

ROSALYN WRAIGHT

Corpse

CALL

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Boys. If you watch them long enough, you can begin to predict. Step. Step. Swagger. And then a glance to each side. Like the world would be looking. Arrogance all balled up in a simple glance from side to side.

I didn't always watch. It just seems like always. And it seems as though I am always so very close. On the brink. But then the swagger. The swagger is what changes everything. The mindset that makes innocence remember guilt and seek to blot it out.

We all have that little homing device—that little thing inside that broadcasts our sins through the cerebral airwaves just to remind us, just to keep us on the edge. You think you can let go, but like a barely tuned-in radio station, it says it loud and clear on occasion and then fills the rest of the time with white noise. Stifling, consistent white noise. Then black noise. Then periods of white noise to make us think we could almost let go of it, almost know peace. Then black noise.

I am his black noise. His ceaseless reminder that something in his world is amiss.

He almost makes eye contact. That would be a mistake. That would be like making those cerebral airwaves real-world airwaves. Everyone within miles would hear what he thinks should not be said.

But it will be said. One day very soon, it will be said.

But not today.

He nearly makes eye contact again and then looks away. I look away, too. But I am still watching.

I walk away. Step. Step. No swagger.

It is a dance. A dance with an unwilling partner. A tango of the wills maybe, for lack of a better term. I have the lead. I lead. He follows. Into my trap. Where I want him. Where I need him to be so that my own black noise doesn't stand a chance, but instead is drowned out by the white noise.

I hurry across the street. I carefully deposit coins in the blue metal paper vendor. I grab the inky thing, careful not to touch anything but the white space. Touching the black would be like taking out a billboard, announcing I was here. Here are my fingerprints! All inked. All ready to go. This, I know. This, I will not do.

I take a seat at the outdoor table. A waitress comes, and I order coffee. She recognizes me from my ritual, but she does not acknowledge that she recognizes me. I do not either. We keep our little secret. I order coffee, and she brings it in a bone-white cup. Bone-white, perfect for inky fingerprints, and so I am careful.

I take a sip, and then carefully remove a five-dollar bill from my pocket. By the edges, and then with the spoon, I jimmy up the saucer and slip the bill underneath. My precautions. And if I timed it all perfectly, I should be able to look up to the second-story window just in time to watch him swagger to it. He'll try to work now. He'll pretend that I'm not having coffee in a bone-white cup, pretend that the importance of whatever he does supersedes what I do, what I will do when the moment is ripe. When he turns his back to the window, I unfold my paper. Careful. Careful.



Chapter 1

With a sigh, Detective Laura McCallister wiped the mayo from her face with a napkin. Then, she took a sloshing slug of coffee as she studied the scene before her. A diver came to the surface of the lake in the middle of Prentice Park and gestured to the driver of a tow truck. A moment later, the slack in the cable behind the truck was taken up.

“It’s Max Wendt,” Officer Jansen announced as he briskly approached her car. “We found him. Actually, a mail carrier on her lunch break saw the car in the water and called 911.”

“Since when do I get called to traffic accidents?” she challenged, her eyes minding the tow truck’s winch. “I was actually sitting in a restaurant having lunch for a change. Imagine that.”

“The car was in neutral, Detective,” Jansen replied.

She offered no response, although she knew he expected one. Instead, she watched the back end of a dark green sedan slowly emerge from the water. Noting its position, she knew that it had gone in at a ninety-degree angle from the roadway. Its aim was intentional. The slight incline of the bank would not have allowed a great speed, especially in neutral. She knew the driver would have had ample time to exit the vehicle, if he had wanted or been able to. Satisfied the situation warranted a detective, she took another swallow of her coffee and exited the car.

“Any tread marks, Jansen?” she asked, still watching the sedan materialize as it inched backward to the shoreline.

“Nothing,” he answered. “The wife said he went missing on Friday, and it rained that night and all day Saturday. Anything that might have been here is long gone.”

“Ignition?”

“On.”

“I’ll talk to his wife, but did she say anything was wrong with Wendt? Depressed? Did they have a fight or something?”

“Nothing like that. She said he went to Briscole’s bar that night like he

did every payday to blow off steam with his buddies. She expected him home by midnight.”

