



*Reservation
for Murder*

A Kyle Callahan Mystery

MARK MCNEASE

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For Lee Lynch, friend and legend.

PART I

A New Beginning

PROLOGUE

Dear David:

Thank you so much for the birthday card. The big six-oh! I remember thinking at twenty-five how old forty would be, and now forty seems young and distant. Young because I wish I had the energy I had at that age, and distant because it is. The idea of twenty years shortened by fading memories into a slideshow of the past two decades is hard to express. And you and I had known each other so many years by then!

I hope you and Elliot are finding Los Angeles to your liking. How is his father's health? Moving there to take care of him was an amazing thing to do. I know from our conversations it was a difficult but necessary decision. My mother and her second husband Farley are in Scottsdale now, and I can't imagine moving there to take care of her if anything happened to him. We would if we had to, of course, but why ponder these things at all? It's like expecting heartache, or anticipating the things we dread most. For you and Elliot, I hope only that you like it there and that you're happy. The new grandchild helps, I'm sure, and having Elliot's son in Santa Barbara has to be a plus. I always knew you'd find the man of your dreams (for who is that but the one who brings us contentment?), and you did. We both did, and we're both at a time of life that's changing, new, exciting, and more than a little frightening.

We're leaving New York City at last. We've been driving back and forth to Lambertville for the past few months, getting the apartment ready to sell, and, to be honest, dragging our feet just a bit. New York has been my home since I moved here with you all those years ago, and for Danny even longer. But everyone's gone now. We seem to be the last two people on the train. His parents moved to Florida two years ago (shoot me if I ever suggest it). My beloved boss Imogene has packed up and flown the coop, teaching now in Santa Clarita. She has a sister there. Margaret Bowman passed away last Christmas. We went to both memorial services – one in Fort Lauderdale where she'd made so many friends, as Margaret was bound to do, and one here at the restaurant. You should have seen the crowd! The previous two mayors were there, along with celebrities, a few icons in the New York restaurant business, you name it. She got the sendoff she deserved, and a week later we decided it was time to move, to face the sadness of leaving our home for a new one, but also to embrace the adventure.

We sold Margaret's Passion to Chloe Sparks. You remember her, she was the best assistant Danny ever had running the restaurant, and a fine woman. It's called Chloe's Gramercy Park now, and it's a success. What else would it be? We've kept the building for the income from the tenants, but the restaurant is all Chloe's and we're very proud of her.

At last the apartment has been sold and we have to vacate this week. Sad? Yes. Regrettable? Not at all. We've had our bed and breakfast, Passion House, in operation for two months. It's a huge learning curve with no end in sight, but I like that. I'm out of the TV business. My friends, including you, have all moved on. And I love Lambertville. New Jersey is such a beautiful state, and the Delaware River Valley is spectacular. I wish you'd seen it before you moved, but I also know you'll visit. Soon? Summer is your favorite season, and a great time to see such a beautiful town.

I'll let you go now. I so enjoy our letters. No one writes them anymore, everything's email and text. I do plenty of that, too, but old fashioned letter writing is something to savor.

I'll write you next from our home in Lambertville. We've got a big week coming up with a convention in town and Passion House is booked solid. I'm happy, Danny's happy, our new kitty Wilma is happy (God rest Smelly's little cat soul, we miss her still), and I don't imagine I'll be running into any serial killers in Lambertville! I've enjoyed the past few years without them, and if I never encounter another one it will be too soon. That was the old life, this is the new one.

Give my love to Elliot. Our best room is yours anytime, on the house. Or should I say on Passion House. I think Margaret would be happy we named it that, and I know Danny is.

Until we write again ...

Love,

Kyle

CHAPTER 1

Kyle Callahan stood by the apartment doorway staring at what now seemed like vast emptiness. The movers had finished ten minutes ago and were already on their way out of the city.

“We have to go,” he said to his husband Danny Durban. “We’re meeting them at Passion House and we need to be there.”

“You don’t have to state the obvious,” Danny replied.

Kyle knew the move was even harder on Danny than it was on him. The apartment had been Danny’s long before he met Kyle thirteen years ago. Kyle and his cat, Smelly, had moved in from their home in Brooklyn. They’d been the new members of a family that had previously consisted only of Danny and his cat Leonard. It hadn’t taken long, either. The men had been dating for three months when they decided to combine households, and that household had just been sold. They were vacating because they no longer owned it and the new residents were coming the next day. All the empty space Kyle was looking at, freshly painted, scrubbed, *cleansed* of their presence, had held memories until this very moment. Now those memories were ghosts who had to leave with them. The furniture and belongings they’d decided to keep would still provoke the same sentiments—the coffee cups Kyle bought from every place they’d traveled, Danny’s awards for his years in the restaurant business—but they would not be housed in the same place. They, like their owners, were being uprooted by choice and planted in new ground.

“Are we doing the right thing?” asked Danny, standing next to Kyle with only the front door between them and their new life.

