

Ladies Lunch Club Murders

A JACK MCCALL MYSTERY

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Chapter One

Lieutenant Ann Reynolds, from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, pulled to the curb and watched CC Wilmer, a sergeant from the county sheriff's office, approach. Most people in this community were retired, some worked part-time. Murders here were not commonplace. Assuming tonight's death was ruled a homicide, this made three homicides and one accidental death in the county this year—a number that almost matched the total homicides in the prior five years—and it was only March.

On the job Ann usually wore her chestnut hair back in a tight bun. She'd released it with her decision to visit tonight's homicide scene. The county sheriff's department had its share of hunks, but Ann didn't flirt on the job. The exception was Sergeant CC Wilmer, a man more than twenty-five years her senior. He liked the look with her hair down. At times, Ann needed CC's help so, it was to her advantage to stay in good stead with the long-divorced career cop. His influence was such that he was, in effect, the final word on homicides in this county.

When he got close, she stepped out of her car and turned to let the cool breeze push a few miscreant hairs off her cheek.

“Hiya, Sarge.” She swung her door shut, set her feet at shoulders width, and gently settled her hands on her hips. “What’s today’s special?”

“Hey, Ann. We got ourselves another dead woman, Sarah Sims, a local, probably retired. I think this one was a real looker in her day. For that matter, she’s a darn good-looking woman today. Well, not literally, her being dead and all.”

“Before we get into that, what’s with the story going ‘round you’re close to pulling the plug on your career?”

“That story recycles every now and again.”

“Not true? You’ve got in your twenty, right?”

“Shit. I’ve never told you the boring story of how I ended up here. After a double hitch in the army, I went to work for state law enforcement, where we met after you joined several years back. Later, I signed on with Sheriff Jackson. Fortunately, my state time transferred into the sheriff’s pension system ... last year pushed me past thirty, not twenty.”

“Sounds like the truth’s catching up with the rumor.”

“After last night, what’s your opinion? You think I’m too old?”

Ann emitted a low, throaty, rolling groan. “After last night, my opinion is, you qualify for rookie of the year.”

“That may be overdoing it. My last birthday I cracked the egg on sixty-four, but I appreciate your opinion.”

“That’s good news. I’d hate to see you put yourself out to pasture too soon.”

“I got no plans to take off my shield. Every day the department puts out fresh hay and this warhorse trots into his stall. Okay, we through with the old-guy dance, here?”

“Sure, Sarge. You run the plate?”

“Scotty, the officer first on the scene, did. That’s where we picked up her name. Car’s registered to a Sarah Sims, local address. The picture on her license matches the woman in the car.”

How'd it go down?"

"The medical examiner's on her way. My take says an icepick in her ear. Entry point's too small for anything else. If that's the how, the pick punctured her brain and shorted out her circuits."

"Don't tell me, you're clairvoyant."

"Nah. Any other blade would've done more damage." Sergeant Wilmer pointed down the gravel-covered dirt road. The target of his long finger was a red SUV parked head-in at the lookout over the water reserve about a hundred yards off the paved road. "Come on. I'll give you the dime tour." He started in that direction.

Lieutenant Ann Reynolds held her hair back against the breeze, and used her other hand to wave at Scotty, the uniformed officer posted near the entrance to the water reserve. She walked a little quicker, keeping Sergeant Wilmer between herself and the low-setting western sun. "How'd we get the word?"

"The call to the station showed a pay phone; not many of them around anymore. The caller said, 'There's a dead woman in a red SUV out at the bird pond.' I motioned for the dispatcher to get a patrol car to the scene. The caller said he looked inside and rapped on the driver's window. When she didn't react, he called it in. He refused to ID himself. He had it right. She was dead."

Ann moved her purse to her other shoulder. "A man you say, not some yob?"

"I love it when you talk dirty."

"That's not dirty." She wagged her finger. "It's the way I talked back home. Sometimes it slips into what I'm saying."

"I've been in London, and I never heard yob."

"Well you weren't in Yorkshire, up north and east of London."

"I've heard you say it before, remind me."

“Yob is boy spelled backward. A youngin’ who thinks he’s tough, a hooligan, street kid ya know. What you said gave me the feel this was a full-grown man so he’d be a scrote, not a yob.”

“That one I need you to define.”

“You yanks call some fella a dick. We Brits use scrote, short for scrotum. More colorful don’t you think?”

“Could be. From his voice I pegged him near fifty.”

“You think the caller could’ve been the perp?”

“Mebbe.”

“The first two victims, the woman in January and the one killed last month, they were both members of a local ladies lunch club. Could this lady be another member?”

“I don’t think of a group of elderly ladies getting together to share lunch as involving much risk of being murdered. I’ll check that angle when we get back to the station, but the odds say no.”

“Excluding coming to get murdered, what do people visit this pond to see?”

“Pretty much all the wildlife common to this part of the state. Gators, sometimes, but the developer calls in the fellas from SNAP to keep gators out’a this particular pond.”

“Don’t tell me, because these gator police come SNAP ‘em up?”

“It’s an acronym, like so much nowadays. SNAP stands for Statewide Nuisance Alligator Program. The state uses private contractors.” Wilmer ran his finger across the left trail of his thin mustache. “Other times the gators just skedaddle on down the road on their own. Usually at night, mostly during mating season. Like us two-legged variety, boy gators cruising for willing female companionship. I got no idea how they identify the good-looking gal-gators from the ugly ones.”

