

Rosalyn Wraight

SECRETS
and
SINS



Secrets and Sins

Rosalyn Wraight

To Mary

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a Don't Waste Daylight publication

Chapter 1

April 7th 5:45 PM

A cold sweat and a heavy heart mock me as I enter these words tonight. I am fearful to even write them, and yet, I know that I must. Thoughts gnaw away at me; I have picked myself to the bone trying to surmise a way to change things. If I cannot, then let these words speak as proof of the circumstances at hand.

It seems my countless thoughts about Alex have conglomerated themselves into a conclusion that confuses me. How foolish I was not to have seen it sooner! How foolish I was not to have fathomed her innocent suggestion that I increase my life insurance, get my affairs in order. Amid our conversation about Mother and Father's deaths, about our own aging, I merely took it as sisterly concern. Certainly not as a deviousness pointing to her preparations to kill me!

Are her financial burdens so heavy that she could place a bounty on my head? The ledger shows my many attempts to help her, but obviously she wants more: the lifestyle she was accustomed to before three divorces and lunatic extravagances took their cut.

Has she sunk so low in her selfishness and greed that she could reduce her own flesh and blood—her own brother—to the monetary buoyancy of inheritance?

My sister. My own sister!

God, I beg to call myself paranoid, filled with the inane suppositions of a lonely old man. If only it were that simple—if only it were precisely that way—what I would not give for that! But her hatred of me, there since childhood, seems to have intensified, festered over these past months. And regardless of my contrary desires, I cannot look away—no more—on that my life undoubtedly depends.

Perhaps it is misguided, but I have invited her for dinner this evening. If I can summon the courage, I shall confront her with my suspicions and divert her plan: get her to see how deeply I love her, how far I have—and would—bend to help her. If I cannot, then I will be forced to continue living under her thumb, in fear of my own life.

But either way, it is imperative that I hide my fear from her.

In the event that the course of the evening fails to meet my expectation of resolve, I have hidden a loaded pistol in the living room. In case ... just in case Alex is even more mentally unstable than I have theorized.

Suddenly, the expected, yet intrusive chime of the doorbell echoed through the capacious house. Tobias hastily scrawled: *I must go—she is here. God help me.* He placed his pen between the confessional pages and gently shut his journal. As he rose from his chair, he braced himself against the grand mahogany desk and gasped a breath of desperate fortitude. With lingering reluctance burdening his steps, he withdrew from the study and headed toward the front door.

Alexandra had concluded her third and crescendoing succession of knocks by the time Tobias reached the huge oak door. With a twist of his hand and a mighty creak, the door flared, allowing Alexandra's words to enter before her. "For God's sake, Tobias, what took you so long? You were expecting me—you did invite me."

In her whirlwind manner, she entered the hallway, snagged her trench coat on the coat tree's limb, and shoved her ivory-handled umbrella into the stand. "It's supposed to rain later. I just got my hair done, and I am not about to ruin it in any downpour. Oh, and I brought the bottle of cognac you asked for," she said, impatiently handing him her tote bag. "I suppose there's a reason you had me go to such trouble and expense. You have a reason for everything, Tobias, but regardless, here it is."

"Good evening, Alex," he said, trying to appear unruffled by her usual tempest. He carefully clutched the handles of her tote bag and continued,

“Your hair looks lovely. Oh, and thank you so much for bringing the cognac. Do—do, come in.”

Alexandra took an abrupt, almost breakneck turn to peer at him, her eyes squinting tightly in skepticism. “My, you’re in an unusually good mood tonight, dear brother. What was there? A sale on fertilizer today?”

Tobias chuckled, but inwardly he grimaced, sensing the inevitable onset of her ridicule. “No,” he replied. “But now that you mention it, there is something I must show you. Please, come with me.”

Ardently, Tobias strode through the living room, depositing the tote bag on the bar as he passed. He made his way into the dining room, beyond the table that had been so elegantly set for dinner. Then he came to a sudden halt and waited for Alexandra to catch up. Curiosity chased her until she stood before him. Then, Tobias turned to face the door.

“The greenhouse!” she exclaimed, disappointment twisting her face. “I should’ve figured as much.” She shook her head, sarcastically adding, “Boy, this’ll do wonders for my hair.”

Tobias ignored the nearing of her predestined tirade, clutched the doorknob to the greenhouse, and pulled it open. A warm draft of tropical air escaped, the humidity dabbing their faces as they entered. With a gentle snap, the door quickly closed behind them, hoarding the essentials of survival.

