

Meow If It's Murder (Nick and Nora Mysteries Book 1)

By T.C. LoTempio

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First in a new series!

Nora Charles doesn't believe in fate, even if she is a crime reporter who shares a name with a character from The Thin Man. In fact, she's moving back to Cruz, California, to have a quieter life. But after finding an online magazine eager for material, and a stray cat named Nick with a talent for detection, Nora's not just reporting crimes again. She's uncovering them...

Back in her hometown, Nora reconnects with old friends and makes some new ones, like Nick, the charming feline who seems determined to be her cat. But not everything about Cruz is friendly. Writing for a local online magazine, Nora investigates the curious death of socialite Lola Grainger. Though it was deemed an accident, Nora suspects foul play. And it seems that her cat does too.

Apparently, Nick used to belong to a P.I. who disappeared while investigating Lola Grainger's death. The coincidence is spooky, but not as spooky as the clues Nick spells out for her with Scrabble letters—clues that lead her down an increasingly dangerous path. Whether fate put her on this case or not, solving it will take all of Nora's wits, and maybe a few of Nick's nine lives.

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Editorial Review

Review

"A really good mystery and I really had no clue whodunit. . . . If you like cozies then you will enjoy this one." ---Books, Movies, Reviews! Oh My!

About the Author

T. C. LoTempio is the author of several books, including *Ebony* and *Bound by Blood*. She is a staff reporter at *Susabella Passengers and Friends*. In her spare time, she and her cat Rocco raise funds for Nathan Fillion's charity, Kids Need to Read. T. C. lives in New Jersey.

Rebecca Mitchell is a performance artist and classically trained vocalist, as well as a professional host, emcee, and personality. Her natural flare for the dramatic, coupled with her love of being in the studio, brought her to the world of narrating in 2013.

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PROLOGUE

Lola never knew what hit her.

She was exhausted; Kevin's "business slash pleasure" cruises always took a toll on her, and she was more than a bit annoyed he'd chosen this particular weekend for one—after all, tomorrow was their fifteenth wedding anniversary. She knew he'd been under a lot of strain lately, though, what with the new laser device KMG was developing for the Army—not only was he under pressure to deliver the product on time, but there had been rumblings of a corporate spy in KMG's midst. She wondered vaguely if that was the real reason behind this impromptu cruise. Why else would he have dragged his three key people along on a weekend that should have been meant solely for the two of them? And people she didn't particularly like, to boot?

Not to mention the fact she'd much rather be celebrating on dry land. A shudder rippled through her. She'd always been fearful of lakes, rivers, the ocean in particular. The only water she felt comfortable in was a tub, or a Jacuzzi. Perhaps it was silly, but she could never shake the fear—why, hadn't a psychic warned her of danger only a few weeks ago?

It almost seemed as if Death were stalking her.

She slipped out of her blue-and-red silk caftan and removed all her jewelry, except for the cherry pearl studs Kevin had given her for Christmas. She donned a pair of sweats to ward off the night chill, and slipped her feet into her well-worn scruffs. After a few moments' consideration, she crossed to her husband's closet and pulled one of his down vests out and slipped it on, then rubbed her arms. Damn, what she wouldn't give for a drink right now! But that would entail returning to the main cabin and rejoining the others—and she had

other more important things to do.

She could hear the soft murmur of voices as she tiptoed past the main cabin, and risked taking a quick peek. Marshall Connor and Buck Tabor were huddled in one corner, talking, while her husband and his admin, Patti Simmons, were on the divan. She saw the way Patti's hand roved possessively across her husband's arm, and Lola felt the warm color rise to her cheeks—then she steadied herself and moved swiftly down the corridor, past the kitchen, where the captain was seated, enjoying a brandy, and made her way toward the guest staterooms.

If she ever had a shot at finding out the truth, it was now or never.

* * *

A half hour later Lola perched on the edge of her king-size bed. Her hands were clammy, slick with sweat, and her whole body shook with suppressed—what?

Anger? Fear? Rage?

No . . . panic.

Her fingers roved restlessly across the envelope she'd taken from one of the cabins. What was it her dear departed friend Laura Charles used to say?

An eavesdropper rarely hears anything good about themselves.

Well, she hadn't been eavesdropping, but she had been snooping. And she'd found just what her source had said she would . . . which certainly explained a lot. Now she knew the reason behind her husband's recent foul mood swings, his often irrational irritability, the time he'd spent away from home. It was completely understandable, if what she'd found out was indeed true.

Even though Kevin hadn't been completely honest with her, one thing she knew. No one threatened her family. No one.

She wished she could talk to Laura Charles. Her friend had always been so sensible, so levelheaded. She would have known just what to do—but Laura was dead. There was only one other person she could depend on now.