Danny was shorter than Kyle by six inches, and just a little over a year older. Kyle had fallen in like the first night they’d met at a dating event, and within weeks the like had turned to something close to love, or at least the anticipation of it. They were both thirteen years older now, and their added age, along with their height difference, was something Kyle never noticed except in photographs.

“There is no wrong thing, Danny. Everyone’s gone. Some of them have left the planet. Time only goes in one direction and we’re going with it. Let’s be excited.”

“I am excited. It’s just hard. All those years in one place. This isn’t just change. It’s upheaval. I’m a city boy moving to the country. Who would ever have guessed that?”

Kyle put his arm around Danny. “Lambertville is not the country. Linda and Kirsten live in the country,” he said, referring to their friends who had a small house in the woods outside Stockton, New Jersey. “We’re moving to a fabulous, artistic, vibrant town we both love. And we already live there!”

The couple had been travelling back and forth the past three months between Lambertville, where they’d already opened their bed and breakfast, and Manhattan, where leaving had not been an overnight proposition: there had been the restaurant to deal with, the building they owned, and a thousand details that had to be dealt with when settled lives moved from one place to another.

“We should go,” Kyle said gently.

He sensed Danny was crying silently. Just a tear or two.

“Joy and grief are not mutually exclusive,” Kyle said. “Remember, when one door closes ...”

“Oh, for godsake, I hate that expression,” Danny said.

“I know you do. That’s why I said it.”

The mood had lifted slightly and Kyle knew it was time. He turned and opened the door, taking in yet another view he would not see again: the hallway. They’d known their neighbors,

and their neighbors' children and pets, all in this hallway, on the other floors and in the lobby. Life in a New York City apartment building was a microcosm of the city itself, teeming with personalities and lives grand and small.

A moment later they were outside the apartment. Kyle handed Danny the key.

"Here, you should be the one to do this."

Danny nodded. He took the key and locked the door.

A short elevator ride later they were at the front desk. Danny gave their key to Freddy, the morning shift doorman.

"You'll be back," Freddy said, trying to put the best face on a goodbye that was hard for the staff, too. Doormen, porters, handymen, the super—some of them spend their entire working lives in one building. They see new apartment owners settle in. They see the tenants' children grow up. They see the old ones die. And they see some of them leave.

"No, Freddy," said Kyle. "We won't. But I appreciate the thought. We're going to miss you, too. Tell your wife I want some of those cakes for the bed and breakfast."

"You serious, Mr. Callahan?"

"Of course we are!" Danny chimed in. "Nobody makes cakes like Loretta. We want them for our guests. How else can we make sure they come back? Now here—"

He pressed the key into Freddy's palm.

"—we'll call you in a few weeks to say hello. Tell Loretta to pre-heat the oven."

Freddy got up from behind the desk. He looked around nervously, as if he didn't want to violate any rules, then hurried to Kyle and Danny and hugged each of them.

"You'll be missed, really," he said.

"You will be, too," Kyle replied. "Remember, any time you and Loretta need a nice getaway, Passion House is yours."

"That's too kind, we'd love that."

Kyle knew Freddy would never take him up on it. It had been hard just getting people from Manhattan to come to Brooklyn when he lived there. The island was the center of the known universe for most people who lived on it. He knew doormen seldom resided in the city, but they were still city people. Lambertville might as well be Petticoat Junction to them. That's how he and Danny had thought of it until their first visit. Love at first sight had changed their minds.

A moment later they were in their car, a Toyota they'd purchased for their new life. You don't need a car in New York City, but life outside it is nearly impossible without one. Then came the drive cross town, a short delay into the Lincoln Tunnel, out the other side, and off into their new life.

CHAPTER 2

Passion House Bed & Breakfast was originally built as a single-family home in 1929 by one of Lambertville's wealthiest residents. Noah Habermeier had been a German immigrant who'd settled first in Newark, New Jersey, before finding the city too large and sinful and moving his family to the small river town. Noah was known for his religious piety and his capitalism, demonstrating an equal conviction for both. Prayer and profit were sacred to the father of ten, and in Lambertville he found the perfect place to start a general mercantile store that would later spread throughout the Northeastern states and presumably make the Habermeier heirs comfortable for life. Changing trends and technology saw the collapse of his retail empire, resulting in the eventual destitution of many of his grand- and great-grandchildren who, by the time Kyle and Danny bought the house, had been forced to work for a living and in most cases leave the area.

Located on the Delaware River in the southwestern part of Hunterdon County and now technically a city, Lambertville had undergone several transformations. During the 18th century local places were sometimes named after operators of ferries taking travelers across the river into Pennsylvania. Once known as Coryell's Ferry, after the ferry owner Emanuel Coryell, the community was renamed Lambertville in 1814 in honor of John Lambert, another famous resident, who'd served as United States Senator and Acting Governor of New Jersey. In more recent times Lambertville was not considered much of a place to be or visit, but during the 1990s the town began sprouting art galleries, antique shops, restaurants, and more than its share of charm.

