to Tony. “And you’re so young. How does your mother feel about you doing this?”

“She’s not thrilled,” Tony said. “She wanted me to be a lawyer.”

She went on to introduce herself as Vera Newhart and her husband Cliff before rushing to the kitchen to make tea to warm them up.

The interior of the quaint farmhouse was decorated with knick knacks collected throughout many generations that had lived on the Newhart farm. Family pictures occupied the fireplace mantle, end tables, and shelves throughout the house. Many of the more current pictures were of a pretty blond-hair girl from childhood to adult. She was dressed in a variety of flowing, shimmery outfits. In most of the pictures, she held huge trophies.

“Do you know who he is?” Cliff asked.

“We came in to ask you that,” Tony said. “It seemed like the killer went to a lot of trouble to dump him here.”

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Cameron paused in studying one of the pictures on the mantle to shoot a warning glance in Tony's direction. He was giving the witnesses more information than necessary.

"That's our granddaughter, Madison," Vera told Cameron in reference to one of the portraits upon returning to the living room with two mugs of tea. "She's a wonderful dancer."

"The best," Cliff said with a smile. "State champion three years in a row. All through high school."

"She owns Madison's Dance Studio in Beaver Falls," Vera said. "I'm sure you've heard of it."

"I'm not that much into dance." Cameron blew into the hot tea to cool it off.

"Do you have any children?" Vera asked them.

"I'm not married," Tony said.

"Well, you're so young." Vera turned to Cameron for her response.

"Six."

"Six?" Vera looked her up and down—admiring Cameron's slender, athletic build. "How do you keep your figure?"

A slim grin crossed Cameron's lips. "Chasing bad guys." She didn't go into explaining that she was stepmother to Joshua's five adult children and their daughter Izzy had been adopted.

"We have one—a daughter." Vera picked up a framed portrait of a young woman posing with a cocker spaniel. "Sherry's a dog groomer. She's groomed several champions."

After admiring the picture of the blonde, who appeared to be a slightly older version of Madison, Cameron returned it to the end table from where Vera had grabbed it. "Have you been living here long?"

"Three generations," Cliff said. "My father built this house for my mother. I grew up here with my brothers and sisters. I was the only one who wanted to stay after my parents passed. Why do you ask?"

“We’re trying to figure out why someone would dump a dead body in your field,” Cameron said. “Can you think of who he might be?”

“What does he look like?” Vera asked. “I didn’t really see—”

“Middle-aged man,” Cameron said. “You said you only have a daughter—”

“And one granddaughter,” Cliff said.

“Any ex-husbands or boyfriends?” Tony asked.

Both Vera and Cliff shook their heads. “Sherry is happily married,” Cliff said.

“Shawn isn’t around that much on account he’s a cross-country truck driver,” Vera said. “But Sherry says that’s why their marriage is such a success. They’ve been together twenty-eight years.”

“Is Shawn out on the road now?” Cameron asked.

“He was here just yesterday to help me fix a broken door in the barn,” Cliff said. “Him and Sherry stayed to have dinner with us.”

“Shawn left early this morning to go pick up a load and head out on the road again,” Vera said.

“I think he said he was going to Montana,” Cliff said.

“They are very happily married,” Vera said. “Everyone loves Shawn. No way that can be him.”

“Is there anyone you can think of who would possibly want to send you a message by dumping a dead body practically in your back yard?” Cameron asked.

Vera placed her hands on her hips. ““Lieutenant Gates, what kind of people do you think we are? We’re nothing but a couple of old goats. We work hard. We pay our taxes.”

“We don’t even drink,” Cliff said.

“Do we look like the type of folks who’d know anyone who’d kill someone, dump him in a hayfield, and then set fire to him?”

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“Well, maybe your brother Stan,” Cliff muttered to his wife.

“Stan’s much too lazy to go to that much trouble.”

“That’s true.” Cliff told Cameron, “She’s right. Her brother is one lazy son-of-a-gun.”