She reached for her Dooney & Bourke, rummaged inside for her iPhone. She clicked it on, opened up her directory, scrolled down—and yes! She had put it in. She clicked on the number, let out an agitated sigh when it went into voice mail.

“Hi, it's me. You were right. I found it hidden just where you thought it might be. I can't believe Kevin kept this from me . . . it's no small matter. Why, it could put me in danger! I'm so mad at him . . .” Her voice began to shake and she paused to take a deep, calming breath. “Listen—I'm going to have a showdown. Kevin will probably kill me, but—this can't go on. Thanks for all your support. I won't forget it.” She rang off, ran her hands through her hair. A showdown might be considered a foolish move, but she didn't care. All she knew was she no longer wanted either herself or her husband played for fools. She sighed. It would probably be best, though, to confront Kevin and tell him just what she intended to do. Maybe her assertion would awaken some courage in him—she hoped so. She really didn't fancy facing down the enemy alone.

Thump. Thwack. She raised her head as the sounds from the side deck got louder. Damn dinghy's rope had probably come loose again. She thought about calling Kevin or the captain, then decided against it. The

dinghy was something she could take care of herself—hadn't she retied it a million times? She turned her attention to the prize she'd found earlier. Her fingers closed around the manila envelope, and she looked around for a safe place to put it until she could confront Kevin. Her lips curved in a half smile. Oh, yes, she knew just the place! Her little secret hideaway. No one knew about it; her little treasure would be perfectly safe there . . .

A few minutes later she stood on the deck, picking her way carefully toward the dinghy. As she drew nearer, she stopped and cocked her head, puzzled. The thumping sounds had stopped. Now that was odd. She started to turn, and then she saw the shadow, out of the corner of her eye. Lola shoved her hands into the pockets of the down vest and took a bold step forward.

"I know what you're trying to do," she yelled. "You coward, come out and face me. I know what you're doing, and it stops now! I found your little stash, and I've taken care of it. I won't let you hurt—"

Her voice stilled as something heavy crashed into the back of her skull. Everything started spinning, and she lashed out with her arms at her unknown assailant. She whimpered as something struck her across her left side, and then she felt herself being pressed against the side of the boat. Terror rammed through her and she tried to cry out over the pain that was radiating through her side, but her throat was so constricted, she could do no more than whimper. She felt a slight pricking at the base of her skull, and then found herself descending into a pool of blackness, a pool as relentless as the dark waters she'd feared all her life, as she felt herself drift down . . . down . . .

ONE

"From printer's ink to pastrami. I guess it's quite a change for you, eh, Nora?"

I smiled as I sliced the pastrami sandwich in half and arranged it on a paper plate. I'd gone to high school with Lance Reynolds, even dated him while in college, but our romance was just not meant to be—and not just because he dated four girls at one time, either. Whereas he was content to remain in the old hometown and go into business with his brother, I opted for the exact opposite—I got as far away from Cruz, California, as I could get. Armed with my trusty BA (major in journalism, minor in English) I moved to Chicago, where I was lucky enough to land a job on the *Tribune*, working my way up the ranks from small articles to my own column—*Crime Beat*—with my very own byline—*by Nora Charles*. I'd thought I'd spend the rest of my days reporting on big crime bosses and their related activities, until life threw me a curve.

Life's funny that way. And no, my decision didn't have anything to do with a broken romance (although I'd had my share) or malicious coworkers (a few, but not too many, thank God). My decision to return to my roots had been dictated by something much more simple: family loyalty.

I added a kosher dill and a side of coleslaw and wrapped it all up, slid it inside a brown paper bag. "Well, you know what they say, Lance. All good things must end."

I rang up his purchase, and he removed a ten-dollar bill from his wallet, passed it across to me. "I bet your mother's happy, looking down from heaven. She was proud of you, for sure, but she wasn't crazy about you trailing criminals and mobsters around."

Quite true. My mother had counted on the fact that cooking, as much as writing, ran through my veins. "She knew I'd step in," I agreed. Had I declined ownership, the shop would have passed to my sister—who, no doubt, would have wasted little time in selling it. The last thing Cruz needed was another fast-food

eatery—or an empanada stand. We had three now.

I handed Lance his change. He slid it into his jacket pocket and then, almost as if he'd read my mind, asked casually, "So how is Lacey these days? Have you seen much of her since you came back?"

I knew Lance had always harbored a crush on my younger sister, even while we were dating, but I couldn't help breathing a sigh of relief that things had never worked out between them, mainly because my sister is, first and foremost, a flake. "She's okay. We spent a few days together after the funeral, but then she took off for Carmel."

"Carmel?"

