

# MURDER BY PAGE ONE

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JO CONTINUED TO PLAY WITH her soup. Spence barely touched his grilled chicken and cheddar sandwich on whole grain bread. I ignored my salad. Lunch would've been a celebratory meal if the deputies had at least agreed to spend as much energy focusing on Betty, Bobby, and Zelda as they were spending on Jo. But since they'd rejected our request—and had gone the extra step of warning us not to interfere in the case—the atmosphere was much more maudlin.

My gaze was drawn once again to Delores's table. She scowled as she returned my stare. Had I done something to offend the church's pianist? I combed through my memories.

"Marvey, do you think it's a good idea to ignore the deputies?" Spence's question interrupted my thoughts. He gave me a look of such grave concern I almost doubted myself.

*Almost.*

I took a deep drink of my iced tea, which the locals referred to as "sweet tea." Who'd have thought there'd be so many cultural differences within the nine hun-

dred seven miles separating Brooklyn, New York, and Peach Coast, Georgia?

“Perhaps ignoring the deputies’ orders isn’t the brightest idea I’ve ever had, but how would I feel if I didn’t do anything and our worst-case scenario became real?” I trusted them to understand I was referring to Jo’s arrest. I didn’t want to spell it out.

Spence held Jo’s worried gaze as he spoke. “I won’t speak for Marvey, but I’d feel horrible.”

“So would I.” My tone was grim.

Jo dropped her soup spoon. “I can’t ask either of you to risk angering the sheriff’s department—or worse—for me.”

I reached across the table to grip Jo’s forearm again. “This is bigger than you, Jo. There’s a murderer in Peach Coast.”

“That’s what I’m saying.” Her voice was dancing on the cusp of hysteria. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I’ll be careful.” I released her arm.

Spence corrected me. “*We’ll* be careful. I’m not going to leave the two of you to investigate a murder on your own. We’re in this together.”

“Thank you.” The tension in my neck and shoulders eased.

Jo silently assessed Spence and me. I could sense her searching for words to change our minds. Finally, she gave a heavy sigh and tugged two books from her To Be Read tote bag. “All right. If you’re both determined to continue this investigation, I’m grateful. Believe me. But I’m also worried.” Jo passed Spence and me a copy of *In Death Do We Part*. “As Marvey asked, I’ve brought you each a copy of Fiona’s book.”

Although I’d seen Fiona’s debut mainstream mystery

in the library, I skimmed the back cover description again. “Fiona’s writing will give us some insight into her personality. Criminal psychologists say that to identify the killer, it helps to know the victim.”

Spence looked at me with a combination of amusement and admiration. “That’s good insight.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Scoff if you want—”

“I’m being sincere.” He held up his hands, palms out.

“— but whatever we learn about Fiona will help us identify potential suspects in her murder.”

Jo swung her gaze between Spence and me. “What’s our next step?”

Despite my efforts to ignore her, I was aware of DeLores’s unceasing surveillance. Why was she staring at me? Or was I being paranoid? I glanced at her again, and again encountered her vexation. No, I wasn’t imagining things.

Doubling down on my efforts to block her from my conscience, I sat back against my seat to consider our approach. “Since the deputies won’t re-interview Betty, Bobby, or Zelda, we’ll need to follow up with them ourselves.”

Spence leaned into the table. “The hardware store where Bobby works is on my way home. I’ll stop by after work to talk with him.”

“Great.” I recalled Zelda’s business card was still in my purse. “When I get back to my office, I’ll give Zelda a call to see if she’ll meet with me.”

Jo looked from me to Spence and back. “Which one of you is going to talk with Betty?”

I stared at Spence, trying to think of a persuasive ar-

gument for him. I came up empty. “I thought you might want to speak with her.”

Spence gestured toward me. “I thought she’d be more comfortable speaking with you, woman to woman.”

“Oh, no.” I waved my hands. “Everyone likes and respects you, Spence. You’d have a much better chance of getting her to open up.”

Jo chuckled. It was good to hear her laughing again. “I’m glad you decided I couldn’t help with the interviews, since people wouldn’t feel comfortable speaking freely in front of me. I wouldn’t want to interview Betty about the murder of her ex-husband’s wife, either.”

“Humph.” I crossed my arms in mock irritation. “It’s very convenient for you to use that reasoning now, isn’t it? You resented the suggestion when it kept you away from Spence’s dinner party.”

Jo laughed harder, as I’d hoped she would. “If you can’t see the difference between missing Spence’s dinner party and skipping Betty Rodgers-Hayes’s interview, then you’re just hopeless.”

Spence tossed her a grin before facing me. “Let’s talk with Betty together.”

I smiled. “Good idea. You can take the lead.”

He laughed. How would he react when he discovered I wasn’t joking?

A flurry of movement drew my attention to the other side of the aisle. Delores rushed past our table, generating enough wind to flutter my napkin as she sailed past us. I shifted on my seat, tracking her progress toward the front exit.

*What was that about?*