Kyle and Danny first visited Lambertville when they were staying for a long weekend with their friends, Linda Sikorsky and Kirsten McClellan. Linda had been a police officer for the New Hope, Pennsylvania, Police Department, making her way up to Detective over the course of a twenty year career. She'd met the men seven years ago when she had investigated a murder at Pride Lodge, a popular LGBT resort in the area. They became fast friends, and when Linda retired, moving to a small house in the New Jersey countryside just twenty minutes from Lambertville, Kyle and Danny became regular houseguests. By then Linda had met and fallen in love with Kirsten, once a local real estate powerhouse and now an author writing mysteries in the woods while her wife ran a "vintage everything" store in New Hope. The two couples could often be seen eating in their favorite restaurants in both towns and walking across the bridge that connected them.

Approximately a year ago, Kyle and Danny began having conversations about getting older and what, if anything, they wanted to change in their lives. So many of the people they knew and loved had moved on or passed away. Manhattan had begun to feel like a ghost town of eight million living souls. Their restaurant, Margaret's Passion, had been Danny's other true love, but with its founder and namesake dead, his heart wasn't in it anymore.

"We need to do *something*," Kyle had said one night over dinner at home. "Go somewhere."

The thought of leaving New York had been preposterous just months before. Danny had lived there all his life, and Kyle had been there for almost forty years. But now, suddenly, it felt like the past. Kyle was staring at his sixtieth birthday coming at him full speed, and Danny had already gotten there. Why not make a move? Why not roll the dice at least one more time? They'd gambled on buying the restaurant and the building it was in. They'd taken a chance living together with the highest hopes but nothing guaranteed, at least in the beginning. That had worked out spectacularly well. All of it had worked out. So when they were walking around Lambertville on another visit to see Linda and Kirsten, a "For Sale" sign in a yard caught their attention. The house was huge –

three stories with a large yard and a wraparound porch. It was also very run down. Someone kept the lawn and landscaping up, but that was to be expected in a town that considered it a civic responsibility. There was also a small guest house in back, which Kyle later learned had been built for servants at a time when it was common for rich people to have them.

Kyle had a vision in the moment, standing on the porch peering into the empty rooms: a bed and breakfast.

“You’re out of your mind,” Danny had said. “And let’s get off the porch. Somebody might be home.”

“Nobody’s home,” Linda said from behind them. All four of them were now staring through the large front window. “No one’s lived here for years. I think the family still owns it, or maybe the bank. You’d have to call the real estate agent to find out, but I bet you can get it for a steal.”

Danny saw her smile and knew a plot had been hatched then and there to convince him to embark on one of the biggest adventures—and risks—of his life.

That had been in August of the previous year. Over the course of the next eight months they transformed the nearly-dilapidated, one-time mansion into Passion House, a bed and breakfast that was fully operational by the time they left their apartment in the city for the last time. By springtime it was staffed, bringing in income and challenging them on a daily basis. Kyle loved it. And he saw that Danny loved it, too. It had given them new life and new direction. They lost their beloved cat, Smelly, to age and infirmity. Their other cat, Leonard, was still going strong and they’d gone so far as to adopt a new one named Wilma. Leonard didn’t seem to mind the new feline in the family, which had been as important as their own reaction to her. And this week, two months after opening, they had their biggest booking yet. Three of the five rooms were already occupied, thanks to a reduced weeknight rate, and the two upstairs suites were booked for arrival the next day.

Counting the guests on his fingers, Danny had said, “Nine people in our house at the same time. That’s really scary.”

“That’s really successful,” Kyle had replied as he drove through Flemington. It was a trip they’d made dozens of times but would not be making again, except when they wanted to visit old friends or spend a day in the city. “We’ll be fine. We’ve got Justin and Patty. And we live in the guest house. We don’t have to spend time with any of them, except for breakfast and if they need anything.”

The guest house had been a godsend. They’d first thought of living on the third floor, but then decided, after talking to other bed and breakfast owners, that making their home in another location would be a sanity-saver. Luckily they had an option, and they’d made the small guest house as comfortable as their apartment had been, minus all the clutter they’d cleared away when they moved.

“This is a turning point for us with Passion House,” Kyle had said. “If we’re booked up once, we’ll be booked up again and again. Stop fretting, we can do this.”

Danny had sighed. He knew Kyle was right. If they hadn’t believed they could succeed, they never would have taken the chance. This would be the real beginning of their new life.

When they bought the house it was an abandoned mansion in disrepair. The dark green exterior paint had been peeling for many seasons; the front porch had two lights that hadn’t had working bulbs in them for years; and the guest house looked more like an especially large shed whose windows were too grimy to see through. They purchased the property from the bank, which had foreclosed on it two years earlier from the last remaining Habermeier, a woman named Grace who

lived in Texas and had stopped making payments on a loan against the house. That was how they got it for such a good price, allowing them to invest an additional thirty-five thousand dollars into renovating it. The house went from being what its neighbors had called an eyesore, to a beautiful, interesting, new bed and breakfast with the unusual name *Passion House*.