"Yeah. She's gotten it into her head she wants to study art, and there are a lot of artists' colonies and good instructors out there. Our Aunt Prudence has a spare room, so . . ." I shrugged. "Lacey's still trying to find her bliss, as they say, and one day she'll succeed. Art is one of the few professions she hasn't sampled yet." At last count my sister had been everything ranging from secretary to short-order cook to gas station attendant—plus a few select jobs we're better off not mentioning.

"You were always the grounded one," he agreed. "It must be hard for you, doing something so different from what you've been used to."

I pushed the bag toward his outstretched hand and leaned across the counter. "To be perfectly honest—I haven't given it up entirely. I started writing some short stories for an online crime magazine last month. Ever hear of *Noir*?"

"Louis Blondell's magazine? I read the first issue. It wasn't bad. He mentions it whenever he's in the Poker Face to anyone who'll listen, though. Sometimes he even buys rounds of drinks, trying to get folks to order subscriptions." He chuckled. "He's definitely an acquired taste. How on earth did you hook up with him?"

I laughed. "The same way I meet most people these days. He came in for lunch, and we got to talking about writing. I got to talking about the articles I wrote in Chicago and that I'd always wanted to try my hand at fiction and—wham! Next thing I knew I had a part-time job."

Lance nodded. "Louis knows a good thing when he sees one. Not only are you a local girl, but your prior experience will lend an air of credibility to the magazine. I imagine his circulation will jump."

I thought of Louis—early forties, just a tad older than me, overweight, and balding—and had to agree. He could definitely be overbearing and demanding, but I had a feeling his pompous attitude was an attempt to cover up his basic insecurity. "He just wants to make a success of *Noir*," I heard myself defending him. "And in this economy, who can blame him?"

"Not me. As a matter of fact, I'm going to make sure I have the next issue sent to my Kindle." He tapped two fingers on my counter. "Well, it's been swell catching up, but I'd better get back to work. Stop by Poker Face one night. The drinks are on me."

"Thanks."

He left and I turned my attention to Hot Bread's new menu—my attempt to attract a younger, hipper crowd while still retaining the old, faithful customers. I ran my finger down the listing of over twenty different kinds of specialty sandwiches, named after cities, places, and people: The Parisian Fling. The Siena Sub Sublime. The Lady Gaga Special. The Michael Buble Burger. There were even some homages to literary

characters: The Sherlock Holmes Humdinger, Miss Marple's Magnificent Chef Salad, The Richard Castle Club—and my own personal favorite: The Thin Man Tuna Melt.

Hey, with a name like Nora Charles, it was inevitable, right? Plus, lots of people over the years had told me I bore an uncanny resemblance to Myrna Loy. How could I go wrong?

I was immersed in reviewing the listing when a hand dropped on my shoulder. I jumped, the menu falling to the floor. "Good God!"

"Oh, I am sorry, *chérie*. Did I startle you? I didn't mean to—you always say you can hear me coming a mile away."

I frowned at my intruder. Chantal Gillard has been my best friend for the past twenty-eight years, ever since we were ten and she'd rescued me from Leonard Goldie, the class bully, attempting to tie my shoelaces to the cafeteria chair in the fourth grade. Such an event can really bond two people, and Chantal and I had been thick as thieves ever since—so thick, in fact, that people usually took us for real sisters, even though we were nothing alike. My friend was somewhat of a dreamer, which she claimed enhanced her latent psychic abilities (which to date, I've really seen no concrete evidence of, other than that she is very good with tarot cards). I, on the other hand, prided myself on being levelheaded and practical to the point of being anal. What can I say? At thirty-eight, I'm pretty set in my ways and not likely to change anytime soon.

My gaze dropped to Chantal's feet and the flat-heeled ankle boots on them. "I can—then again, you're usually wearing five-inch Manolos."

Chantal slid onto one of the high-backed stools behind the counter and raised one foot up. "My feet are still recovering from the Psychic Fair. So much walking. Who knew?"

Chantal's California born and bred, but both her parents hail from Paris, France. Since she grew up thinking English, not French, was her second language, she likes to emphasize her heritage through her mannerisms and speech—although her affected accent can get a little dicey at times. She has a definite flair for fashion, although many would say it borders on the quirky—today her slender figure was enveloped in a voluminous blue caftan that matched her eyes, a scarf of the same color wound through her cap of tight, black curls. The Psychic Fair, an event held in Parsons, a town about five miles south of Cruz right on the coast, was heralded as a "major event"—supposedly renowned psychics from the world over attended. "Ah yes, the big excursion. So how'd it go?"

She shrugged. "Not bad. I got to meet a lot of interesting people there." Her hand dipped into the pocket of her caftan and she whipped out a small card, which she extended toward me. "I almost forgot—Remy had these made up for me. I gave some out yesterday."