The hothouse ran an incredible distance, nearly the entire length of the large house. In Tobias’ mind, it stretched eternally—when compared to the small back room he had started with many decades before: hobbyist turned amateur turned fanatic.

Three rows of wooden stagings outstretched, and atop each one, vigorously grew his beloved orchids, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them: species, tribes, and subtribes—yellows, purples, black, the whitest of whites—commoners and rarities. Some boasted gigantic sprays over three feet long; some modestly hid their beauty, a subterranean existence. Each and every one, in this, his enormous glass house, seemed to flourish under his devoted care. Perhaps because of him. Perhaps for him.

“Orchids are like people, you know,” Tobias began, succumbing to the philosophical mindset the greenhouse always gave him. He had begun the thoughts that notoriously entered his mind in this room, his sanctuary. But before he could continue...

“Come, now! You think of them as people, Tobias,” Alexandra interrupted. “That has always scared me about you. You spend your entire life with them. Do they keep you warm at night, dear brother?”

“Do you really want to start this, Alex? Can’t you just for once show interest in something that gives me pleasure? Can’t you just once try to see the world through my eyes?”

“I’m not starting anything,” she snapped her defense like a streak of

lightning. “I’m in here, aren’t I?”

“Fine, then,” he concluded and wended his way between the second and third rows. He sliced through the hum of the fluorescent lights and the whirl of the fan, through the hiss of the hot water pipes and the nearly inaudible *drip drip drip* of the humidifier. Soon, he approached a potted orchid that seemed separate from the rest. He stopped and outstretched his hands in a welcoming gesture.

“Alex, do you remember Kim Su?” he asked, his voice carrying an air of reminiscence mingled with a sense of anguished betrayal for daring to give such memories voice.

“Kim who?” Alexandra bellowed, her nose cricked, her ignorance masked by banter.

“Kim Su,” he repeated, enunciating each word. “The groundskeeper Mother and Father had when we were children—do you remember him? He lived in the shed out back, slept on the floor, even after Mother offered him the guesthouse. Kim Su,” he repeated once more. “Do you remember?”

“Oh, vaguely, I guess,” Alexandra offered, waving her hand in a dismissive motion. She busied herself with a sudden and overwhelming curiosity with the things around her. She perched her nose in front of a bluish Vanda, gently ran her finger on the underbelly of a slipper orchid, and marveled at an *Ophrys vernixia* that resembled a massive bumblebee.

Tobias recognized her feigned interest in his life’s work. He wondered if it attempted to hide her failing memory or if she truly lacked even a remote interest in what he was saying. Unsure of the answer, he nonetheless ventured forward.

“Well, I remember Kim Su quite well. Despite how young I was, I learned a great many things from him. But, Alexandra, surely you must remember the day they came to take him.”

Alexandra didn’t respond. Her attention turned from the greenhouse to her own self. She stretched and smoothed the nylons on her thick legs. She touched her stiffly sprayed blond hair, checking the relative humidity of her vanity. She did everything but look at him with either inquisition or acknowledgment.

Tobias continued, “He escaped Manzanar, the relocation camp in California, during the big riot in ‘42. He said no one was going to lock him up just because of the slant of his eyes. They were rounding up the Japanese all over in those years, but it meant nothing to me until the day they tracked him down and took him back. It took them two years to find him. He swore he didn’t hurt that corporal. Just a few months more and he would have been okay,” Tobias said. His eyes seemed almost to glaze over with an ancient pain, his first lesson in losing and letting go. Reticently, he spoke further, “I clung to Mother and cried as they took him. Those bastards! ‘Tobias,’ he said

to me, 'take care of the orchid; it is family.' And then we never saw him again. He was gone."

Alexandra listened distractedly to Tobias as he told his story. Then, he turned and touched the earthen sides of the orchid's pot. "I cared for his orchid as best I could, praying he would be back to claim it. It had been his mother's; I knew how important it was to him. I was certain he would be back to get it. Over sixty years later, I still tend to it, but my own grayed hair knows I will never see Kim Su again."

"You've grown that thing for sixty years?" Alexandra was astounded but appalled by Tobias' adamancy in not letting go. "Don't you think that's a bit much, dear brother?"

"Is it, Alexandra? To keep alive the wishes of a man, to dignify him? To dare remember and foster what he cared for?"

"That's not what I mean. I mean waiting for him."