“It kind of sounds like a place where senators meet their mistresses, or people stay to indulge their sexual fantasies.”

Danny had bristled at Kyle’s comment. “It’s named after Margaret’s Passion, and it’s *our* new passion. I can’t be bothered with other people’s interpretations, and neither should you.”

He’d been right, and Kyle had quickly let go of his concerns over the name. Passion House it would be, and Passion House it was, when the final touches were added and the gorgeous, hand-painted wood sign was planted in the front yard.

The house had five guest rooms, three on the first floor and two on the second. The rooms on the second floor had been turned into suites by combining smaller rooms the original inhabitants had probably used for sewing or reading. The third floor was off-limits to guests and included two rooms for the live-in staff as well as space for storage and supplies.

The suites had themes: one was the Manhattan Suite, with a mural of the New York City skyline on one wall, a sleek gas fireplace, and furnishings of chrome and glass that reflected a modern feel. Kyle had thought it was incongruous given their new location, but he knew Danny had wanted something to remind him of the life they’d known, a way of preserving it as the memories faded over time, so he’d said nothing when the mural was painted. Walls could always be painted again.

A second suite, called Margaret’s Room, had been designed with Margaret Bowman in mind. Danny remembered her apartment above the restaurant and he’d had the room furnished as if it belonged to everyone’s favorite old aunt. It included a large, comfortable overstuffed chair, a faux fireplace, and an afghan Margaret had given to Danny when she moved to Florida. There was a mural of the Delaware River Valley on one wall and rustic furniture that made the guests feel as if they were staying in the woods somewhere not far from the river. The standard rooms downstairs were all comfortable and tastefully decorated to reflect the kind of life you find in a quaint river town.

Unlike most bed and breakfasts, each room had a small flat screen TV. Danny and Kyle had the habit of watching TV when they slept, allowing it to shut off with a timer at the 1:00 am hour. They never stayed where there was not a television, and Danny said the guests who didn’t want one could simply leave it off.

There were two shared bathrooms on the first floor, complete with tub and shower, while each room upstairs included a private bath. They’d hired a local jack-of-all-trades named Chip McGill to do some of the heavier renovations on the house, along with two men he paid to help him. One of them, a gay man in his late twenties named Justin Stritch, had subsequently taken the job of live-in handyman, moving into one of the third floor rooms. Justin had been a drifter by his own admission, having lived in several states since being rejected by his religious parents and banished as a teenager to life in the streets of Philadelphia. He’d survived well enough, moving around the country and finally settling in Lambertville, where he’d lived with two roommates for the past year doing odd jobs and handyman work. Kyle and Danny knew he might not stick around, given his history, but he was smart, reliable, hardworking and eager to be part of this new adventure.

The other live-in staff was a woman named Patty Langley. Originally from Lambertville, Patty have lived in Frenchtown, then Stockton, and even the big city of Princeton, finally coming back to her home turf a year ago. In her years serving other people, she’d been a nanny, a maid, a

personal assistant, and an aide to a succession of elderly clients. They'd found her through a referral from one of their many new friends in town, and, as promised, she had proved to be exceptionally conscientious, if not very friendly.

By early April they were ready to open for business, and Passion House was birthed. The first week they had three guests in two of the rooms. The second week four. By their one-month anniversary in May they were getting enough bookings to think they might just pull this off, and now, as they returned from their last trip to Manhattan as residents, they were full to capacity and nervous. Everything needed to go right—no plumbing crises, no leaking roof, no conflict between guests. They'd discovered that most people staying in a bed and breakfast got along fine, but once in a while there were personality clashes, usually solved by the guests in question avoiding each other. They hoped for none of that this week as they pulled into the driveway, got out of their car and headed for the only home they had now.

CHAPTER 3

Scott Harris was excited about the trip. He hadn't been back to Lambertville in five years and had not expected to return. He didn't dislike the town, he'd just had enough of it growing up there, then staying as his twenties passed, his thirties, and finally his forties. He'd always had what he thought of as bigger dreams, although he'd never been able to define those dreams beyond getting rich, famous, or some combination of both. When he found himself working at a grocery store, a middle-aged man slicing meat and cheese for impatient octogenarians, he decided his life was over and dreams were for the foolish. Then, one day, a handsome older man (which at Scott's age meant in his sixties), number 42 from the ticket machine they used to serve customers, asked for a half-pound of Vermont Yellow Cheddar. Scott looked up at the person who'd placed the order. His eyes met those of Harold Summit, and love arced over the deli counter, striking them each in the heart. That Harold was rich and sort-of-famous, the author of a series of thrillers set in Los Angeles, made Scott rethink the death of his dreams. Maybe they'd just been on life support and Harold was the experimental treatment they'd needed. Harold, never a bashful man, wrote his cell phone number down on a business card and exchanged it for his bag of cheese.