I looked at the purple-tinted card and read the bold script:

LADY C CREATIONS ONE OF A KIND JEWELRY

CHANTAL GILLARD 504-555-5578

Below the embossed lettering were drawings of a necklace, bracelet, and two rings. I pushed the card back and applauded. "Going public? About time, I must say."

"It was more Remy's idea than mine." She took the card and shoved it back in her pocket. "The flower business is slow, and there aren't that many people in Cruz interested in a good psychic reading. He thought I

might as well turn my little hobby into something profitable.”

Chantal and her brother, Remy, ran Poppies, a flower shop located on Main about three blocks from my store. Chantal had a little cubbyhole set up in the back where she served tea and gave psychic readings, but thanks to the recent economic downturn, both businesses were suffering. Chantal had a degree in art from UCLA, and lately she’d taken to designing and creating necklaces, earrings, and bracelets—more for relaxation than profit. Now it appeared her brother wanted to turn it into something more.

“He’s making up a catalog, can you imagine? And yesterday I heard him on the phone with his buddy Raj. They were talking about signs, website design . . .” Chantal rolled her eyes. “He’s putting more energy into this than the flower arrangements in the window.”

“Remy knows a good thing when he sees it. Your jewelry is beautiful,” I said. “I’ve always said you should sell it.”

She wrinkled her pug nose. “I don’t know—it’s kinda like putting your children out for sale. But Madame Michelau read my cards yesterday, and said my new venture would be profitable, so . . .” She shrugged expressively. “Why not, right?”

Chantal removed a purple velvet pouch emblazoned with silver stars out of the tote and shook it. Her tarot cards slid out and across the black-and-white-checked tablecloth. She gathered them up, began to shuffle them. “Odd thing—yesterday Madame Michelau said a friend of mine was about to undertake a dangerous mission. I thought of you immediately.”

I shot her a look of mock innocence. “Me? Why?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Nora Charles. You know exactly what I mean.” When I remained silent, she raised both eyebrows. “I saw what you were looking at on your laptop yesterday. Lola Grainger? You are researching her for some sort of article for Louis, right?”

Lola Grainger had been the wife of one of Cruz’s premier businessmen, and a faithful customer of my mother’s, having her cater events at her palatial mansion at least once a month. About a week after my mother’s death, Lola had gone on a weekend cruise with her husband and a few of the members of his staff. Long story short, there had been some sort of accident and poor Lola had drowned. The story piqued my interest for more than one reason. For one, details on the incident were sketchy at best, and the people on the yacht all seemed very reluctant to talk about it. One could excuse that, perhaps, but the manner of death truly disturbed me, since I distinctly remembered my mother telling me on more than one occasion of Lola’s deathly fear of water. Twice monthly yachting excursions aside, Lola never ventured alone into any sort of water—she’d even confided to my mother the only water she felt comfortable in was bathwater. The case had been ruled a “horrible accident” and closed rather quickly—a little too quickly, I’d thought, but chalked it up to the husband’s standing in the community, as half the population of Cruz were employed by his company, KMG Incorporated. “The thought did cross my mind,” I admitted.

Chantal made a little sound deep in her throat. “For goodness’ sakes, why? The case was so open and shut—what possible story could there be?”

“Open and shut—maybe so, maybe not. Personally, I’d have liked to see our police department put a bit more effort into the case,” I said. “Although I can guess why they didn’t. Mrs. Grainger was one of Mom’s best customers, both on a business and a personal basis. They really liked each other. Mom always said Mrs. Grainger seemed to be a lonely soul.” I shut the refrigerator door and leaned against it. “Call me crazy, but I’d kinda like to give Lola’s soul the peace it deserves.”

Chantal's hand fluttered in the air. "You know I do not think you are crazy. Oversensitive, perhaps . . ."

"Gee thanks."

"Anyway, one of the psychics yesterday told me a friend of theirs read Lola Grainger's fortune at her last fund-raiser. She told Lola she saw a fatal disaster in her future. Can you imagine?"

I stood up, mainly to ward off the chill that was inexplicably making its way along my spine at Chantal's words. "Honestly—no. How did Lola react, did she say?"

"Not well. She got all pale and left without waiting to hear any more." Chantal shuddered. "Frankly, if someone had told me that, it would have taken a small miracle to get me to go out of the house, let alone on a boat in the middle of the ocean."

I nodded in agreement. "It gives me the creeps, and it's not even my fortune. Who wants to hear they're walking headlong into disaster?"

"Not I, that's for sure. I'd much rather let the universe surprise me."

"Speaking of surprises . . . what else did your psychic friend say about me?"