"Ah, but, Alex, look at it! Look at Kim Su's orchid," he commanded, raising his hand in show.

Alexandra looked but remained dumbfoundedly silent.

"In all the years I have cared for this, it has never bloomed. I have searched high and low for another of its kind, for someone who could tell me the secret of its bloom. There is no one—there is no other plant like this in the entire world—at least, not that I know of. It's one of a kind. Just as Kim Su was. I have an orchid that my research proves to be extinct. Rare orchids go for thousands and thousands of dollars. The pricelessness of this one far exceeds anyone's dreams."

"So, it's expensive. Is that what this big announcement is?"

"No, no, Alex. There are many, many things far more important than money. Kim Su's orchid has finally flowered. That is all. That is the big announcement. It blossomed last week when my watchful eye was closed."

A brilliant orange blossom hailed from a fragile spike like 4th of July fireworks refusing to extinguish in midair. It seemed proud yet sheepish: stared at, exposed.

"My work with these creatures has come full-circle now," he concluded with a mix of triumph and sadness. Then suddenly he exclaimed, "Oh my word, aphids! That will not do." Carefully, he prodded around in the orchid's medium. A small piece of bark fell to the staging, through the slat, and onto the floor.

"Alex, see that cabinet at the end of the row?" He pointed; Alexandra's head followed his finger.

"There's a bottle of pesticide in there. A big green bottle. Would you fetch it for me, please?"

Alexandra seemed disgruntled by his request but obliged him nonetheless. Quickly, she returned, carrying the bottle, and as she handed it to him, he asked,

“Would you mind opening it and setting it down? And do be careful.”

“Careful?” she asked, searching the label for the expected skull and crossbones. “Perhaps you should do it yourself.”

“No, you do it. My warning was more about its smell than its very poisonous nature. It’s supposed to smell like an angry skunk, but I really wouldn’t know for sure. My nose has never been a good one. A travesty for a flower lover, wouldn’t you say?”

Alexandra scowled as she opened the bottle an arm’s length away from her wary nose. Cautiously, she set it down beside Tobias’ work area.

“Oh my God!” Tobias abruptly shouted, swiftly turning around and nearly knocking Alexandra over in the process. “The duck is still in the oven! Oh, it must be charred. Quickly! I must get to the kitchen quickly.”

Tobias dashed out of the greenhouse with Alexandra in close pursuit. When he reached the kitchen, he pulled open the oven door, only to have a smile widen his face. “Looks near-perfection to me,” he boasted. “I do hope you are hungry.”

After a leisurely dinner, Tobias and Alexandra retired to the living room. Tobias lit a fire in the fireplace, forcing an early spring chill to leave the confines of the house.

“How about that cognac?” he suggested, ramming the fireplace poker into its stand. “Care to do the honors and pour us a glass?”

Alexandra reposed on the beige leather sofa: feet curled under her, red pumps strewn on the floor like hit-and-run victims. Reluctantly, she rose and ambled almost sleepily toward the bar.

“There are two snifters on the top shelf,” Tobias instructed as he made his way to the brown recliner. He sat down with the sigh of a long, hard day.

Behind the bar, Alexandra stooped and returned with the snifters. Her long red nails clinked the Austrian crystal like a toastmaster demanding attention. She uncorked the bottle and poured the large snifters half-full.

“This bottle was over a thousand dollars! And the receipt is in my bag, by the way. Why did you insist I went to all the trouble?” she angrily inquired. “The things you expect!”

“This Louis XIII de Rémy Martin is very expensive, but it was Father’s favorite,” he answered, shaking his head at her ignorance, treating it as blatant disrespect of his memory. “I remember so many times, sitting in this very room, talking with him—watching him rise to pour himself a glass. The more cognac he had, the more talkative he became. But I guess you would not remember such things, Alex. You were always off somewhere, never quite wanting to be a part of the family.”

His remark nailed her in place. Motionlessly, she stared at him, a noticeable fire swelling in her eyes until she wallowed in a full-blown glare.

She marched toward him, angrily thrusting the snifter in his direction. As he outstretched his hand to retrieve it, she abruptly pulled it away. “You’re such a son-of-a-bitch sometimes, Tobias. You understand nothing,” she spat, nearly spelling out each word with wrathful contortions of her face.

She again shoved the snifter at him, this time allowing him to take it. She returned to her place on the sofa and stared at him. In extreme discomfort, he looked away, to the teal carpeting butting the white bricks of the fireplace.