She watched the rest of the car come into view, its cracks pouring precious evidence back into the lake. Cautiously, she neared the driver’s side door and peered in. A body slumped face down from passenger side to driver side, its head nearly lodged under the steering wheel. Dark hair, jeans, and a red flannel shirt fit the description the wife had given.

“All right, here we go, Jansen,” she said. “I want pictures before anything. Then, let Hastings in. Are CSU and Hastings here?”

“En route,” he replied. “I called them and you after the dive team told me what they found.”

She withdrew gloves from a small bag in her jacket pocket, put them on, and then cautiously reached through the open window. From the back pocket, she carefully retrieved a brown wallet, flipped it open, and read aloud, “Maxwell E. Wendt.” She handed the wallet to Jansen and headed to her car.

Since the park sat in the middle of the city, news had traveled swiftly, and a crowd began to gather. Officer Jessop tugged on two small boys who had snuck under the police line he had just strung. Reporters aimed cameras, most of them hoping for some gory shot that would play well on the front page or sensationalize the lead story on the evening news. McCallister studied them all as she leaned in to grab her camera from the glove compartment. She aimed the camera at the group and snapped several pictures, gazing between shots to see whether the action made anyone uncomfortable.

“Can you give us anything, Detective? Is there a body in the car?” one of the reporters shouted. “Is it Max Wendt? That’s the plate number we have on him.”

“I know as much as you do,” she responded with a shrug of her shoulders. “Just *please* be patient so if there is a next of kin involved, they find out from us and not some incorrect news flash.” She threw a cursory smile and made her way onto the road.

As she walked, she looked for skid marks the rain would not have washed away. Finding none, she took pictures from the road toward the car and the sparsely wooded shoreline. She noted trees on the opposite side of the road—trees that would not have allowed the car to careen out of control toward the lake only to be shoved into neutral. From road edge to lake, that was the greatest distance the car could have traveled without a breakneck turn.

She brought the camera down and noticed the slow approach of the coroner’s van.

“Good afternoon, Laura,” Dr. Peter Hastings called as disembarked.

“Took you long enough,” she chided her lifelong friend. “Looks like we found a man named Wendt who went missing Friday night. He doesn’t look

too bad for being in there almost three days. I expected worse.”

“The water temp this time of year averages 53 degrees. That would have slowed decomp, but now that he’s out, it’ll go fast. I need to get a move on,” he said. “Are you ready for me?”

She gestured to the vehicle and then followed him as he made his way. He surveyed the body and the front seat as he stretched on his gloves.

“What about the position of the body, Hastings?” she quizzed. “Is that what you’d expect from a man seated behind the wheel?”

“Not exactly,” he answered with another scan of the front seat. “But if you’re about to drown, you don’t generally stay calmly seated and patiently wait for the inevitable. He probably tried to get out, floated, or he could have been moved when the car drained as it was pulled out.” He looked to the diver. “What was the position when you found him? How strong was the current down there?”

“He wasn’t much different from what he is right now, except his head wasn’t under the wheel like that. The current wasn’t strong at all.”

“Did you open the window?” McCallister asked.

“No,” he answered. “It was already open.”

“So, if he was fighting for his life, Hastings, why didn’t he just slip out the open window right next to him? Or why not open the door? Why go to the other side?”

“Laura, think about it,” he reprimanded with a jerky shake of his head. “Would you have your bearings in a situation like that? Was it dark?”

“You’re supposed to tell me time of death,” she countered. “You tell me if it was dark.”

“You are no doubt the most impatient person I have ever known, Laura. If you’d let me do my job—”

“What about a positive ID? Can you at least give me that so I can tell his wife before all these reporters—”

“Go!” he ordered, vehemently pointing to the road.

“I know. I know,” she conceded, raising flattened hands in surrender. “I’ll leave you be.” She spun on her heels and walked away.

She stood on the road and looked in all directions. In her mind, she tried to imagine which direction she would take if she needed to exit the scene quickly on foot. To the right, she would have headed to the park’s entrance that butted a usually busy street in Granton. To the left, she would have gone further into the park on a road that merely circled back to the entrance and the same busy street. Directly in front, a small playground and a shelter with two picnic tables edged a wooded area that would eventually bring her to a section of the city riddled with condominiums. By far, that would have been the optimal escape route for someone not wanting to be seen.