Chantal looked at me from under lowered lashes. "Ah, so now you are curious. I thought you did not believe in psychic impressions."

"I don't—but I do believe in intuition. I guess it's pretty much the same thing, when you get right down to it."

My friend cut me an eye roll, a sure indication she thought I was full of, as the French would say, *merde*. "The only other thing she saw was that this mission had to do with something that was switched."

I wrinkled my nose. "Something switched? Like what? That's not much of a clue."

Chantal shrugged. "What can I say? Sometimes the images come over a bit . . . clouded, shall we say? We have to interpret them the best we can." She hunkered over the pile of cards before her and flipped over the one closest to her. "Well, well," she murmured. "On a much better note, it looks like there is love in your future, *chérie*."

I let out a squeal and gave her arm a playful punch. "So now you're reading my cards? Please don't. I do so hate when you do that."

"That is because you do not open yourself up to the universe."

"I wouldn't say that. I'm very open. Just not to portents and omens."

She shook her curls. "You are practical to a fault. Just once I'd like to see you let yourself go—believe in the unbelievable. The world is a wondrous place, if you only open yourself up to all the possibilities."

"Tempting, but I can't afford the luxury. I'm a businesswoman now. I've got to keep my feet planted firmly on the ground and a level head."

"You know, if I didn't know you, I'd think you had no adventure in your soul at all. Now, are you certain you don't want to hear it?" She tapped the cards. "Trust me—it's good."

I hesitated, and then shrugged. “Oh, what the hell. Hit me.”

She plucked a second card from the pile. “The King of Swords crosses your card,” she said. “That means a dark, handsome stranger will shortly enter your life and sweep you off your feet.”

I rolled my eyes. “You can tell that from one card?”

“Not just from the card—the vibe. And this is a strong vibe, very strong indeed.”

Uh-huh. I’d heard all this before from my friend, in many ways, shapes, and forms, and a handsome stranger, dark or otherwise, had yet to make an appearance in my life. “Well, when he shows up, you’ll be the first to know. I’m not holding my breath.”

Chantal glanced at the clock on the wall and jumped up. “*Oh, zut*—I am late for my shift at the flower shop. Remy will kill me.” She swept her tarot cards into their velvet pouch, tucked them inside her tote, and ambled toward the front door. Her French accent slipped a bit as she said, “Try not to work too hard, willya? You’ve been looking a little peaked lately.” She opened the front door and stopped still. “Well, well,” she murmured, accent back in full force as she shot a swift glance over one shoulder. “Come quickly, *chérie*. This will teach you to have more faith in my predictions. There is a dark, handsome stranger out here who wants to see you.”

“You’re kidding.” I moved forward and looked over Chantal’s shoulder. The street outside was deserted. I cocked a brow at my friend. “There’s no one here.”

Her tongue clucked against the roof of her mouth. “You are not looking in the right place.”

Chantal pointed down. I followed her finger and beheld her dark, handsome stranger.

A stocky, black-and-white cat.

TWO

The cat squatted square in front of my door. He lifted his head, and large, unblinking golden eyes bored into mine. The stare was so intense that for a moment all I could do was gape. The portly fellow chose that moment to rise and walk inside, his black plume of a tail swishing regally behind him.

“Hey, wait a minute, you can’t—” I stopped, bit my lip, and whirled to Chantal. “He can’t come in here.”

“Too late. He is already in.” Chantal snickered. “After all, what’s stopping him? You do not have a sign that says NO PETS on the door, *chérie*. He might not be a paying customer, but there are other ways he can earn his keep. Take that storeroom of yours, for instance. I am positive I saw mouse droppings in the far corner the other day.”

“Mouse droppings—there better not be,” I grumbled. “I just paid two hundred for an exterminator—you’re kidding, right?”

She didn’t answer, merely inclined her head toward my kitchen. The cat had leapt up onto one of the counters and was calmly washing himself. I sighed and whirled back to Chantal. “Come clean. Are you behind this? Did you go to the animal shelter and—”

She placed one fist on a slender hip, made an exaggerated sign of the cross over her heart with the other. “Cross my heart and hope to die—I’ve never seen this cat before today.”

I eyed the animal, who’d finished his bath and now lay sprawled across the counter next to the sink. “Well . . . I like his coloring.”

“I do, too.” Chantal gestured toward the cat’s plump belly. “I think they call that type of black-and-white cat a tuxedo. With their white bib and paws, they look as if they are ready for an evening on the town. And he does look ready to step out to a black-tie event, doesn’t he?”

I had to admit the cat did cut an elegant picture. And then he flopped over on one side and started licking his privates.

Chantal’s voice rumbled with suppressed laughter. “Nothing shy about him, is there? I think you’ve finally met your match.”