Alexandra ranted, “You were afraid to leave their sight, and then you dare condemn me for not being there every minute of every day of every year? Where the hell do you get off?”

Without looking at her, he sheepishly replied, “It’s just what I think. It’s what I watched you do when we were young, before they died. And now you do it with me. I just wish I mattered more to you.”

Alexandra released a burst of air through her nose and shook her head. “Yeah? And what about your disregard of me?” she challenged. “Did it ever occur to you that I have the right to have a life? That being a hermit in this tomb is not my idea of a life?”

“No, three blood-sucking husbands is much better an existence. But I’m good enough when you need money, though, aren’t I?”

Tobias suddenly became silent, realizing he had crossed the fine line that stretched between her reason and rage. He winced, fully expecting a verbal bludgeoning to ensue—but the room remained deathly silent. Cautiously, he raised his head and found Alexandra swirling the cognac in her snifter. She painstakingly twirled the glass, making the amber rise dangerously close to the brim. She stopped and swilled a mouthful, and then her eyes returned to him.

“Is that what this is all about? Your blessed money?” she asked.

“This has nothing to do with money,” he defended, drawing enough courage to look her directly in the eyes. “I’d give you all I have. You are my sister, and despite your belief to the contrary, family is of the greatest importance to me.”

“Yes, sure, Tobias. Is that why you contested Mother’s will? You tried to get it all for yourself and leave me in the lurch. That’s how important family is to you. That’s how willing you are to give it all away.”

“That’s not true. You were having problems with Dominic then. You said he was cheating on you and taking you for all you had. All I did was try to tie it up in court long enough for you to divorce him. And as soon as you did, did I contest it anymore?”

“You didn’t contest it because you knew you were about to lose.”

“That is not true.”

Alexandra looked away from him—unconvinced, sickened perhaps.

Tobias took a hefty drink of his cognac and leaned his head onto the

back of his chair. His eyes pierced the high ceiling with forceful and racing thoughts. He took a deep breath and moved to a perfectly straightened stance. He looked at her. “Why have you always hated me, Alex?” he posed his lofty question. “I have tried all my life to figure it out. Did I do something? Did I not do something? I can handle the truth. I want the truth. Why have you always hated me?”

Alexandra leaned forward and held her face in her hands. She remained quiet for what seemed an eternity to Tobias. Finally, she assembled her answer and began, “You are so spineless. Exactly as Mother and Father wanted you. They could mold you into exactly what they wanted. A little replica of themselves, a little token to show the world. That is why they loved you more than me. They hated me for what I stood for. I just wanted a life. I wanted somebody to love me without goddamn strings connected to it all.” Tears spiraled in her throat; she swallowed hard and continued, “You talk about giving me money, but you do nothing to loosen the strings you attach, dear brother. Instead, you try to tie them into a noose to hang me with.”

“There are no strings!” Quickly, he reached into the drawer of the end table next to him. He wielded his ledger at her. “You want it all? I’ll write a goddamn check and give it all to you. I don’t care about the money!”

“Bullshit!” she snapped. “Spare me your dramatics. You’d die having to leave this house, fend for yourself, actually make a living, instead of leeching off them. Even dead, they still have you dependent on them. And yes, I’m drowning in debt, and you offer to help. But not without the same kinds of strings they attached. Live your life this way, Alex. Don’t love that man, Alex. Your dress is too short, Alex. Get rid of that bastard, Alex. Come live at home, Alex. You try to buy me. Perhaps you should find yourself a woman besides your sister, Tobias.”

At the last breath of her remark, Tobias flung the ledger forcefully toward her. It hit the arm of the sofa and slide to the floor, spine-up and twisted. He swiftly rose from his chair, charged, and stood within inches of her. She peered fearlessly up at him as he towered above her. Violently, he grabbed her and then retreated.

“There’s a gun in the drawer there,” he said, pointing with his head as he returned to his chair. “Go ahead and kill me. If I am so deplorable to you, just go ahead. I really don’t care anymore.”

Alexandra’s eyes were wide and calculating, but she did not move. Instead, she held her forearm, soothing the scratches Tobias had left on her with his grasp. She grabbed a tissue from her pocket to dab at the pooling blood. She spat, “You are crazy, Tobias. If I wanted your money, I’d find a better way than that. Perhaps I should just start documenting your insane outbursts—like this one—and have you declared legally incompetent. That would be a kicker, hey, dear brother?”