“Ristow,” she called and then awaited the CSU tech’s approach.

“What do you need, Detective?”

“When you’re done here, I want a sweep from this spot all the way out of the park through the woods,” she ordered while gesturing in front of her. “Ristow, find me something—anything—that says someone else was here.”

After Ristow nodded, McCallister removed a notebook and pen from her pocket and began to transcribe what she knew and what she wanted to know. She had nearly completed the task when she received an elbow from Hastings.

“It’s Maxwell Wendt,” he announced. “Everything fits, right down to the tattoo on his left arm and an appendectomy scar. I’d still like a visual ID, though. I’m not sure how the wife will take this, how she’d react to viewing. I can do dental records, if that’s better.”

“Any idea how long he was down there?”

“Based on my preliminary findings, I’d say Friday night is probably accurate, maybe Saturday morning at the latest.”

“Was he alive when he went in?”

“I honestly don’t know. Like I said, this is preliminary. I wanted to be able to ID him for you and give you a ballpark time of death,” he said. “I need him in the lab for the rest. I’ll get you what you need as soon as I can.”

“I know. I know,” she said with a smile. “I’m sorry I’m so damn pushy. It’s just—”

“It’s just the way you are,” he interrupted and then jabbed her again. “I know. I wouldn’t recognize you if you weren’t. Now, can I have the poor man?”

She nodded and then motioned to Jansen. “Put up the tarps,” she called. “I don’t want those damn reporters getting a thing.” Then, she spouted orders about CSU processing the scene, getting the car to the lab’s garage, and making sure Hastings got everything he needed. After receiving acknowledgements, she said she would go talk to the wife.

Twenty-five minutes later, she pulled into the Wendt’s gravel driveway, just outside the city limits. Numerous vehicles were lined up in front of the house, and she recognized the scene as a family gathering, that huddling that goes on to brace for bad news and yet still beat the hope drum no matter how empty it sounded. It was limbo. It was hell. And what she was about to do was to eliminate the limbo and intensify the hell.

She knocked on the front screen door, although there were already numerous faces on the other side of it staring her down. They already knew. In their guts, they already knew.

“I’m Detective McCallister, Granton Police Department. I need to speak with Grace Wendt,” she said to glazed expressions.

“Gracie!” one of them finally called.

As if McCallister had already delivered the news, she heard, “No. Please,

no!”

The group slowly parted, and a man approached, nearing dragging a distraught woman with him. She covered her face with her hands and shook with sobs.

“I’m Max’ brother,” the man said. “Walter Wendt. This is Gracie, Max’ wife.”

“Please, please, don’t say it!” the woman shrieked. “Please, just tell me he’s okay. I won’t be mad at him. I swear I won’t be mad at him.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Wendt,” McCallister said, forcing herself not give into the tears trying to force their way out, trying not to loathe life for what she was about to do. “We just found his car in Prentice Lake. I’m afraid your husband is dead.”

The woman’s knees gave out from under her, and her brother-in-law tried to hold her up like a heavy rag doll.

“Come on, Gracie,” Walter encouraged. “Let’s be strong. Max would want you to be strong. Johnny needs you to be strong. We’ll get through this. Come on, Gracie.” He hoisted her until he could hold her in his arms.

McCallister offered Walter an apologetic look. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I need to ask some her questions, but I can wait. I’ll be out by my car when she’s ready.”

He nodded appreciatively, and McCallister took leave.

She sat in the front seat of her car with her legs hanging out and lit a cigarette. Willfully, she shook the image of the devastated woman from her mind. She told herself that hell was better than limbo, knowing was better than being tormented by the unknown. Then, she busied herself with her notes, and not more than ten minutes later, Walter neared her car.

“I think she’s ready,” he said and pointed to the front porch where Grace sat on a bench.

McCallister followed him to the porch where she reiterated her sympathies.

“Was he drunk?” Grace asked. “Is that how it happened?”

“We’re not sure yet,” McCallister answered. “Is that a good possibility? Was that something he did?”

Grace laughed. “He only had the guts to come home drunk once, and he paid for it—dearly—for a week. I thought maybe he got drunk and was just afraid to face me.”