I shrugged. “He must have wandered off. He looks too well cared for to be a mere stray. He’s got to belong to someone.”

“True,” Chantal agreed. “Or perhaps his owner died, and he is now all alone in the world. He could use a friend.” She gave me a sidelong glance. “Admit it—you’ve always had a soft spot for cats.”

Well, I couldn’t deny it. Out of all types of animals, cats did appeal to me the most—probably because I identified with their independent spirits. Caring-wise, though, my track record stank.

The cat stretched out full length, paws dangling over the side of the counter. His wide, golden eyes were fixed directly on me. He looked almost pleading—appealing even.

Dammit.

I shook my head. “Oh no, you don’t. I like cats, but you know I’m not good with pets. Just ask my sister about the goldfish I let starve to death, and the chameleon I got when I was in fourth grade. Poor thing lasted a week.”

“What happened to him?”

“I—ah—accidentally flushed him down the toilet.” I saw my friend’s lips start to twitch, and I added defensively, “Well, he was really small . . . what do you want from a ten-year-old?”

“You cannot compare a reptile to a cat. I doubt you *could* flush him down a toilet.”

I studied the cat’s girth. “That’s for sure. He’d probably break the plumbing on the way down.”

Chantal pressed her finger to her lips. “Ssh—you will insult him. Why not keep him? If nothing else, you can use him as a mouser.”

I gave the cat another once-over. “I don’t know how good of a mouser he’d be. He doesn’t seem to be the athletic type. The mice would probably outrun him.”

Chantal clapped her hand over my mouth. “Ssh, *chérie*. Animals are very smart. And look at him. He’s listening to us.”

I glanced over at the cat. Damned if his head wasn't cocked to one side. He did look as if he was very interested in our conversation, which, of course, was impossible.

Chantal squeezed my arm. "Take a chance on him, Nora, who knows? Give him a week. And then, if the two of you aren't *sympathique* . . . well, then ask me again. He seems far too fine an animal to end up in a shelter, trapped in a cage."

A loud purr emanated from the cat's throat. Dammit, could he understand us? I found that thought particularly unsettling, to say the least. Still, there was something about him that touched me. I couldn't explain it and I wasn't sure I would if I could. "Why don't you take him now?" I suggested. "I know how you love animals, and you really seem to like him."

Her finger wagged under my nose. "Nice try, but you know Remy would have a fit. My brother thinks he's allergic to every animal on the planet, and cats top his list."

"We both know it's all in his head. You could convince him to adopt the cat, Chantal. I know you could."

Chantal tapped her chin with one long nail. "Probably," she conceded at last. "But I think you should at least make an attempt with him, Nora. He would be good company for you and who knows? Perhaps you can discuss the Lola Grainger case with him. Who knows, he might have some good ideas."

The cat's head lifted, bobbed up and down. "*Meowwwwww*."

I started, then shook my head. "Come on Chantal, I haven't got time for this. Admit it—this is one of your practical jokes, right?"

Her chin lifted. "Do not insult me, *chérie*. I would have selected a purebred. A Siamese or a Persian."

"*Grrr*."

We both turned. The cat was up on his haunches, upper lip peeled back displaying a good amount of fang, wide golden eyes trained straight on Chantal.

I slid my friend a glance. "Now *you've* insulted him." I slapped my forehead with my palm. "Good God, what am I saying?"

Chantal moved over to the cat, bent down, and scratched him under the chin. "Ah, handsome, do not take any of this personally. I did not mean to insult you. You are obviously a stray of great quality. Play your cards right, and I shall make you a beautiful jeweled collar for your neck." She snapped her fingers. "Say, you know, that's not a half-bad idea. Collars for cats and dogs. People love to pamper their pets, right, handsome?"

The cat's growling turned into a satisfied purr as Chantal continued to stroke his chin. I shook my head.

"Chalk up another male who's succumbed to your charms." Guys had always found her appealing, and apparently the cat was no exception.

"What can I say? Men of all types adore me." She rubbed her fingers across the cat's head. "Oh, come on, Nora. Look at him. He's so adorable—how can you possibly turn him out?"

The cat flopped on his side and lay looking up at me, his golden eyes wide. I sighed and threw both hands in the air. If there's one thing I've learned, it's not to fight city hall. Or a cute kitty.

“Fine. I’ll keep him until I can locate his owner. I’ll make some inquiries tomorrow.”

“Good.” Her eyes twinkled. “You could name him Nick, you know, after those movies you love so much?” She cocked her head to one side. “He even looks like a Nick, don’t you think?”

The cat purred louder, as if in agreement. I felt definitely tempted, but shook my head.

“Hmm. I’m not sure about naming him. That’s too much of a commitment.”

