

Love Him or Lock Him Up?

with Lauren Order

“The Case of the March Murderer”

Coppers Park is an ordinary little town.

Lauren Order, is an ordinary small-town police investigator. On her way to finding true love, she has to solve a few ordinary small-town mysteries such as lost cats, teenage pranks, parking infractions, and... murder.

Part One

It was an icy March morning when Lauren got her first call of the day. She shivered as she drove across town, her car sliding on the frozen roadways. Nothing short of murder would have dragged her out on such a cold day, but that's just what this was. A body had been discovered! Local real estate agent, Carrie Corpus, was murdered in her own home, bludgeoned by some heavy metal object.

Lauren arrived on site. Officer Bell had already secured the scene and informed Lauren that there were three persons of interest waiting in the other room: Mrs. Biddy, the victim's next-door

neighbor, and two men, Byron Corpus, the victim's brother; and Joe Maraschino, her contractor. Lauren must have shown her surprise when Officer Bell mentioned their names.

“You know these people?” he asked.

Lauren nodded. “Two of them, Byron and Joe.”

“Close friends of yours?”

“Not yet,” Lauren said.

She'd been hoping to change that, though. She met Byron when he was hired to do a construction project at the police station. They hit it off and finally scheduled a date for last night. It was just after noon when he called to cancel, so she'd asked someone else to go out with her.

Joe was a friend from the dog park. His

Labradoodle liked play-dates with Lauren's Weimaraner. When Byron cancelled, Lauren invited Joe to join her instead. He'd told her he would, but in the end he never showed. She spent her evening alone, sitting at the movies with one extra ticket. To make it even worse, she hadn't realized this cold front was moving in, so she'd only brought a light jacket.

This was not going to be a pleasant investigation.

"Let's look at the body first," she suggested.

Officer Bell ushered her to the kitchen.

Carrie Corpus was lying there, her head crushed by one powerful blow. A dark pool of blood surrounded her, stark and ominous against

the brand-new tile. A mop and broom leaned in the corner, their recent work negated by the grisly aftermath of violence.

Lauren could easily see that the house was being extensively remodeled. Appliances had been moved, walls were unpainted, and tools were scattered about. A large pipe wrench was in plain view.

“Is that the murder weapon?” she asked Officer Bell.

“It’s got blood on it,” he confirmed. “But no fingerprints.”

“Figures,” she sighed.

Wondering how the murderer had gained entry, Lauren inspected the back door. It was locked

securely. Turning the latch, she let herself out into the back yard. A new deck was being built. A set of muddy footprints tracked over it, all the way to the back door. Work boots with a distinctive star-shaped logo in the tread. Lauren pulled out her notebook and jotted this down.

Heading back inside, she noted that a laptop computer sat open on the kitchen counter. The victim's wallet was next to it with several envelopes. Lauren checked the wallet and found ID, credit cards, and a twenty-dollar bill. Next, she checked out the envelopes.

There was an invoice mailed two days ago from Joe Maraschino for his remodeling work. It seemed Ms. Corpus was past-due in her

payments—the contractor was seriously out of pocket and none too happy about it. There was a furious note in large, bold handwriting: “*You’ve kept me waiting too long! I warned you what would happen—it’s life or death now, Carrie. You will pay.*” Lauren made a quick note of that in her book.

The next envelope contained legal documents regarding Carrie’s inheritance. Apparently, this house was part of her parents’ estate. After a quick read, Lauren learned that the house had gone to both Carrie *and* her brother. The brother wanted money instead, so Carrie agreed to pay him half of the home’s appraised value. Someone had taken red pen and made a brutal circle around

the amount that was listed there. From the looks of the remodeling projects, that appraisal figure seemed rather low. Lauren also jotted that into her notebook.

The third envelope had no writing on it. Inside, Lauren found the bank receipt for a \$2,000 cash withdrawal, dated yesterday at noon. But there was no cash. If Carrie had gotten \$2,000 from the bank, it wasn't there now. Lauren wasn't sure what to write in her notebook for that.