“The coroner has to run tests, Mrs. Wendt. I can’t answer your question right now. But the more information you can give me, the easier it will be to determine exactly what happened.” She paused and then asked, “You were expecting him home by midnight. Correct?” When she nodded, she asked, “When was the last time you saw him or talked to him?”

“He headed to the bar about 8:30. I think I called him around ten to ask

him bring milk home on his way.”

“What kind of mood was he in?”

“He was in a good mood. ... I could tell he was drinking, but I also knew he wasn’t drunk. He said he was shooting pool and taking everybody’s money.” She stopped talking and seemed to lose herself in thought.

“Then what, Mrs. Wendt? I know this is hard, but please keep talking to me. Help me understand.”

“He said he’d bring milk home,” she answered very despondently. “When he wasn’t home by 12:30, I started calling. ... I feel so bad now about being angry. I had no idea—” She started crying again.

“Mrs. Wendt, was he depressed lately? Was anything weighing on him?”

“Nothing beyond the usual,” she said. “Paying the bills. Getting the shed finished.” She absentmindedly pointed to the side yard, to a large half-built structure. “That damn shed.” She shook her head. “He’d come out here with Johnny, our son, to work on it, and then they’d end up throwing the football around all afternoon. The two of them ... two ten-year-old boys when they’re together.”

McCallister continued as she saw the tears rise again, “Any problems with his friends? At work?”

Suddenly, Walter interrupted, “Why all the questions, Officer? You make it sound like he did it on purpose!”

“He would never! Max would never!”

“We’re simply trying to determine what happened,” McCallister assured. “Like I said, the more we know, the easier it will be to understand what happened. You want to know what happened, don’t you?” She gave a stern look to Walter.

“Of course, we do!” he said and then bowed his head.

“Then, what you’re telling me is that nothing has been any different lately. Correct?”

They both were adamant.

“So you have no sense that he maybe he did it intentionally or someone did it to him. You’re convinced it was an accident. Is that accurate?”

Again, they were both very adamant, and with a glance, McCallister could tell that all the eavesdropping relatives at the door were equally convinced.

McCallister gave them both her business card and asked that they call if they thought of anything that might be helpful. Walter agreed to identify the body at the coroner’s office after he retrieved Johnny from school and brought him home to learn that his father was dead.

When McCallister hit the bottom porch step, she stopped and turned to Grace. “I’m very sorry you lost your husband, Mrs. Wendt. I promise I will do everything in my power to find out what happened.”

Grace nodded at her with a slight smile. McCallister returned the smile

and then left them to deal with their hell.

A short time later, McCallister's car skirted the curb in front of Briscole's, a small neighborhood bar on the edge of town. She noted that while it was very close to the Wendt's home, it was far from Prentice Park. She entered the bar and gave her eyes time to adjust to the dim light. An older man sat at the end of the bar, nursing a beer and watching cable news. The bartender looked to be a man of about 60, his bald head catching the light from the TV screen above his head.

"What can I get for you, miss?" he asked with a broad smile.

She approached the bar as she showed her badge. "Detective McCallister, Granton PD," she clarified. "I was hoping I could talk to the bartender who worked on Friday night."

"That would be me, Charlie Briscole," he replied. "What can I do for you, Detective? Are you sure I can't get you anything? How about a cup of coffee?"

That she agreed to and stood silently as he poured her a cup. When he set it on the bar, he said, "I supposed you're here about Max. Any news?"

Suddenly, she found herself wishing the reporters had spread their tidbits of information. "Actually, we just found him in Prentice Lake. He's dead."

"Oh my God!" he exclaimed, and even in the dim light, she saw his face go ashen. "What happened? What the hell was he doing there?"

"I was hoping you could help me figure that out. Do you remember what time he left here on Friday?"

"Of course, I do. I already told the officers on Saturday. He left about 11:15 after he ran out of money. He wasn't much of a pool player, but that never stopped him from bragging and betting."

She asked about his mood and level of intoxication. He described him as being in good spirits and assured her that none of his friends would have let him drive if he had drunk too much. He said that right before he left he and his buddies were laughing, trying to come up with some excuse for being broke so Gracie didn't string him up from the clothesline.

"He even had to borrow five bucks from someone because Gracie needed him to stop at the store. ... I felt so bad when she started calling that night. The first couple times she called she was mad, and then, she was downright scared. Everybody took off and started looking for him. I don't think anyone would have thought to look by Prentice Lake. What the hell was he doing way over there? How is Gracie? Oh my God, her heart must be broken."