Scott's manager Daphne was on duty that day. Fearful of being scolded for flirting with a customer, Scott discreetly tucked the business card into his apron and nodded politely at Harold, telling him to have a nice day. A last smile was exchanged as Harold wheeled his grocery cart around and walked slowly toward the dairy department.

Later that evening Scott could not believe his good luck. The business card read: Harold Summit, Author, Lecturer, Man of Letters. Then, as if one subtitle were not enough, it added in italics, *The Connor Dark Novels*. Not "mysteries," not "thrillers," but "*novels*." Hoping Summit was not as pretentious as his calling card, Scott dialed the number. What followed was a two-hour-long conversation with Harold that left them aching for more. Harold was visiting Lambertville for old time's sake. He'd lived there for many years before moving to Manhattan a decade ago to pursue his career as a writer, with a second move to Los Angeles more recently.

"I could have written from anywhere," Harold said, "but I wanted to be in the thick of it, you see. I needed to feel the city, to smell it. The bustle of Times Square, the stench of Hell's Kitchen. My character Connor lives there, and it seemed I really should, too. It's best to write about places you know intimately, you understand?"

Scott nodded as if Harold could see him through the phone. He noticed Harold had mentioned his fictional antihero as if he were a living person but he gave it little thought, assuming writers and artists were just odd that way.

"The series was a smashing success, as you know ..."

Actually, Scott didn't know—he'd never read a Connor Dark novel but planned to remedy that immediately.

"I came back to visit friends in the city and we decided to spend a few days at Pride Lodge. I went to the grocery store for some provisions, I'm not one to eat every meal out."

Scott knew where Pride Lodge was, just a few miles outside New Hope. He had availed himself of their large, popular swimming pool in the summer, but never stayed there.

"Back to the city?" asked Scott. "I thought you lived there."

"I'm in Los Angeles now," came the reply. "For the past two years, developing movie ideas and plans for a Connor Dark TV series. It's in pre-production."

Scott's heart sank. This wonderful man, this cultured, talented, *wealthy* man, was from the

other side of the continent. So why had he bothered flirting with Scott? Was he looking for a one-night fling while he strolled memory lane in his old home town, something to tell his friends about around a game of Monopoly?

“I’ve never been to Los Angeles,” Scott said, hoping he didn’t sound as disappointed as he felt.

“Then you must come.”

“I must?”

“I insist.”

“But I work in a deli. It would take me months to save up the money for a trip.” Taking a risk, he added, “Will you wait for me? I could probably swing it by October.”

“There’s no reason to wait, Scott. Money is not an obstacle.”

They were words Scott had never heard before.

“But I’ve always paid my way. I’m a proud man.”

“And you can stay that way. I need an assistant, and I have no interest in the pretty young things one so often finds at the side of old men.”

“Older,” Scott said.

He heard Harold laugh over the phone. “I’m not the pompous ass you might think from the business card. It’s meant to be playful, even if I’m the only one playing. It also creates an appearance, when appearances and bullshit are half the game.

“I don’t say ‘older’ when I’ll be sixty-seven in a month. I’m not frightened by my own mortality like so many people you meet. I’m old, Scott, and unashamed of it. Now let’s cut to the chase, as they say. I’d like to have dinner with you—we can go Dutch if it’s important to you—and then I’d like to talk about your first trip to L.A. I’ll need to interview you in my own environment, so to speak.”

“Interview me?” Scott asked. “Is that what you want to do?”

He felt himself smiling.

“I’m sure you’ll get a call-back,” Harold replied. “So what do you say?”

What Scott wanted to say was, “When’s the next flight?” Instead he said, “I’ll think about it, Mr. Summit.”

“‘Mr. Summit.’ I like that. But only in public if you take the job. In private you can call me Harold.”

“I might call you Forty-Two,” Scott replied.

“Forty-Two?”

“That was your number at the deli.”

“Call me whatever you’d like to, just say yes.”

“I have to think about it,” Scott said, not needing to think about it at all. “I’ll let you know over dinner. When, where, and what time?”

The following night they had an incredible meal at Marsha Brown in New Hope, which Scott allowed Harold to pay for. Complete with an excellent red wine and a bill for over \$200, it provided evidence for Scott that money was indeed not an obstacle.

Five years, three novels and a canceled television series later they were back in Lambertville. Scott had moved to L.A. two months after meeting Harold. He’d accepted the job as the personal assistant to Mr. Summit and, two years later, as his husband. He’d also learned that Harold wasn’t so unconcerned about being old that he didn’t team with a younger writer named Bradley Manning to accompany him to industry meetings. He might not have a problem with his age but the money men and women of Hollywood weren’t so accepting.

They were in town for a conference of the Mystery Authors Alliance being held at the Lambertville Station Restaurant and Inn. Harold maintained memberships in a half-dozen professional organizations, and MAA was one of them. The conference moved around from year to year, attempting to please a membership that included writers from all fifty states. It was pure coincidence they'd chosen a river town in New Jersey that had once been home to both Harold and Scott. Harold loathed staying in the hotels and convention centers where the meetings were always held, so they'd booked one of the suites at a new bed and breakfast in town.