She needed some answers. Hopefully, she'd find those waiting in the next room. Signaling Officer Bell, she headed for the formal living room where everyone was gathered.

“I'm the one who found her,” the older woman

on the sofa began. “Eleanor Bidy. I live next door. Every morning at 7:15 I take little Buttons out for his morning walk.”

“Buttons?” Lauren asked.

“My dog,” Mrs. Bidy explained. “He’s the cutest thing! Each day, I put on my walking shoes, dress Buttons in his sweater, and we go on our walk. Carrie waves to us from her window. On our way back, she comes out to give Buttons a cookie. It’s like a ritual for us! But when she wasn’t there waving at us, and then when she didn’t come out with a cookie... I just knew something was wrong. I was afraid something like this might happen... the sort of people she’s been working with lately.”

“What do you mean?” Lauren asked.

“That contractor!” Mrs. Bidy said, glaring daggers at Joe. “Oh yes, I’ve heard him arguing with her about money. Well, when I didn’t see her today I went around to peek in the back window. His footprints are all over out there! Then I saw her. Just terrible! I called the police right away.”

“Thank you for calling it in, ma’am,” Officer Bell said. “We appreciate your vigilance.”

Mrs. Bidy beamed. “I don’t usually go around snooping that way, but after last night, I guess I was worried.”

“What happened last night?” Lauren asked.

Mrs. Bidy shook her head sadly. “I took Buttons out for his nighttime potty. It was right at

10:30—the same time, every night. That’s when I saw him.”

“Saw who?” Lauren questioned.

“A man. A man was walking up the sidewalk, away from Carrie’s house.”

“You saw a man leaving her house?”

“Well, I couldn’t be sure he was leaving her house. He was already on the main sidewalk when I saw him, walking away. But where else could he have come from? I would have seen him if he walked past my house, and there weren’t any cars on the street.”

“So you think he came from her house,”

Lauren said, noting that in her book. “And can you describe him?”

“Well, he was walking away, so I didn’t see his face. Plus, he had his coat pulled up tight around him. It got so cold last night, really freezing! With that heavy coat, I couldn’t even tell if he was a hefty man or thin. But I do remember his footsteps.”

“His footsteps?”

“Yes, he was clomping quite loudly. The man wore heavy boots—workman’s boots. He must have been the murderer! Don’t you think?”

Officer Bell shot a quick glance at Lauren. She nodded but didn’t comment. It was too soon to draw any conclusions.

“I guess we’ll find out, Mrs. Biddy,” Lauren said.

The older woman smiled, then reached over to pat Byron's shoulder. "I hope so, Miss Order, for poor Byron's sake. I'm sure this has been quite an awful shock for him."

"I'm sure it has," Lauren agreed, finally facing her former date. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Byron. Can you tell me what brought you out here this morning?"

"Carrie asked me to come." His voice cracked with emotion. "I mean... yesterday she did. She told me to come pick up my money."

"Your money?"

"She's buying my share of the house. Yesterday she called to say she had the first installment for me. So, I came over this morning.

The police were already here... it's just awful."

"Yes, it is. Please bear with me, I have to ask a few questions to get the timeline figured out.

When did you talk to her yesterday?"

"Just after lunch. I should have come over last night, but I had other plans. I mean... something else came up."

"So you weren't here yesterday? At all?"

"No! As I said, I had other plans."

"And what were those other plans, Byron? I know the plans you *did* have, but you cancelled those. Why?"

He hung his head sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Lauren. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I'm broke. My car ran out of gas so I couldn't take you to the

movies. That's why I had to cancel."

Lauren eyed him. His faded shirt and frayed jeans supported his claim of poverty. His footwear, however, told a different story.

"It looks like you were able to afford new boots recently," she commented. "That's a good brand, and there's not even a smudge on them."