“So you say—now,” Chantal chuckled. “But I have a feeling this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

I cut her an eye roll. “I do so hate it when you quote *Casablanca*—or any classic movie, for that matter.”

Chantal blew me a kiss, and then she was gone, leaving us alone. The cat jumped from the front counter to the rear one, and it only took me a minute to figure out why—he’d smelled the leftover tuna from today’s special. I could hear slurping sounds as he pushed his face hungrily into the bowl.

In spite of myself, I had to admit he was cute—but cute enough for me to abandon my resolve of “no pets”? Well, maybe, especially if he earned his keep. Even though I greatly doubted there were mice in the storeroom now, it was a well-known fact that the scent of a cat often kept the rodents at bay. “You’d be cheaper than the exterminator,” I murmured, and I moved closer to him, reached out my hand, and stroked his black fur. It felt soft and . . . nice. The cat raised his head, leaned back, and bumped it against my hand. I scratched him behind his ears and he purred, his whiskers streaked with flecks of tuna.

“I’d like to help you out and give you a home, Ni—cat,” I corrected, my hand absently stroking up and down his back, “but to be perfectly honest, I’m terrible with pets. Aside from the whole chameleon incident, I just don’t have the patience. I’m not even good around other people sometimes.” I paused, and then added, “But you can finish the tuna. You must be hungry.”

He stopped purring and stared at me, gold eyes unblinking. At length he turned back and buried his head in the tuna bowl again. I sighed, locked the door, and switched the sign from OPEN to CLOSED and returned to the kitchen, where I pulled my laptop out from under one of the cabinets. I carried it over to the table near the kitchen entrance, settled myself comfortably, and called up the file I’d started on Lola Grainger. I opened the document labeled ORIGINAL ACCOUNT and followed the link to the *Cruz Sun* story:

SOCIETY MATRON FOUND DROWNED

Cruz, Calif—The body of socialite Lola Grainger was found floating Monday morning in a shallow lagoon off the Cruz coastline. County lifeguards and sheriff’s deputies said Mrs. Grainger, 47, drowned accidentally. The Graingers were on a weekend cruise with friends and members of Mr. Grainger’s staff, celebrating their fifteenth wedding anniversary. According to witnesses, Mrs. Grainger had been drinking rather heavily and was thought to have gone to bed. It is suspected that she got up in the middle of the night, slipped, and fell in. Her body, clad in sweats and a down vest, was found floating in the cove waters around 5 a.m. Her husband identified her body and is unavailable for comment.

I jumped as something soft wound itself around my legs. I looked down. The cat was stretched comfortably out at my feet. I bent over and lifted him onto my lap. God, he was heavy!

“You must weigh twenty pounds at least. Probably more. I guess a lot of people take pity on you and feed you, eh? If you did live here, I’d have to put you on a diet. If you’re too fat, you won’t be able to catch any

mice.”

The cat opened his mouth in a wide, unlovely yawn. I caught a whiff of his breath and set him back on the floor. He pinned me with another golden gaze and jumped back on my lap in one fluid motion. Rearing up, he raised one white paw, placed it on my shoulder, and swatted at a stray curl. I tucked the strand behind my ear and ran my hand along his soft fur.

“Okay, okay,” I murmured, letting my fingers tangle in the cat’s ruff. “You win. We’ll do as Chantal suggested, a trial thing—test each other out, see how we get along. And if things work out . . . but I’m not making any promises, okay, Ni—ah, cat?”

His mouth opened, almost as if he were going to answer me. And at that moment the phone rang. I reached over, shut off my laptop, and then got up, unceremoniously dumping him from my lap, and went over to the phone.

“Hot Bread.”

“Hey,” the voice of Louis, the owner of *Noir* and my online editor, boomed out. “I just thought I’d let you know I got the story you sent in. It’s great, Nora. I’m going to feature it on the cover.”

“You’re kidding,” I cried. “Louis, that’s . . . that’s wonderful.”

“You’ve done a remarkable job in the short while you’ve been with *Noir*,” he continued. “So much so that I wondered if perhaps you’d like to move on from the fiction end, maybe try your hand at something more realistic.”

“You must be reading my mind,” I said. “As it happens, I had an idea for a series of articles on cold cases.”

A loud laugh. “That sounds terrific, Nora.”

“I’m glad you think so. I’ve been doing a bit of research, and I thought I might start out with Lola Grainger.”

I heard a sharp intake of breath, then a moment of silence during which you could hear a pin drop all the way back in Chicago. Finally he cleared his throat. “Lola Grainger? That’s not an unsolved crime—that was ruled an accident.”