She inquired about the Wendt's relationship and was told about childhood sweethearts who married as soon as they both turned 18. He said they had just celebrated 25 years of marriage. She asked whether he was friendly with any women at the bar on his payday outings.

"Well," he began, "I hate to turn on my own kind, but he *was* a man. So,

yes, when he was drinking, he'd flirt. But not unlike his pool playing, I don't think he was anything more than a big talker. He knew where he lived and that someone was waiting."

She finished her coffee and then asked about other patrons in the bar that night. He said there were no unfamiliar faces and jotted down as many names as he could on a napkin. She thanked him for his time and placed a five-dollar bill on the bar just as her cell phone sounded in her pocket.

"McCallister."

"Detective, it's Ristow. You still interested in something to prove someone else was here?"

Chapter 2

Lights flashing, McCallister's car screeched to a halt in front of the police lines in Prentice Park. She flew out of her car, ducked under the yellow tape, and yelled Ristow's name as loudly as she could.

From a distance, she heard, "Up here, Detective. Follow the tape."

She did as instructed, heading into the wooded area behind the playground. Soon, she came upon Ristow and another tech rummaging in their equipment cases.

"What did you find for me, Ristow?" she asked with a hopeful smirk.

Ristow pointed to a tree, and there, McCallister saw a zippered plastic bag, containing a blue cell phone, tied to the trunk with a dark red ribbon.

"Did you call it? Is it his? Whose is it?"

"It's Wendt's all right. Jansen had his number from the missing persons report, and I turned the phone on. He has an Elvis ringtone, by the way, in case you need to put that in your report." She smiled. She was proud of herself, pleased to hand McCallister one of the straws for which she notoriously grasped.

McCallister scrunched her face in confusion and stared at the tree. "Why the hell is it bagged and tied to an f-ing tree?"

"That's your job, Detective. I only take pictures of it and process it in the lab. What it means, I'm afraid that's yours."

McCallister rolled her eyes at her and said, "Then let's get it to the lab. What are we waiting for?"

"Procedure."

Impatiently, McCallister watched one of them cut the ribbon while the other recovered the bag. They bagged, labeled, signed, and, as far as McCallister was concerned, took their sweet time with all of it.

Nearly an hour later, the prize was being removed from the bag in the lab. Ristow meticulously applied fingerprint powder to it, inside and out, eventually declaring it print-free. She then turned it on again, and they both

studied the list of recent calls. Jansen's was there, as well as a multitude from his frantic wife. They scanned the list of text messages, and again, there was a slew from his wife, little love notes she seemed to have sent him while he was at work. Nothing jumped out at them.

"Why the hell was it bagged and tied to the tree?" McCallister thought aloud. "Who the hell bagged it and tied it to the tree?" Her thoughts swirled like cyclones. She despised the sensation of something being right in front of her and being unable to see it. Suddenly, she shouted, "Drafts! Check his message drafts!"

Ristow quickly thumbed the menu. "Bingo!"

They both looked to the small screen, and a draft of a text message read: *Stupid fucking cops!!!*

"What the hell is this?" McCallister shouted. Her thought cyclones took on speed and sucked up everything in their paths.

"Well, we're not that stupid," Ristow said. "Let's look at his photos." She thumbed them to the screen, and another "Bingo!" burst forth. There was a photo of Max Wendt's car nearly submerged on the darkened Prentice Lake. The picture bore a timestamp: *10/17 11:56 pm*. That happened to be four minutes before the curfew Grace Wendt imposed on the night her husband went missing.

McCallister stared at the minuscule picture, willing herself an eye keen enough to determine if she could see Wendt's head behind the wheel as the car sunk. She begged to see a reflection in the back window of whomever held the cell phone and snapped a picture as if it were a sunny afternoon at the zoo and not the moment of murder. Expectedly disappointed on both counts, she asked Ristow to have the photo enlarged and enhanced. Ristow agreed and added that she would also fume the plastic bag for prints and see what they could do with the ribbon.

McCallister nodded with encouragement but said, "If the person was smart enough not to leave even a partial on a cell phone, I doubt we'll find anything, but definitely, process anything and everything."

