

ONE

MEG MILLER WAITED in the main parlor of Darrow House for an interview with the detective. The call she'd made thirty minutes earlier began a series of events Meg couldn't predict. If she had to do it over again, she wasn't sure she'd make a different choice or that she'd had a choice at all. The only thing she knew for sure was there was a dead body upstairs. She'd assumed she was alone in the house, but her mind raced. Now, it occurred to her being alone there made her a likely suspect.

Meg twirled the cords on her drawstring bag, jumping when the Christmas tree lights clicked on. She was caught by surprise at the slightest sound. There could be a murderer still inside. Had that occurred to the EMTs and officers she had let in just minutes earlier?

Her heart still pounded at the memory of seeing the woman's body. Maybe there was no murderer. Maybe the woman was ill and died there, falling to the floor and unable to get up. Maybe there was an explanation.

It wasn't likely that a shapely female with long blonde hair would remove her clothing and fall next to the bed in a museum of a house on the day of a historic homes tour. No, Meg had to admit that didn't seem likely. The woman was nude, slightly gray in color, and there was nothing else in the room belonging to her. Clothing was gone, shoes, everything.

Meg hadn't been able to bring herself to lift the hair from the woman's face to determine who she was. She hadn't seen Lena Hillard with her hair down like that, but it could have been her. The hair for sure. The body was slim like Lena, petite.

The sun was setting, people were beginning to walk the boulevard to tour the houses, enjoy mulled wine, and view the carefully selected seasonal decorations. It was Meg's favorite fundraiser for the historical foundation, an opportunity to wear Victorian costumes, and pretend to live in another time.

She smoothed the velvet of her own skirt against the nap, slowly changing the color of the fabric. The scarlet nail polish she'd selected at her last manicure was meant to be the perfect match. She longed to run her finger around the face of her watch and observe her painted nail move the hands back in time. The high collar of the velvet jacket was annoying Meg. She ran her finger under the fabric pulling it away from her neck. The dryness in her throat made her aware of swallowing, an effort she never considered before.

Out the window past the glowing Christmas tree, an officer strung bright yellow crime scene tape on the black iron gate. It was strange to see the festive greenery and red ribbons combined with the stark, attention-seeking banner. Meg's heart ached at the homes tour marred by the image.

There was a commotion on the staircase, someone coming down. A woman appeared there in the wide opening to the foyer and approached Meg. She was flanked by two officers in uniform. Meg stood, anxious for some information about the woman on the floor upstairs.

"Hello, I'm Detective Penny Crawford," the woman dressed in black slacks and blazer said. "I understand you made the call to report the deceased."

"Yes. I did." Meg's voice was raspy. The sound of it surprised her. She coughed. "I'm sorry my mouth has gone dry," she forced the words past her hoarse throat, holding her hand to her collar.

Detective Crawford turned to one of the officers and asked him to bring Meg a bottle of water. He disappeared from the parlor. The detective focused on Meg. "I have some questions for you. Can we sit here and talk?"

Meg nodded and returned to the sofa. Crawford followed to a nearby chair. She held her hand out to Meg and said, "I'm sorry I didn't get your name."

Meg could feel the heat in her face as it reddened when she apologized. "I'm so sorry. I'm not thinking straight. Margaret Miller. You can call me Meg. This has been so upsetting. I don't know how you deal with seeing a murder every day." Meg thought Crawford was an attractive woman. She had short-cropped hair, longer on the crown, a fashionable cut. She must be about Meg's daughter's age, early thirties. Her simple jewelry and hairstyle reminded her of Dorie.

If Meg hadn't been so upset, she might have asked the detective where she got her hair styled and made an appointment for herself. The younger woman wore minimal make-up with appealing lip gloss. Her simple gold jewelry was understated. There was a wedding band on her left hand.

The officer returned with the water and handed it to Meg. She unscrewed the lid and took a sip, wiping the corners of her mouth with her fingers.

"Mrs. Miller, I don't see murders every day. It is upsetting to see death. Do you think this might be a murder? Do you know the woman upstairs?"

"I've just been thinking about it. Where are her clothes? If it was natural causes, why would she be in a semi-public place and nude? I have those questions. I didn't pull her hair back to look at her face, so I'm not certain of who it might be, but my hunch told me...it was Lena Hillard."

“Are you a friend of hers?” Crawford took a pad from her bag and started writing.

“No, an acquaintance. We’ve done some volunteer work together. Meg fidgeted with the crocheted purse on her lap.

“Okay. Can we start with you telling me about your entry into the house and how you made the discovery? Please tell me why you were here.”

Meg straightened, pushing her back against the sofa pillows after taking a seat. “I wasn’t supposed to be the chairman for the homes tour this year. Lena, Mrs. Hillard was taking over. Her husband called me several weeks ago to tell me she was ill, and she asked if I could step in. I hesitated. The main reason was I’d given my hooped petticoat away, thinking I’d never need it again.” That sounded like a silly excuse for resigning from the chairmanship. When Meg said it aloud her face reddened and she felt a flush.

“I see.” Crawford hadn’t written any of that down. Meg supposed it wasn’t interesting. *That wouldn’t be interesting to me either any more.*

“Well, that’s the reason I came here before the tour started.” Meg lifted her skirt to show Crawford the petticoat. Lena’s husband told me this petticoat would be in the upstairs dressing room closet, and I could borrow it for my costume. There are several costume pieces up there that can be shared.”

“I understand,” Crawford said. “So you came in this afternoon to put on the petticoat? Do you have a key to this house?”

“Yes, I have a key to all the homes on the tour. This particular house is owned by the foundation. There are no permanent residents here, it’s for functions and tours and people rent it for parties and such. I came for the petticoat and to make sure the floral arrangements had been delivered. I’m responsible for the details of the tour this evening. I guess I won’t be able to follow up with that?” Meg shook her head.

“No, I’m sorry we need to complete this questioning. It’s important since you’re the only witness. The scene has been secured, and we can’t allow people to come inside.”

“I didn’t witness anything,” Meg said. “That body was there. I didn’t even see it until I came out of the closet after putting on the petticoat.” Meg was becoming irritated that her plans for the evening would be changed. She hoped someone else had realized she wasn’t going to be able to complete her duties. She slumped letting her chin rest on her hand, her elbow on the arm of the mustard velvet divan.

“I really need to let someone know that I’m unable to be at the other houses,” Meg said. “They’ll be expecting me and start to worry.” Meg wanted to focus on the things she *could* control.

“We’ve been in touch with Tom Richards,” Crawford said. “I understand he’s the executive director of the historic foundation. We told him this house will have to be taken off the tour, and he knows you’re here with us.”

Meg nodded. “Tom will handle it. He’s diligent and trustworthy. That makes me feel better. Oh, I can’t imagine what he’s going through.”