There was a familiar logo, though—a *five-pointed star*.

"These? I found them at the thrift store just a few days ago," Byron claimed. "They're two sizes too big, but I'm happy to have them. My only other pair of shoes fell apart last week!"

"I see. But that doesn't explain where you were last night," she insisted.

Byron shrugged. “I was alone at my home, as I told you. No gas in my car.”

“No one to provide an alibi, either.” Lauren sighed, then turned to Joe. “And what about you? Where were you last night, Joe?”

He shifted nervously in his chair, crossing and uncrossing his legs. Lauren couldn't help but recognize the same star-shaped logo on his heavy work boots. His, however, were not clean and new like Byron's. Joe's boots were caked with dried mud. Clumps and dust littered the area where Joe had been sitting.

“I'm really sorry, Lauren,” he said. “I was happy you called me. I'm not used to having a day off so it was a nice distraction. But not even a half

hour after I talked to you, my brother called with a family emergency.”

Mrs. Biddy clicked her tongue. “We’ve all heard about *your* family, Mr. Maraschino. What was the emergency? Did someone need you to help rob the bank? Make someone an offer they can’t refuse?”

“I’m not involved in that stuff!” Joe grumbled. “Not anymore. Two years in prison straightened me out.”

“What was this family emergency, Joe?” Lauren asked, ignoring Mrs. Biddy’s sneer.

“My brother and I run an honest business,” Joe defended. “Despite all the rumors, we gave up the old Maraschino ways. This emergency was my

ten-year-old nephew being rushed to the hospital! He's been sick and we've struggled to pay for his treatments."

"That's why you missed our date?" Lauren asked.

Joe nodded. "I was so worried that I jumped in the car and rushed to the hospital, leaving my phone at home. By the time I even remembered our date, Lauren, it was too late. I didn't have your phone number with me to call you. I'm sorry, but my family needed me. I stayed at the hospital all night."

"Your family can vouch for your whereabouts? You were with them all night?"

"Well, not really. My brother and his wife were

in the room with my nephew. I slept in a chair out in the lobby. Alone.”

“I see,” Lauren said, watching him closely. “So you could have left the hospital at any time. And I assume as Carrie’s contractor, you have a key to her house?”

“So what? Her brother probably has one, too.”

Lauren glanced over at Byron. He gave her a reticent nod. Obviously locked doors would not be a deterrent for either of these two suspects.

“All right, Joe,” she sighed. “Why are you here this morning?”

“I came to get my money,” he replied. “My nephew is doing better today, so I left the hospital and went home bright and early. I checked my

phone and found a message from Carrie yesterday saying she had a payment for me and wanted me to come finish the job. I refused to work yesterday because she hadn't paid me, so this was good news. I put on my work clothes and came right away. I got here at the same time Byron drove up. I almost took off when I saw the police here, but they told us what happened. It's really tragic."

"It is, but I'm glad your nephew is doing better," Lauren said. "And I'm sorry you both missed the movie yesterday."

"I hope you'll give me a raincheck," Byron said. "I'd love to reschedule our date... once all this has settled down, of course."

"And I hope you'll be willing to give me

another chance, too,” Joe said quickly. “I was really looking forward to getting to know you better, Lauren.”

Mrs. Biddy interrupted the men with loud throat-clearing. “I say! Miss Order, how can you even think about dating at a time like this? Poor Ms. Corpus has been killed!”

“She’s right,” Officer Bell inserted. “Ms. Corpus is dead and there’s a high probability that one of these three people is a murderer!”

“I am not a murderer,” Mrs. Biddy declared firmly.

“Of course you’re not, Mrs. Biddy,” Lauren assured her. “The murderer is one of my two friends here, I’m sad to say.”

Officer Bell seemed perplexed. “If you’re so sure it’s one of them, why are you planning to date them?”

“Oh, I’m only going to date one of these guys,” Lauren said with a smile. “The other one has a date with a jail cell. Officer Bell, arrest him!”