"Passion House," Scott had said, when he was looking for a place to stay. "That's an intriguing name. And it's run by a gay couple."

Harold was accustomed to letting Scott make all the arrangements. That's what a personal assistant does.

"I like the name. Who doesn't need a little passion?"

Scott called that day and booked the room, making them the final guests in a full house. He'd spoken to Kyle Callahan, one of the owners, when he'd made the reservation. He could have done it online but preferred talking to human beings.

That was three weeks ago. Now, after a flight to Newark, a car rental and an hour's drive, they were parked in front of Passion House, early but pleased. The house looked marvelous. Scott gazed up at the second floor, where he'd been told their suite was, and wondered which window would be theirs.

"We're here," he said, reaching over and gently shaking Harold in the passenger seat.

Harold opened his eyes, adjusting back to consciousness. It had been a long day and he was ready for a power nap followed by a stroll through town.

"Do you think they'll let us check in early?" Harold asked, unbuckling his seat belt.

"They always do," Scott replied. "Once they realize who you are."

"And if they don't know, I'm sure you'll tell them."

"It's my job, Forty-Two."

Harold did not like being called Forty-Two but he'd humored Scott for the past five years. He truly loved the younger man, having come to think of him as incredibly efficient and committed, offering a devotion Harold had not always returned. There had been dalliances, as there probably would be until Harold was no longer capable of performing or interested in other men. Scott had turned a half-blind eye, and in exchange Harold had provided him with an extremely good life.

They exited the car, Scott circling around to the trunk for the suitcases and laptop. He took a deep breath, convinced the air smelled of Lambertville, memories, and triumph. He'd come a long way on the road back home, and he'd come in style.

CHAPTER 4

“Gladys Finch is a legend in lesbian fiction,” Kyle said. “And she’s staying at our bed and breakfast!”

Danny was sitting across from him at the small table that was proportional to the size of their kitchen. Everything in the guest house was small. It had not been intended for comfort, since the butler and maid were there to work, not to enjoy themselves, and it had been up to subsequent residents of the main house to upgrade it. Danny and Kyle had done quite a bit of that themselves, with the help of Chip and Justin, and it could now be described as a cozy cottage for four: Kyle, Danny, and the two cats.

“I didn’t know you read lesbian fiction,” Danny replied dryly. He’d been going over the breakfast menu for the next few days, as well as plans for a book signing Thursday night. Kirsten McClellan’s third Rox Harmony mystery had just been published and they were holding a reading at Passion House.

Kyle didn’t appreciate Danny’s tone. “I read *good* fiction. Gladys Finch is a master of the short story and a respected novelist. It could be beneficial for our brand if she likes it here.”

Admitting Kyle had a point, Danny said, “Make sure to include something extra in her welcome basket.”

All the guests were treated to a basket of jams, jellies and crackers from Dahl House Jams, a local operation run by a woman named Maggie Dahl who’d been among the first to welcome Kyle and Danny to Lambertville’s business community.

“There’s a whole shelf at Booketeria devoted to her books,” Kyle said, referring to the town’s popular bookstore. “We need to get some this morning and put them on the bookcase in the parlor. I’ll bend the spines so they look read.”

“What room is she in?”

“*They*,” Kyle said. “She’s coming with her wife, Carol something ...”

“That’s her name? Carol something?”

“I don’t know her last name. I just know Gladys dedicated her most recent story collection to her. They’re booked into the Manhattan Suite, across the hall from the *other* big name writer, Harold Summit. We’ve already got a couple of his books in the parlor.”

Kyle leaned forward and scanned Danny’s menu upside down. “Can we pull this off?”

“A full house? Of course, we have to. This is what we do for a living now, Kyle. It’s not a hobby.”

Kyle sat back in his chair and sighed. They’d managed to stay in business for two months and had every intention of succeeding, but the stress of it was sometimes hard for him. They had five people already checked in, with four more on the way. They had plans for a book reading that would bring in another sizable group from outside, and four fabulous breakfasts to make before everyone checked out and headed home. The writers conference had been a gift for them, but it had also presented them with a first big test: keeping a house full of guests happy from the time they arrived until the time they drove off with Passion House in their rearview mirrors.

“Excuse me,” Kyle said, getting up from the table. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Danny replied, not looking up from his menu. “And please feed the kids.”

Kyle said nothing else, heading to the cabinet for a can of cat food. The sound of the cabinet door opening was enough to bring Wilma running into the kitchen, her claws clicking on the tile

as she slipped and slid in a mad dash for her food bowl. Leonard sauntered in a moment later, tail up, taking his time. He was old now and had no use for such foolishness.

Kyle had discovered quickly that running a bed and breakfast meant sometimes feast, and sometimes famine. There had been a few weeks when they only had one or two rooms booked, usually on the weekends, but they had to maintain the same cozy environment, with the same welcoming attitude, as if every night were booked solid and a breakfast table for ten with only four people at it was not the least bit awkward. If they only had a guest or two, or were out of town themselves for some reason, Justin and Patty would fill in, acting as their surrogates.