I twined a stray auburn curl around my finger. “I know it was, but—I’ve been going over every newspaper account I can find—which isn’t much—and something just doesn’t hit me right. I thought maybe—”

“I can sense your frustration,” Louis cut me off mid-sentence. “As a former true crime reporter, I can see where this type of story might appeal to you, but to be frank, I think it’d be better if you concentrated on less sketchy topics.”

I bit down hard on my lip. “What if I could prove there was some substance to it—that it wasn’t just a ‘sketchy topic’? What would you say then?”

His sigh was audible. “I’d probably say run with it, but you’re not going to find anything, so it’s a moot point.”

Hah. He had no idea whom he was talking to. If there was anything I loved in this world, it was a challenge. “Don’t bet on it.”

“I try not to take bets that aren’t sure things, and with you, anything’s possible.” He paused, then said, “How about your own column, you know, like you had in Chicago? People love ’em. It’s kinda natural, too, for an online magazine. Maybe you could do a sort of advice column—you know, for wannabe detectives? We’ve got lots of readers who fancy themselves in that category. They devour every crime show on television and think solving crimes is easy.”

A pang of disappointment arrowed through me. “It’s an interesting concept, but I’m not a detective, Louis.”

“You were a true crime reporter, right? That’s kind of the same thing. Besides, a little birdie told me you once had a secret yen to be a detective for real—did you ever get a PI license?”

I sucked in my breath. I’d confessed that long-ago dream during my first meeting with Louis—but only because I thought he was more than half-drunk and really wasn’t paying attention. “That’s all true, about my wanting to be a PI,” I stammered. “But all it’s ever been is a dream. There’s no way I could do that now, not with running Hot Bread.”

He interrupted, “Just because life’s thrown you a few curves doesn’t mean you should give up, especially if it’s something you really want. Why, if I’d done that, *Noir* would still be a couple of scratched pages in the back of my notebook.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, I haven’t worked out all the details yet.” He paused. “You know, the bigger the readership we develop, the more money we take in, which would mean a nice raise for you. You can always use more money, right?”

Leave it to Louis. He knew just how to appeal to someone—right in the old wallet. “Of course. I’m just not certain I could devote enough time to it. And as I’ve said, I really don’t have PI experience.”

“I’d be willing to work around your schedule,” Louis assured me. “As for the PI stuff, we could call your column *Notes from an Aspiring PI*, or something like that. How about we get together for lunch, say, one day next week and brainstorm? That idea’s not cast in stone, you know. I’m open to other suggestions you might have.”

I had the feeling he was just paying lip service to my qualms—but I was still intrigued by the idea. “Sure. I’m agreeable to a meeting, but I can’t do lunch. That’s my busy time, Louis.”

“Oh, right. How about a drink at the Poker Face, then?” I could hear him flipping pages over the receiver. “How would next Monday work for you? Around six thirty?”

“That should be okay. It’s a date. And Louis—thanks.”

“No problemo, Nora. Thank you. Don’t worry—I’m confident we can work something out.”

I was hopeful as I hung up the phone. Okay, maybe Louis had all but shot down my unsolved crimes idea, but the alternative he’d proposed signified a huge step forward not only for his magazine, but for me as well. Maybe, just maybe, my luck was changing.

“Sure, why not,” I murmured. “Nora Charles, former investigative reporter turned sandwich shop entrepreneur slash private eye. I could do it.”

I turned back to the table and stopped at the sight of the cat, squatted in front of my laptop, his eyes glued to an article displayed on its screen. I frowned. I’d been certain I’d shut the computer off when I’d gone to answer the phone. I moved closer and peered over the cat’s shoulder. An article from a sister paper, the *California Sun*, rehashing the details of Lola’s unfortunate “accident.” I made a move to shut off the laptop

when Nick's paw lashed out, the tip of his nail grazing the bottom of the screen. I tried to press the power button again—and once more his paw tapped insistently at the monitor.

“What do you want me to see?” I squinted at the screen. At the very bottom of the article, no bigger than a footnote, was one line: *“The deceased's sister was unavailable for comment, other than to say her sister's death was a travesty that bears further investigation.”*

I frowned. I hadn't realized Lola Grainger had any relatives. That in itself was interesting, and compounded with the fact it appeared her sister also thought there was something off about Lola's untimely demise . . .

I leaned over, switched off the laptop, and closed the cover, still wondering just how that article had popped up on a computer I'd have bet my last nickel had been shut off. I shook my head, determined not to obsess. Chantal would have called it Fate, and maybe it was.

Sometimes you just had to believe things just . . . happened. For a reason.

“Hm,” I said. “Two and two make four, right? Lola's sister—whoever she is—thinks there's something off about that ‘accident,’ too. I bet my hunch is right. I smell foul play—meow if you agree.”

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