With a confident flourish, Lauren pointed directly at the murderer.

Part Two

Byron Corpus gasped when Lauren singled him out. “How can you accuse me of such a thing, Lauren? I thought we were friends!”

Mrs. Bidy clearly took his side. “It can’t be him! No, look at his boots, they’re clean as a whistle. Mr. Maraschino’s though, they prove his guilt. Look at all that mud, just like the prints he left on the back porch.”

“I got this mud on my boots when I worked here two days ago!” Joe insisted. “I haven’t set foot in this house since then, not until just this morning.”

“I believe you, Joe,” Lauren said. “It was too

cold last night for anyone to get mud on their boots—the ground was frozen solid. Obviously, those tracks outside were made long before Carrie was murdered. Besides, the way that dry mud is flaking off your boots, Joe, you would have left a trail of it all through the house if you'd been here. Carrie cleaned up after you left two days ago, and her kitchen floor is still spotless... well, most of it is. Besides, it's obvious Byron had the better motive and opportunity to murder his sister.”

“Why would I kill her?” Byron cried. “Our parents are gone; she was all I have left!”

“Exactly, and now that she's gone, this house is all yours.”

“But I didn't want the house! I can show you

the agreement we drew up. Lauren was keeping the house and she was paying me for half of it. That's the arrangement I wanted."

"It might be what you wanted at first, then you realized your share would be a lot less than what your sister would get. She was doing all the renovations so she could sell the house for much more than the agreed-upon appraisal, wasn't she?" Lauren questioned. "You would get half the old amount, but she'd get everything else. Isn't that true?"

Byron's gaze darted about anxiously. Officer Bell moved into the doorway, blocking any route of escape.

"What do I care about that? I didn't kill her;

she was my sister!”

“And she was cheating you. She didn’t even hire you do the remodeling, did she?”

He gave an angry snort. “She hired this ex-con to do the work that I could have done. Can you believe it? Her own brother, and she made me grovel and beg for crumbs that should have already been mine.”

“That’s why you killed her, isn’t it? She’d gone to the bank to get money for Joe. You thought that money should have been yours.”

“It *was* my money. And she owed me a lot more than just \$2,000.”

“But she wouldn’t give it to you,” Lauren said. “So you took it, didn’t you? She tried to stop you,

so you killed her with that wrench.”

“I’m not the ex-con here,” Byron snapped.

“Why don’t you accuse him? He threatened my sister! I saw that horrible note he wrote her.”

Joe quickly defended himself. “It’s true I warned Carrie that she needed to pay. But it wasn’t a threat. I’ve got to have the money for my nephew’s medical bills—it’s a matter of life and death!”

Byron tried to argue, but Lauren shushed him.

“It’s too late, you already admitted your guilt when you mentioned the money. There’s no way you could have known the amount or seen that invoice before yesterday—the invoice was only mailed the day before, and Carrie went to the

bank yesterday at noon. It's obvious that you were here yesterday, Byron. You saw Joe's invoice and you took the money."

"No! I told you, I couldn't go anywhere—my car was out of gas."

"Then how did you show up here in your car this morning?" Lauren asked. "You filled it up because you took that money last night. That's why Mrs. Biddy saw you walking away, clomping along in your two-sizes-too-big workboots with no mud on them. You walked here, and then you walked home... after you murdered your sister."

Byron lunged at Lauren, but Officer Bell and Joe jumped in to stop him. They barely held him back as he seethed.

“All right, fine. I did it!” he snarled at her. “But you’re no goody-two-shoes, Lauren Order. You made a date with an ex-con!”

“Worse, I almost stepped out with a *murderer*,” Lauren said, giving Joe a quick grin. “But I won’t give that ex-con the boot. Think we could give the movies another try, Joe?”

Joe smiled back at her and gave a wink as he said, “Yeah, I think we can do a reboot.”