She left Ristow to her work and headed to her own area of the station, her thoughts still fiercely aloft. She went to the building's roof, lit a cigarette, and paced. Then, she hurled herself into the cyclones of thought. A family man out with his friends, headed home early, ends up on the other side of town at a park. His car lands on the bottom of a lake with his body in it, while someone took a picture, someone used his phone to mock the police, someone bagged and tied the phone to a tree. Who? Why? How? From experience and a skeptical nature, she knew that things were not always what they seemed. From her last murder case, she also knew that suicide could convincingly disguise itself as murder and vice versa. Could he have done it himself? Shoved the car into the lake, took a photo, used and planted

the phone, and then swam to his car to await his watery death? She knew it was simultaneously feasible and incredible. *Why* would he do something like that? A life insurance policy that would pay on murder but not suicide? Was he protecting his family, securing their financial future? But if so, what the hell made him feel the need to abandon life and his family?

She stomped her cigarette and instantaneously lit another.

If he didn't do it, who the hell did? And why? And why taunt the cops? Why not just let the car and the body settle to the silty bottom in a seemingly clueless state? Why announce that someone did it? Why announce it to the cops? A murderer's objective was to take care not to leave clues. What kind of murderer intentionally left clues? She knew too well that it was the kind who left false clues to mislead, the kind who wanted to get caught, or the arrogant kind who didn't think they could.

Again, she extinguished her cigarette and then made a beeline for her car. Intently, she drove to Briscole's and came to a pause in its parking lot. She looked to her watch and recorded the time in her notebook. It came upon half past four. Purposefully avoiding forethought, she eased into traffic and headed to Prentice Park, observing her surroundings and mentally registering her passage through one of the four intersections in the city with a traffic camera. Once in the park, she pulled to a stop by the crime scene, still abuzz with activity. She recorded her time of 23 minutes, acknowledging that late afternoon traffic would have slowed her down, compared to a Friday night. If Wendt left the bar at 11:15, drove to the park in an unhurried 23 minutes, and the picture was taken at 11:56, whatever happened to him occurred within a minimum window of 18 minutes. Except, that made it all sound so easy. That made it seem like all she had to do was simply determine what had taken place in those 18 minutes. *Simply?* Things were rarely that simple, unless someone wanted them to be.

With yet another mission in mind, she hightailed it back to the station. Within moments of her footfalls in the parking lot, she was demanding footage from the camera at Pine and Main for the night in question.

Her mind continued its spinning as she watched frame after frame of stops and starts, red lights, yellow lights, green lights, streetlights, headlights, and blinkers. The abundance of light sources turned the wet pavement into a cluttered mirror.

When her phone sounded in her pocket, she hit PAUSE and answered. Jansen informed her that the scene was processed and asked for further instructions. She advised him that since his shift had ended, both he and Jessop should head home, but then, she added, "I know it's probably a long shot, but get a couple of uniforms to do a door-to-door in the neighborhood on the wooded end of the park. If someone left by that route, maybe somebody saw or heard something."

She disconnected and clicked the mouse on the PLAY button. Not five minutes later, a green sedan made its way into the top of the computer screen, its timestamp: 23:24:37. The car eased through the green light and swiftly vanished from the screen. She quickly paused and asked the tech how to watch it again in slow motion. He rolled his chair next to her and reached over to make the program do what she needed. Intently, she studied. She could see Wendt's hands on the steering wheel, the dim light making the rest of him barely visible, and then the car was out of sight.

"Play it again," she instructed.

Three more times she studied until finally she yelled, "Stop!" She leaned closer to the screen and pointed to the darkened passenger side. "That's a hand. A hand comes up and goes back down," she said. "Do you see it?"

The tech moved several screens back and then several screens forward. He repeated the sequence several times. "I think you could be right, Detective," he concurred. "But watch this."

Several keystrokes later, all four camera angles from the intersection were on the screen. Again, they watched frame by frame.

"That's Wendt!" she declared, pointing to a shot of the driver's side. "There!" she yelled a second later. "There's someone in the passenger seat! Can you zoom in or something?"

The tech did so, but a raised and bent arm obscured the passenger's face. "How convenient," he remarked. "We get this a lot, people trying not to be seen by the camera. Why else would you ride around with your arm wrapped around your head like that? We get carloads of teenagers shooting the moon, too."