She laughed maniacally at him, boasting the upper hand she had always managed to have against him. She walked toward the dining room, chanting under her breath, “Such a stupid little man. Such a little, little man...”

Chapter 2

“What we got, Jansen?” McCallister asked as she rounded the rear of her blue car, removed her sunglasses, and slid them into the breast pocket of her bomber jacket. “I hadn’t even made it to the station when I got the call. Now, Jansen,” she stressed, sternly thrusting her finger at him, “I start my vacation tomorrow afternoon. I won’t tolerate any screw-ups or delays.”

Jansen, who had been vigilantly awaiting McCallister’s arrival, moved apprehensively from the curb and headed up the sidewalk with her. He recognized she was in no mood to be impeded, but then again, he reminded himself, she never was. Investigations always fevered her—vacation or not.

He flipped open his notebook and began to recite the details of the crime scene. “Man named Tobias Faraday, seventy-three, found dead this morning by his housekeeper.”

“Always the damn housekeeper, huh, Jansen?” McCallister chided as she slipped under the yellow police line and climbed the front step of the huge house. She turned to scan the neighborhood. It, she suspected, maintained an air of quietude when not marred with police cars, a coroner’s van, and the local media. “So what else, Jansen?”

“Housekeeper said the front door was ajar when she arrived at eight,” Jansen continued. “Said she entered the residence and found Faraday on the floor in the living room. Said she didn’t touch anything but the telephone. I have her out back; Jessop is questioning her.”

Surveying the mayhem around her, McCallister seized mental photographs of the people who had come to watch. A small group gathered along the police line, butting the sidewalk. The usual ghouls, she surmised. In the distance, she spied a woman, clad in a housecoat and curlers, pulling weeds from a flowerbed: a pitiable attempt to portray apathy. A stout man stood motionless on the corner, mindlessly gripping a leash; an impatient basset hound tugged and pleaded for the relief of an elm, only feet away. A mail carrier lingered on her rounds; her hat tipped to block the sunshine that tried desperately to burn off last night’s rain.

From her vantage point, McCallister suddenly felt as if she loomed far above the neighborhood and its people. The high step seemed a pulpit from where she preached the presence of the law: its watchful, protective eye—now its suspecting eye.

Abruptly, she turned and entered the house. In the foyer, she slipped booties over her shoes and a cap over her dark blond hair.

“This way, Detective,” Jansen respectfully directed, guiding her through the entryway and into the living room. As she followed, she stretched gloves over each of her hands. The snap of the latex arrived in the room before her.

“Morning, Laura,” Peter Hastings, the medical examiner, greeted her, only briefly raising his head. Diligently, he continued his work as she neared and crouched next to him.

McCallister’s eyes dutifully fell to Tobias Faraday. His rumpled body lay face down in front of the fireplace: a marionette with severed strings; a thing to be bagged and tagged like a sirloin from the butcher shop; a DB; a corpse... There were a hundred names for it, a hundred descriptions: a synonymy. McCallister quipped them all, doggedly awaiting the day when a cadaver did not chill her bone.

“This really a job for Homicide, Hastings?” McCallister asked. “A dead old man ... no doubt natural causes. Maine is so beautiful this time of year,” she added, knowing full well, by the condition of the room, that a man had not simply expired in some peaceful scenario, reaching the timely and natural end of his life. The set of fireplace tools had been toppled; a couch cushion slumped far from its rightful place; a lamp and a book lay on the floor: mute but reliable witnesses.

“Well,” Hastings began, “do you smell that? I mean ... other than vomit and urine.” His eyes widened, a wordless admission that he asked the near impossible of her.

In eager, yet disgusted assent, her eyebrows knitted together, and she drew the room’s scent into her nostrils.

“Poison, I’d say,” he announced. “Same smell in the snifter on the table there,” he added with a nod of his head. “I’ll run a tox as soon as I get him to the lab.”

McCallister’s heedful eye glanced to the snifter on the end table while her inquisitiveness searched for possible mates. She snapped her finger at a woman entering the room and pointed to the glass on the coffee table. “Lovely shade of lipstick, don’t you think, Ristow?”

Ristow rolled her eyes at McCallister as she approached and zipped her windbreaker with the big CSU embroidered on the back. She knelt in front of the table to gather the evidence.

“Okay, so maybe it’s not so cut and dry, Hastings,” McCallister facetiously

confessed, turning abruptly to face him. “Two glasses, one DB, and a God awful smell. I guess it beats killing time in Robbery. I don’t suppose you have any interest in two tickets to Maine.”