Patty Langley was a good cook, perfectly capable of taking Danny's place when she needed to. She was also an outstanding housecleaner, room attendant, errand runner, and task master. Kyle learned quickly that keeping a house clean was much more difficult than keeping an apartment clean. For one thing, you could see everything in a house full of windows. Their co-op in Manhattan had faced the back of Baruch College, depriving them of a view but also of sunlight. Once they were living at Passion House, they couldn't escape the sight of dust and the everyday debris of living outside the city. Leaves fell, grass clippings flew. The next thing you knew, there were twigs inside your front door and you could coat your finger in dust just running it across an end table.

Patty was somewhere in her fifties, though she wouldn't say how far and would not take kindly to being asked. She was tall and thin; she wore her hair most days in a graying braid down her back, and she tended to dress in calf-length skirts, simple blouses and, when the weather was chill, a draping, button-down sweater she said her mother had given her many years ago. That the sweater was in good condition after such a long time was evidence of Patty's fastidiousness. She was hard to get to know because she kept her personal life and her professional life completely separate. That extended to living on the third floor of Passion House. She'd insisted on a lock on her door, which Kyle and Danny promptly installed, and she spoke only of her late mother, as if there had been no one else in her life for the fifty-plus years she'd lived it.

This all suited Kyle and Danny fine. They knew from the first day that running a bed and breakfast was hard work, requiring daily commitment. They needed people like Patty and Justin if they were going to succeed. Patty's work ethic was awe-inspiring, with Monday always strictly off. Sometimes she stayed in her room, with forays into town, and sometimes she simply vanished, returning Monday night to rest for the resumption of work the next morning. They had encouraged her to take a second day off, but the thought of not working for two days seemed unsettling to her, as if looking after Passion House gave her a reason for living.

Justin Stritch was another matter, and a polar opposite to the woman who quietly and quickly exercised authority over him. Twenty-six going on eighteen, Justin was the first person to tell you he was a free spirit and the last to admit that it meant immature. But he was a demon with a hammer and a wrench and could be called on any time of the day or night to appear with a toilet plunger. He was the fix-it guy, and a house as large and demanding as Passion House needed someone on-site. It saved Kyle and Danny from those 5:00 a.m. calls from guests who'd used a half roll of toilet paper or whose HDMI cable had come unplugged from their TV set.

One of the rules they'd laid down for Justin: no men in his room. Passion House had not been named for that kind of passion, and Justin was very much in his sexual prime. They knew from the grapevine that he had a fondness for no-strings sex. They refused to judge him for it, insisting only that he take his pleasure elsewhere, and never with a guest.

They were all a kind of family, with daddies Kyle and Danny living in the guest house with the cats. It was something neither man had expected, but both had come to enjoy, a sort of communal enterprise that enriched their lives in ways they'd never expected.

Everything was running smoothly and today all hands were required on deck. Danny had gone to the Giant grocery store in New Hope for supplies, with a stop at Booketeria to pick up a few of Gladys Finch's books. Patty was doing her daily inspection of the house. Justin was edging the lawn along the walkway. Kyle heard the edger stop and Justin say, "Good morning! Welcome to Passion House," a greeting he'd taken it upon himself to offer each and every guest.

Kyle looked at the clock on the parlor wall above a guest registry that sat on an oak pedestal. It was 10:00 a.m.

"Don't worry, the rooms are ready," a voice said.

Kyle turned, surprised to see Patty standing in the doorway with a dust rag. She was quiet in more ways than one, and had often startled them by being in a room without them knowing it.

"Thank you, Patty. You're amazing."

She cracked the slightest of smiles, then turned and walked down the hallway.

The front door opened, and in walked Scott Harris and Harold Summit. Kyle recognized Summit from his author's photo on the back of his books. The picture had been taken some years earlier, or possibly Photoshopped: the man was obviously a decade older than his headshot.

"I hope we're not too early," the younger man said.

"Of course we're not," Summit stated, as if someone of his stature could arrive whenever he pleased.

Kyle immediately disliked the man, but it didn't matter. "Not at all," he said. "Your room's been prepared."

"Suite," Summit said, frowning.

"Suite, yes." Stepping forward, Kyle extended his hand. "I'm Kyle Callahan, and this is Passion House."

CHAPTER 5

Gladys Finch had heard herself described as a literary icon so many times it didn't mean anything. She was one, of course. She'd been a pioneer in lesbian fiction when most people who were aware it existed thought Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, with its antiquated classification of gay people as "inverts" and its plea to "Give us also the right to exist," was the gold standard. *Tarnished fucking gold*, she'd thought when she wrote her first lesbian short story sixty years ago. She was twelve years old at the time and knew exactly who she was and what she desired. Heterosexuality and conformity were not included.

