

# Murder Out of Character

By Olivia Matthews



Brittany looked like who she was, a competitive amateur athlete. She was perhaps as tall as Spence at a little more than six feet, and fit with lean, well-developed muscles. My research had turned up articles on her previous events: marathons, biathlons, and triathlons.

She removed her helmet, revealing tight dark curls that emphasized her wide ebony eyes and high cheekbones in her dark brown angular face.

Spence settled his hand on the small of my back. “Brittany, this is Marvella Harris. She’s from New York. Marvey, Brittany owns Coastal Cycles.”

“Welcome to Peach Coast, Marvella. It’s good to meet you.” She tucked her helmet in the crook of her arm.

“Please call me Marvey.”

Brittany led her cycle to the customer service counter. Impulse buys such as energy bars, bubble gum, and bike chains had been stacked near the register.

“You were in the paper last month.” She spoke over her shoulder as she circled the counter. “You solved Fiona Lyle-Hayes’s murder.”

“I had a lot of help.” It made me uncomfortable that people thought I’d single-handedly cleared Jo’s name. Spence’s paper was responsible for that perception. I sent him a chiding look. He gave me an innocent shrug, but his eyes twinkled and his lips struggled against a smile.

“Before Fiona, we’d had maybe one murder in two years. Now, we’ve had three in two months.” Brittany shook her head in disbelief.

She’d opened the door to the perfect opportunity for me to find out what she knew. “Do you have any thoughts on these recent murders?”

Brittany’s sharp look swept between me and Spence. I’d have withered beneath that stare if I hadn’t felt so desperate to protect Spence.

“Now how would I know anything about them?” She asked as though she thought I’d lost my mind.

If she thought a show of temper would make me back down, she was mistaken. First, Spence’s life was at stake. Second, I’d taken New York City public transportation seven days a week for more than twenty years. It took a lot to rattle me.

Spence spoke before I could respond. “You socialized in similar circles with Hank and Nelle. Do you know whether they had conflicts with anyone?” His calm, measured tone reduced much of Brittany’s agitation — but not all of it.

“I’ve already given a statement to the deputies.” She gave me a pointed look. “The *real* deputies, not pretend detectives.”

“I prefer the term ‘amateur sleuth.’” Perhaps I shouldn’t have interrupted.

She ignored me. “Like I told the deputies, I wasn’t close with Hank or Nelle, not even in school. I didn’t get involved in their personal issues.”

“What about you, Brittany?” I tried to read her body language. Her arms were crossed and she avoided eye contact with me. Was she trying to hide something? “Have you had trouble with anyone? Is anyone giving you a hard time?”

She gave me a narrow-eyed stare as though she was trying to read my mind. “What’s going on?” She turned to Spence. “Why’re you asking me these questions?”

I pulled the list I’d found in the activity room from my purse and set it on the counter in front of her. She scanned the short list. Her eyes widened and her head shot up.

“What is this?” Her voice trembled a bit. “Is this some kind of joke? If it is, you’re sick.”

Spence shoved his hands into his pockets. “We don’t think it’s a joke.”

I waved a hand toward her. “Based on your reaction, you’re making the same connections we’ve made about the list.”

Brittany set her hands on her slim hips and angled her chin. “Who wrote it?”

“We’re trying to find out.” I spoke gently. “I found it after a library event last Thursday evening, twelve days after Hank was killed. Then last Saturday, Nelle was killed. It seemed like too much of a coincidence. That’s why I brought it to Spence and the deputies. Now we’re bringing it to you.”

Her eyes wavered before she looked to me again. “Are you saying this is some sort of hit list and that someone’s trying to kill me?”

I really disliked that term. It sounded like a gimmick from a Mickey Spillane mystery. This was real life and my friend was in actual danger. “Isn’t that what you thought when you saw your name on a list with two people who’ve already been murdered? Why else did you have that reaction?”

Brittany waved a dismissive hand over the paper, but she seemed unable to look away from it. “What do the deputies think?”

I hesitated. “They’re starting to ask questions. Both Hank and Nelle died under suspicious circumstances.”

“This is ridiculous.” She pushed the paper back toward me. The act was short and sharp, almost violent. “Just because you found a piece of paper with my name on it doesn’t mean someone’s trying to kill me.”

Spence frowned. “Then what do *you* think it means?”

She crossed her arms again and glared at me. “I think it means you’re trying to stir up trouble or cause a panic.”

I stared at her in silent amazement. “Why would I do that?”

“How should I know? Maybe you want attention.” She shrugged, her movements stiff and jerky. “What I don’t understand, Spence, is why you’d go along with this? I’d think you’d know better.”

“I’m concerned by the implications of that list.” He nodded toward it. “You should be, too.”

“Well, I’m not.” Brittany remained stubborn even as the blood drained from her face. “You might as well shred it or recycle it. Just get rid of it. There’s no reason for anyone to want to harm me.”

*Methinks the lady doth protest too much.*

Brittany was smart. Like Spence, she’d been the valedictorian of her high school graduating class. According to her ProNet profile, she’d graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University undergrad and had earned her juris doctorate from Harvard Law School. Then why wouldn’t she at least consider the possibility someone wanted to kill her? Either the idea was too frightening to face or she knew more than she was admitting. Which one was it? Could it be both?