Hastings laughed. “Laura, you’re most certainly the next DB.” He jotted notes on his clipboard and added, “Because Holly’s going to kill you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” McCallister spouted, dismissing the notion with a shake of her head. “Now, let’s get on with it. Are you going to roll him or what?”

“I was waiting for you.” Hastings proceeded to gently turned the body to a face-up position.

A ghastly expression remained on the elderly man’s face, non-gatherable evidence of the trauma that had stifled his existence. The left side of his face was purple, and vomit edged his gaping mouth. His eyes were widened, nearly beyond their sockets, allowing the cloudy gaze of death to peer into McCallister.

“Jesus, close the poor man’s eyes, Peter,” she directed, forcefully breaking her stare. She looked to Hastings instead, and then she further scrutinized the room. “How long, you figure?”

Before a response had even formed in Hastings’ mind, McCallister moved away. She withdrew a pen from her pocket and carefully opened the drawer of the end table directly in front of the body. Both he and McCallister spied the handgun in the drawer.

“I wonder if he was reaching for that. Obviously, not soon enough,” Hastings remarked.

McCallister proceeded to the bar, purposefully allowing Hastings the time he needed to complete the tasks that would give him an idea about time of death—necessary tasks that she detested watching. In her search of the bar area, she spied a smeared, barely legible liquor store receipt, an empty tote bag, a trench coat draped over a stool, and a half-drained bottle of cognac. As she stooped to investigate the shelves’ contents, she noticed an ivory-handled umbrella leaning against the side of the bar.

“Laura,” Hastings called to her when he finished. “I’ve got a core of 88.2, but that was most likely slowed by his proximity to the fireplace. Livor is set. Rigors isn’t full, but it’s awfully close. I’d say he’s been dead eight to ten hours, but keep in mind that if it was poison that killed him, it probably wasn’t immediate.”

She stopped what she was doing and stared intently at Hastings. Then she pulled up her sleeve to look at her watch. “Between ten and midnight, then,” she clarified.

“That would be my guess at this early stage,” Hastings said.

“All right, guys,” she yelled to get everyone’s attention. “Jansen, I need a quick—” Before she could finish her directive, Jansen approached and handed

her a notebook page with a rudimentary sketch of the house's layout. She smiled at her own predictability and his efficiency. She quickly studied the drawing and then said, "Cruz and Jansen, you two take the bathroom, study, and kitchen. Bartholomew, you take the upstairs. Jessop's got the outside. I'll do the sitting room, dining room, and greenhouse. Ristow, finish your business in here and then stick with me. You all know your stuff, so do it. And people..." She paused and glanced at each one individually. "Mr. Faraday needs our help, but please, *please* keep thinking about how beautiful Maine is this time of year." She smiled briefly and then spun on her heels.

Eagerly, she began her tasks in the front sitting room. It was a dimly lit space, even with the sun filtering in through the blinds and making intense strips on the room-size Oriental rug. Nothing seemed out of place; in fact, it was immaculate. An eclectic mix of oil paintings hung on the wall, each with an idle picture light clamped to the top.

Finding nothing of concern, she headed toward the door, but suddenly out of the corner of her eye, she spotted something that caused her to stop dead in her tracks. The last painting on the wall sported a tugging familiarity. She leaned closer to the painting of a flower to check the signature, and there she saw "Holly Crawford" in all its loopy glory. Her lover of ten years had painted it, and at first, the knowledge brought a smile to her face. Then a feeling of disgust spiraled from the pit of her stomach to her throat. Holly had sold many paintings, but the idea that one of them now hung at a murder scene made her want to seize it from the wall and run as fast as she could. Instead, she took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and exited the room.

She headed into the dining room where Ristow now took photos. The table was still laden with remnants of an apparent dinner for two. Studiously, McCallister noted the positions of plates and silverware. She jotted a food items list that would aid Hastings in the autopsy.

Next, she entered the greenhouse through the wide-open door. Her eyes marveled at the incredible span of flowers before her. As she wended her way up the aisles, she acknowledged that each step through the house allowed her to apperceive the life of the Tobias Faraday. Every synonym for the body by the fireplace paled as aspects of his existence, his personality became vivid and clear. The DB became a man.

