

Murder Out of Character

By Olivia Matthews



“You think this is a hit list.” Spence’s voice was devoid of inflection, but I saw the skepticism in his narrowed midnight gaze.

That wasn’t the term I used. In fact, I’d deliberately avoided calling it.

“When you put it like that, it sounds crazy.” I popped off one of the living room’s three thick-cushioned copper and dark wood armchairs. “But how else do you explain two people on that list having recently died?”

“A tragic coincidence?” Spence tracked my restless movements from a matching chair that faced me. He sounded distracted as though he was trying to reason through this situation.

I paused in front of the electric fireplace. It’s sleek, contemporary features included dark tobacco accents on a fresh white finish. Framed photographs across the metal mantel tracked his progression from his undergraduate years at Stanford, his graduate experiences at New York University, to his career as a journalist in Chicago. He also had pictures from his international travels to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Europe.

I turned back to Spence. “Neither of us believes in coincidence.”

“But a discarded hit list? That’s a stretch, especially one found after an event that more than seventy people attended.” He continued to study the list. “What assassin writes the names of their targets, then leaves the list behind? Isn’t that information supposed to be secret?”

Good point. I tossed him a disgruntled look. How could I protect him if he wouldn’t even consider something was wrong? I took a calming breath. The room smelled of wood and peppermint. Like Spence. “Do you have another explanation for your name being on the same piece of paper as two people whose deaths are now ‘under investigation’ by the sheriff’s department?” I made air quotes with my fingers for “under investigation.”

Spence shrugged. “You found this note in the activity room after the event, right?”

“Right.” I continued pacing, this time in front of the fake-fire fireplace.

“It could be a list of attendees.”

All right; I'll play along. “Seventy-six people came to the kickoff. Why were you, Hank, Nelle, and Brittany signaled out?”

“It could be a list of high-profile residents.”

“Why isn't the mayor on the list?”

“Maybe it's a partial list of library donors.”

“Again, why only the four of you?” I rubbed my eyes. This game of verbal tennis wasn't helping my anxiety. “Let's try looking at this another way. What do you have in common with the other people on that list?”

“We all live in Peach Coast.” His words were dry.

I planted my hands on my hips and gritted my teeth. “Could you take this seriously? Please?”

“I *am*.” Spence spread his arms. “And, honestly, growing up in Peach Coast is all I have in common with Hank, Nelle, and Brittany. We're friendly, but we've never been friends. We were in different graduating classes.”

Nothing he said reassured me. If anything, I was more anxious now than when I'd first arrived. I hesitated before asking him the question we were both dancing around. “Spence, is it possible someone's trying to kill you?”

“For what?” His eyes were wide and clouded with confusion as though he couldn't believe we were having this conversation.

Neither could I.

I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to harm Spence in any way. He was thoughtful, kind, humble, and fun. The kind of person other people wanted to spend time with – not bump off. “I don't know.”

“I don't, either.”

I wanted answers, but only found more questions. “Have you fired anyone recently?”

Spence chuckled as though I'd told a hilarious joke. “No. I have a high turnover because most of my editors and reporters leave for bigger and better things after a few years.”

“Have you broken up with anyone recently?” I was more interested in his response than I should've been.

“No.” His expression was self-deprecating. “I’ve gone out a few times, but I haven’t dated anyone seriously in a while.”

I continued to grasp at straws. “Does anyone owe you money?”

“No.” His response was quick and spare. If he had given someone money, he probably wouldn’t consider it a loan.

Frustrated, I paced away from the fireplace and wandered to his front bay windows. Through the window, I could admire his neighborhood. It was clean and quiet, and lush with trees, flowers and expansive yards. The scenery whispered wealth and elegance.

Planting my hands on my hips again, I spoke over my shoulder. “We need to take this list to the deputies.”

“We could do that.” Spence’s voice sounded closer. “But they’ll be more skeptical than I am.”

That was an understatement. Factor in that I’d strained Jed’s goodwill by investigating Fiona Lyle-Hayes’s murder to prove Jo’s innocence and he’d probably be biased against anything I said or did. Ever.

I turned to find Spence an arm’s length from me. “They still need to be aware of this list. It could be relevant to their investigations into Hal’s and Nelle’s deaths.”

Spence rubbed the back of his neck. I sensed his frustration like a presence beside him. “We don’t have any information beyond this list. Whatley won’t take it seriously.”

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t bring it to their attention.”

He dropped his arm. “Why don’t we take today to think it over? If you feel the same way in the morning, I’ll speak to them with you.”

I started to disagree. It was barely nine o’clock and he expected me to wait another twenty-four hours. This was another example of my New York background conflicting with Southern culture. They had a very different concept of “urgency.”

Then I realized whether I go alone today or with Spence tomorrow, the deputies will most likely dismiss my concerns. However, my primary goal was to keep Spence safe. I’d shown him the list and shared my fears. That would have to be enough. For now.