She stared at the still frame, realizing that identification wouldn't be as easy as it could have been, but she at least knew that between Briscole's and that intersection, someone else entered the twisted tale. She asked the tech, "Since you're such a wiz at this, would you guess male or female? I look, but I have no clue."

"Hmm, let's see." He moved closer to the screen. "I'd say it could be either, but certainly not a brawny male, by any means."

McCallister nodded and added to the list, "And a light colored shirt ... with short sleeves. That's odd for the middle of October. It's already been in the 30s at night."

"And dark blond or light brown hair. Probably short."

Running out of anything else distinguishable, she asked, "Can you turn all this into photos for me? Preferably good close-ups of the people in the car?" When he smiled and nodded, she added, "And a name and address on that passenger ... if you have time, of course."

"Of course," he replied and quietly laughed. "I'll have them ready for you in the morning, Detective."

She thanked him for his invaluable help and headed upstairs to her desk. She had just sat down when the Captain Greeley's voice made his presence known.

"Laura. Laura. Laura. And what have you been up to today?"

"Just changing rolls of toilet paper in the restrooms like my job description instructs me to. And you?"

"Oh, just twiddling my thumbs like mine instructs. Occasionally, I wander over this way and wonder what that crowd is doing out on the front sidewalk."

"Shit! The press! I plumb forgot." She stood and glanced out the window, seeing reporters and camerapersons pace like zombies in a b-movie.

"Well, get me up to speed on the case first, and then you can go frustrate them."

She filled him in on what had proven to be a wild-ride of an afternoon. They both agreed that the next steps were contingent upon lab work and what the coroner had to say.

"I'll order extra patrols for the park area," he offered. "If he was murdered—which it sure seems like—as soon as this person knows we found Wendt, I'd bet money they'll go back to see if we got the cell phone." He shook his head. "If this turns out to be what it looks like, it's pretty sick. ... But they all are, aren't they?"

After Greeley left, she scanned her mind to make sure she had done all she could at the moment. It seemed odd to her to be calling it a day. The first day of most murder investigations tended to be long and rigorous. She barely resisted the urge to call the coroner's office, deciding to trust that Hastings would call if he had anything and knowing that badgering him never hastened his conclusions.

She made her way downstairs and out the front of the building to be overrun with questions from the press. She raised her hand to pause them.

"Early this afternoon, a postal worker reported seeing a car in Prentice Lake," she began. "Our dive team discovered the body of Maxwell E. Wendt, who was reported missing last Friday. Our team recovered both the body and the car. The cause of the accident remains under investigation."

"If it was an accident," one of them yelled, "why is a detective on the case?"

"That's all I've got, people," she shouted as she started walking away. "I'll give you more information as it becomes available."

"Detective McCallister, if—"

"Thanks for your time, everybody," she added and quickened her pace.

She had just rounded the corner of the building by the employee parking lot when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

"Laura, wait up," Kate Sutter, a reporter for the *Granton Journal* and a

close friend, called. “Do you have time for a cigarette, or are you rushed?”

Abruptly, McCallister stopped and turned to face her. “Don’t you have to get your story in?”

“I just did,” she replied with a boastful smile. “I only needed confirmation.” She began laughing. “As a breed, we reporters are quite capable of figuring things out on our own. Sometimes we only need you to make it official.”

McCallister chuckled as she gestured for Kate to follow her. She retrieved her cigarettes from her pocket and offered one to Kate. “And what has your breed figured out?”

“The way the car went in the lake makes the chances of it being accidental very slim. Hence, there’s a detective on the case.”

“Oh,” McCallister said, holding a lighter in front of Kate. “Thanks for the tip. I’ll have to look into that. ... Now, what did you want? Was it honestly just to share a smoke?”

“Actually, I was going to suggest calling our far better halves and all meeting somewhere for dinner.”

McCallister’s head hurt from the thoughts being tossed about there. She had visions of slipping into her Holly’s arms for a long spell and then sliding into a hot bath.

“No shoptalk—I promise,” Kate assured. “Just a friendly dinner, a little needed distraction from the crazy day this has been. Even for a Monday, this was way over the top.”

She knew that to be true and suddenly found herself accepting the offer. Both called home, and Holly and Claudia agreed to meet them at Riverbend Restaurant in half an hour.