At the front of the greenhouse, a hodgepodge of pinned notes stuck to an enormous cork board: yellow ones detailed plant names and watering day; corresponding pink ones proclaimed the day for fertilizing. A massive sheet of moisture-damaged paper held taped cards that outlined his entire inventory, citing hundreds and hundreds of plants, each with a specific code. Numerous notes rested on the workbench to remind Faraday to pick up laundry, expect the housekeeper, meet with his broker, set the clocks ahead. McCallister even found one advising him to create a to-do list.

She claimed one more look at what she dubbed his “command center” and continued further into the greenhouse. On the back wall, she carefully opened a cabinet to reveal numerous tools and bottles of pesticides and solutions. Down the third aisle, she found a large, opened green bottle next to space scattered with potting medium. Her nostrils hovered over the bottle, and she easily recognized the odor to which Hastings had referred.

“Ah, the murder weapon,” she boasted, rubbing her hands together in delight at the ease of her accomplishment. “Ballistics will have fun with this one.” She chuckled, knowing how each specialist got hyped at the prospect of doing the work they loved. The city of Granton hardly afforded many occasions, but when it did, people jumped at the opportunity. Ballistics would be sorely disappointed.

Suddenly, Jansen noisily entered the greenhouse and approached her. “I found this in the study,” he began. “Prints were lifted already. I thought you’d want to see it right away.”

He handed her a leather-bound journal with the initials “TAF” boldly embossed in gold on the cover. McCallister opened the book to page after page of journal entries, scribed with a meticulous penmanship.

“The last entry, Detective,” Jansen eagerly persuaded. “I think it might help you figure this out.”

McCallister raised only her eyes to look at him. Her expression censured his self-praising directive, one that insinuated no sleuth of her own. Just as adamantly, her eyes lowered and returned to the pages. “Send Ristow in on your way out, Jansen.”

“Yes, Detective.”

As he dispiritedly headed toward the door, McCallister quickly scanned the last entry of the journal and yelled to him, “And find out where this sister lives.”

McCallister mindfully read: *April 7th 5:45 PM ... A cold sweat and a heavy heart mock me as I enter these words tonight. I am fearful to even write them...*

She finished reading, raised her head, and found Ristow patiently waiting. “The murder weapon is over there,” she said with a stab of her index finger. “And do your magic on the rest, Ristow. I trust you know what’s important.” She left her to her work.

As McCallister made her way out of the greenhouse, she paused at the workbench and quickly compared the journal’s handwriting with the slew of notes. Once satisfied, she continued on until the study’s doorknob succumbed to the twist of her hand. The sweet scent of good cigars greeted her as she entered.

The room seemed to shimmer as the morning sun streamed in through the windows, bathing the highly varnished woodwork, the paneling, a mahogany

desk. Shelf after shelf honored the perfectionistic placement of spines that hailed philosophers, poets, mathematicians, and sleuths. A Michener was surrounded by a Christie and a Poe; Machiavelli cornered Thoreau. All that remained absent from the room's mystique was a great and thoughtful mind to ponder the imagined, to define the unimaginable.

McCallister seated herself in the chair behind the desk and rifled through innumerable papers and notes, pages of an appointment book, and drawers. After jotting down several names, dates, and phone numbers, she returned to the living room.

An impatient Hastings collected the tools of his trade. The body still lay in the cold spot in front of the fireplace, but a sheet had been placed over it—as if sight unseen really changed anything.

“Can I get him to the lab now?” Hastings asked with the whip of frustration sending his words on their way. “You’ll get a lot more from me if you’ll leave me to my work.”

“I understand that, Hastings. I certainly don’t want to slow you down, but I need one more thing.”

McCallister explained to Hastings that she needed to question the housekeeper and that she wanted to do so in the living room, with the body present. She instructed Jansen to summon the housekeeper as she handed Hastings her list from the dining room.

Soon, the housekeeper arrived, reluctantly entering the room. Her eyes sped reflexively to the body of her employer, and then she quickly turned away.

“I realize this is difficult,” McCallister assured, “but I need to ask a few more questions. I’m Detective McCallister. If you’ll please have a seat.”

“I’ve answered so many questions, Detective. I would like to just leave and forget this entire morning. I cared for Mr. Faraday. He was a dear man. I cannot believe he is dead—and like this!”

“You’ll be out of here in no time. Now, those questions, Miss—” McCallister pointed to a chair near the entryway.