A hundred short stories, two plays, and twelve novels later, she was tired of it all. Weary of travelling, of signing books, and especially of being considered some kind of living archive by young writers, many of whom had jettisoned the words "lesbian" and "gay" as labels for old people—like Gladys. She still called herself a dyke and refused to be cowed by today's genderqueers and non-binaries. She didn't have any problem with what they chose to call themselves, or, in modern parlance, *self-identify as*, but she'd be damned if she was going to identify herself as anything but a no-bullshit dyke, lesbian, and trailblazer.

She'd even resisted marriage for most of the thirty-five years she'd been with Carol Dupree, her longtime editor and now spouse. They'd married a month after the Supreme Court made marriage equality national, and Gladys was still not sure it had been the best decision. Gladys was seventy-two and Carol a mere sixty-three. She'd known Carol had coveted a marriage license for some time, but it wasn't until Carol had convinced her that a hostile nurse or some other stranger, at whose mercy they may find themselves, would be legally bound to treat them as spouses that she'd finally acquiesced.

Acquiesced. She liked that word. For Gladys was, if nothing else, a lifelong lover of words. She wasn't afraid to use them, either. It was not her problem if readers had to stop mid-sentence to look up a word she'd used. That was how she'd learned so many of them, reading difficult writers who did not write down to her. As a child, she'd spent more time with a dictionary than with a doll or some ridiculous toy oven, looking up words she'd read in books marred by underlining on every other page.

She hadn't intended to join the Mystery Authors Alliance. Given her stature, it had not required writing a mystery, which she told people was in the works. She'd even come up with characters and a plot, and when anyone asked, "Gladys, how's the mystery going?" she could throw out a scene description she'd invented in the moment, or say she was researching murder weapons. In truth, she had no intention of writing a mystery and had only tried her hand at it once, in a short story that never saw the light of day.

In a word, dreadful. That's what the editor of a small mystery magazine had told her. She hadn't tried for the big names, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, or *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, none of the well-known ones. She'd never taken rejection well, especially since it rarely happened to her, and that one had been short and brutal.

I suggest you stick to what you do well, Ms. Finch. In service of your talent, I have to say 'D' for effort.

That was twenty years ago. The story was promptly shredded and Gladys never again tried her hand at a mystery.

She'd joined the Alliance, and accepted an invitation to be on a panel discussing character development, specifically because of its membership list. Gladys had not come all the way from

the warmth of Arizona, where her aging bones enjoyed year-round comfort, just to talk about making people up from thin air. She had come to confront. She wasn't so old she couldn't give as good as she got in a fight, and a fight is what she expected.

Gladys and Carol had flown into Philadelphia. It was closer to Lambertville than New York was, requiring a shorter drive. Gladys didn't ride well in cars anymore. Her hips, her legs, her ass, were not up to spending more than an hour or so in a passenger seat.

Carol, as chipper as ever, announced the road signs as they passed them, as if each exit led to a potential adventure. It was one of the things Gladys loved about her. An excellent editor and a fiercely devoted partner, Carol was nevertheless a little clueless. *Gullible*, Gladys thought, another word she liked.

Driving north on 295, Carol read out the town names as they passed the exit signs, a hint of wonder in her voice. *Palmyra, Riverton, Holmesburg, Andalusia*.

"How about lunch in Andalusia?" Carol said. "That sounds fascinating, like 'the fields of Andalusia.' Imagine eating there."

"Among the war dead?" Gladys replied dryly.

"Excuse me?"

"It sounds like a battlefield. The fields of Andalusia. Or a Van Morrison song. I'll pass."

Carol frowned. "But aren't you hungry?"

"I'm more in need of getting out of this car than I am of eating. Let's just get there. We can eat in town. I'm assuming Lambertville has a restaurant or two."

"It's fabulous, from what I've read," Carol said. "Very artistic."

Gladys cringed. Artistic was not a selling point for her. It usually meant pretentious, ethnically homogenous and reeking of privilege. She couldn't name a single town she'd ever wanted to visit because it was "artistic."

Staring at the highway ahead of them, Gladys said, "How did you find this bed and breakfast we're staying at?"

"Facebook," Carol replied, as if it were obvious. "I posted about the trip and asked for suggestions, and someone said there's a new B & B run by a gay couple."

"So everyone there is gay?" Gladys asked, suddenly feeling better.

"I have no idea! I just know the two men who run it are. Kyle and Danny. They look good together—there's a photo on the About page—and they're sort of our age."

"You mean your age."

"You know I never think about our age difference. Age is just a number!"

Gladys cringed again. She hated empty platitudes, especially about aging. Getting old was awful, and the older she got, the more awful it was. She would not pretend otherwise.

They finally saw the sign for NJ-29, which ran along the Delaware River into Lambertville. Exiting, Carol said, "Not long now. We'll be there in twenty minutes."

Gladys took a deep breath. Every trip they took was a long one, and this one had required extra patience. The flight, the drive, the almost unbearably upbeat mood of her wife, had all combined to exhaust her. Gladys wanted only to check in, take a nap, and plan her next move.