A short time later, McCallister sat in her car in the restaurant’s darkened parking lot. She leaned her head back and tried once again to make order of the chaos in her mind. It was to no avail; she needed more information before anything would make sense.

Suddenly, the passenger door opened, and Holly scooted in, smiling broadly. “How’s my babe of a cop?” she asked after kissing her.

“I’m just fine. And how’s the love of my life?”

“I’m better now,” she replied, resting her head on McCallister’s shoulder. “I missed you.” Then, she slapped a folded newspaper onto McCallister’s stomach. “Here’s your job prospect for the month. I thought today would be an excellent day to tempt you.”

McCallister grabbed the paper and tilted it toward the parking lot light. Holly had been doing this for years, finding and circling an ad in the Classifieds section of the newspaper. Once a month, a red magic marker would prompt McCallister to consider an alternative to police work. Every other day of the month, Holly supported her, but on that one day, she voiced her discontent, her fear, quite flamboyantly.

“What is it this time?” McCallister asked while she scanned the columns. “Exotic dancer?”

“Oh, you wish. Never in a million years would I let—”

“Parking ramp attendant!” she gasped after reading the ad. “You’d stick me in a little booth all day?”

Holly giggled. “Actually, I would. It’s a respectable job. Just think about it. You could read your ratty old novels all day, stay warm, stay safe... It’s perfect, babe!”

“And how about I lock you in the utility room in your art studio? You won’t be able to paint, but you’ll be warm and safe all day.”

“How about we lock us both in the utility room? That would solve everything.”

“Now that’s the most tempting offer you’ve made yet.” She paused to laugh, and then with a suddenly serious tone, she said, “But, Hol, our work is—”

“I know. I know,” Holly interrupted. She squeezed McCallister’s thigh. “It’s just that... There’s another wacko out there again, isn’t there, Laura? And you’re going to go look for him. I just hate this.”

“Hol—”

Without warning, Kate and Claudia appeared in front of the car and started drumming on the hood.

“Come on, you two!” Claudia yelled. “Get a move on!”

“We’re coming,” McCallister shouted. She clutched Holly’s hand, kissed it gently, and said, “Come on, Hol. Let’s just go have a nice time at dinner, and we’ll talk when we get home.”

“I don’t need to talk. I just need a promise.”

McCallister grimaced. She could not promise half the things she knew Holly needed to hear regarding to her work. *I promise I won’t put myself in danger. I promise I won’t get shot. I promise...* She closed her eyes tightly and braved, “Promise what?”

“Just promise you won’t go so far away this time. Do what you’ve got to do, but keep your heart with me. Please. I’ll be gentle with it.”

“Hol, I love you! I can promise that in an instant. My heart never leaves you. My mind, though... I promise I’ll do my best. And if I go drifting off too far without even knowing it, you have my permission to bean me a good one.”

Holly gripped her hand. “You’ve got a deal. But, babe, I don’t need your permission to bean you a good one. It’s my job.” She laughed, swatted her arm, and ordered, “Now, get out of the car, and let’s go have a nice time.”

They enjoyed a leisurely dinner, and all the while, McCallister sensed that the three of them were akin to that family gathering. They braced for something bad at the same time they beat the hope drum. They were

huddling around her, propping her up for something, and this confounded her to no end. Was she misreading? Was it merely a coincidence? Did they have a bad feeling or know something she didn't? Or had Holly simply called in reinforcements in her effort to keep her grounded during what she figured loomed ahead? Whatever it was, McCallister did not like it. Even in the midst of the laid-back camaraderie, her skin crawled.

About the Author

Rosalyn Wraight is the author of two other titles in the Detective Laura McCallister mystery series: *Woman Justice* and *Secrets and Sins*.

She is the author of the Lesbian Adventure Club series, which currently consists of ten titles: *Scavengers*, *Ledge Walkers*, *Savages*, *Loose Sleuths*, *Sisters*, *Leakers Ignited*, *Scraps*, *L-Word C-Word*, *Spiders*, and *Likely Suspects*. This ongoing series features Detective Laura McCallister, as well as various characters appearing in this title.

On the Web

Author Website: LesbianWriter.com
Author Bookstore: LesbianAdventureClub.com

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