“Mrs. ... Mrs. Jenny Endicott,” the young woman corrected as she took the seat. She tugged on her denim dress and crossed her legs. Her hand smoothed her dress, revealing a mid-term pregnancy. Her other hand pulled her shoulder-length blond hair to the center of her back, and then her eyes glanced again to Faraday and back to McCallister.

“Well then, Mrs. Endicott,” McCallister began. “You referred to Mr. Faraday as a ‘dear man.’ I take it you had a good relationship with him. Is that an accurate assessment?”

“He was an eccentric man, but a very dear one at that,” Mrs. Endicott explained. “Wouldn’t hurt a fly. He was always good to me. Like I told the officer, I’ve worked for him for three years now.”

“And what made him eccentric?”

“He was just such a loner. I don’t think he even had any friends. He would see his sister and that was about it. Most of the time he even avoided me when I was here. I would see him watching me from the greenhouse as I cleaned, but he rarely came out to talk to me.”

“Tell me about his greenhouse.”

“God, he loved those things. He would be in there from the time I got here until the time I left. They’re beautiful all right but not if they’re all you have.”

McCallister inquired about Faraday’s countless notes throughout the house.

“He’s always been like that, as long as I’ve known him, anyway. He leaves me a note each week. It always said the same thing—clean this, clean that—but I got a new one every single week. I would even get a note on my check to tell me he was giving me my check. Strange that way, I guess.”

“And you always clean on Thursdays?”

“Always.”

“Always come in at eight, too, I suppose.”

“Well, actually I’m usually here by seven, but this pregnancy is already slowing me down. I called this morning before seven to tell him I would be late. There was no answer. I just figured he was in the greenhouse and couldn’t hear the phone. I had no idea that—” Her voice broke, and she seemed to shake her head in disbelief.

“I think that will be all, Mrs. Endicott,” McCallister concluded. “If we need anything else, I’m sure Officer Jessop has your address and phone number. Thank you for your time.”

The woman slowly rose and exited the house through the front door.

McCallister turned toward Hastings, smiled, and said, “He’s all yours, Hastings. Now get a move on! I needed those lab results a week ago.”

Hastings smiled at her and shook his head.

McCallister sped to the front door, removed her protective garments, threw them in an evidence bin, and then left to approach the police line that kept the press at bay. In this city, “the press” amounted to three TV news crews and two newspaper reporters. Before she was even within earshot, the who, what, where, when, why and how questions jumped at her.

“I’m sorry, guys. I don’t have anything definite, but I swear I’ll let you know when I do. Maybe later today,” she explained.

The faces before her all drooped in disappointment. She pointed to one of the reporters and asked, “Sutter, can I talk to you?”

Dirty looks followed the two as they stepped further down the police line in search of privacy.

“Sorry to put you in this position with your colleagues, but I need a big

favor, Kate,” McCallister said.

Kate Sutter wrote for the *Granton Journal* and had been a close friend of McCallister’s for many years.

“Is it the kind of favor that might get me a scoop on your investigation?” Kate asked with a hungry grin. When her question met McCallister’s stony, yet smiling face, she reassured, “I was just kidding. What do you need?”

“Holly,” McCallister simply said. “Vacation ... tomorrow ... Holly.”

“Oh shit, Laura,” Kate declared with widening eyes. “She’s going to kill you.” She smiled broadly at McCallister. “Can I watch? *Artist Blots Out Detective*. Now *that* would be the scoop of the decade!”

They both started laughing but tried hard to keep it from the watching eyes and cocked ears.

“I know you’re probably as busy as me today,” McCallister acknowledged. “But if you get a chance, could you stop by our house and see Holly, maybe break it to her before I have to? If she has time to reason it out, she’ll hear me a bit better when I talk to her.”

Kate smiled and replied, “Sure. It’s on my way back to the office. I’ll be stuck there all day anyway doing background and waiting for this detective I know to give us some crumbs.”

“Thanks, Kate,” she said with a smile. “I owe you one.”

They began heading back to the glaring group of reporters. Each sported a look that insinuated McCallister had just made Kate privy to the entire investigation. McCallister countered the looks with her own, saying, “All right. All right. It was Mrs. Peacock in the library with the lead pipe.”

As she headed back to the house, she enjoyed the discussion among the reporters about how she *always* said that. It was *always* Mrs. Peacock. It was *always* in the library. The weapon was the only variable. One claimed she had even said it at the scene of an accidental pileup on a foggy bridge. If they badgered her, they got blatantly bogus information. They trusted that fact as much as they trusted her when the truth was finally fit for public consumption.

About the Author

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

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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