CC started walking, but Ann grabbed his arm. “Before we stop talking about gators, do you know what they call an alligator wearing a vest?”

“I have no idea.”

“An in-vest-a-gator.”

CC shook his head. “You get a lot of razzing about your jokes, but that one doesn’t even measure up to your others.”

Ann squinted into the setting sun when she looked up at CC. “Before I left the station, the buzz was this could be the same perp who took out those two women earlier this year. Look, CC, if this one doesn’t fit with those two, I got better things, you know. You see any connection?”

The sergeant beckoned for Reynolds to follow him around to the driver’s side of the car. “So, far, it’s anybody’s guess. She looks dressed from this angle, but her blouse is mostly unfastened. They appear to have been well into a session of, what I’ve heard you call, getting a bit of the other. Like her SUV, her bra’s red.”

Lieutenant Reynolds pointed. “The lady appears to have a thing for red. She’s also wearing red high heels.”

He shined his light on the side of the dead woman’s face. “See ... there.” He wiggled the light. “The small trail of blood coming out of her ear. What, an inch, maybe.”

“From that, you get icepick in the ear? That little bit of blood could’ve been from picking a pimple.”

“Annie, my love, you’re a hot number. Let’s assume for the moment you’re in the company of a fella, and you’ve pulled in here for a little romantic plug and play. Would you pause to pick a pimple?”

Ann bobbed her head and grinned. “I s’pose not. Neither of the first two women were ice picked.”

“And while we’re on the subject of romantic plug and play, when this case closes you’ll head back to Tallahassee. After that our getting together will require a fair amount of driving. You have any thoughts on how we might deal with that?”

“Whoa, big guy. Slow it down. Let’s not let this great thing of ours get too serious, at least not too fast. You’re a good man, Charlie Brown. We’re good together, but, well ... we have time before we’ll need to deal with that. For now, let’s stick with this case.”

They stepped back from the red SUV, onto the grass beside the parking area.

“The first two women were killed in their homes. This one in a car. Could be no connection. Then again, we’ve gone years without any local retired women being murdered, now we got three in about ten weeks. It feels reasonable to presume that this woman and those two were the work of the same perp.”

Ann turned to face into the breeze skidding across the pond. “What about your inquiry into the death of Mary Alice Phelps? Has anything surfaced indicating she could have been a homicide? If so, she’d raise our total to four.”

“Sheriff considers Phelps an accidental death. So, we have three homicides. Each is enough different that we could have one killer who can’t settle on his technique, or two killers, hell, could be three.”

Ann took a small flashlight out of her purse. She held it in her right hand, an old habit to keep her gun hand free. “You’ve been working these homicides since the first one back in January. I’ve never thought of you as a man who can’t make up his mind.”

“I used to be indecisive. Now I’m not so sure.”

Ann punched Sergeant Wilmer in the bicep. “Nonetheless, you remain convinced Phelps was an accidental death.”

“Sh-iii-t, Annie. Phelps should be closed up, but, for some fool reason, the governor’s office is pressuring the sheriff to not shut it down. Nobody I talk to at the Capitol knows the story behind the governor’s obsession with Phelps, or they aren’t talking. Phelps was a stupid woman who somehow snagged her radio into her hot tub and fried herself—the end.”

“Okay. Let’s drop Phelps, at least for now.”

Sergeant Wilmer crossed his arms. “The first two dead women were murdered on dates for celebrating something. I never before realized it, but nearly every damn day in the year is a

day of recognition for one thing or another, most days for several things. The first murder, in early January, was on National Fruitcake Toss Day. Ain't that something? The way I see it, the person doing this shit is the fruitcake, and I'm looking forward to tossing his ass in the slammer."

Ann moved around to the passenger side of the SUV and shined her light around in the back seat. "Why, Sergeant. Your tone suggests you don't like fruitcake?"

"The gift nobody wants but sometimes gets. Speaking for myself, Fruitcake Toss Day is one of our most worthwhile silly national days of observation."

"Your murder book didn't mention the fruitcake angle until after the second killing nearly a month later. I hear it was the dispatcher at the station who linked the murder to National Fruitcake Toss Day. A little slow on the uptake, weren't you, Sarge?"

"One day, the dispatcher was reading the reports. When she saw fruitcake on the inventory sheet, she mentioned that date was Fruitcake Toss Day. Apparently, she's a real fruitcake nut and takes offense there's a formal day for tossing them away."

"Gimme a break, Detective Lady. For Christ's sake, every murder happens on some day. There's rarely a specific connection between the murder itself and the actual day on which it happens. The precise day can tie to opportunity or means, sure, but not literally the day in and of itself."

Ann Reynolds leaned closer to the rear window, taking care not to touch her cheek against the glass. "I take it you got no idea what these connections mean?"

"That's twice. How long're you gonna bust my balls on this?"

Ann muted the lit end of her flashlight against CC's officer shirt. "Sorry, didn't mean to yank your chain all that hard." She switched off her flashlight and retreated a few steps, taking care where she put her feet, while looking over the outside of the vehicle. She circled around and returned to the driver's side. "There's no tracks for a man getting out on the passenger's side. Assuming the killer was in the passenger seat, he would've gotten out on that side. There's what looks like a man's tracks on the driver's side, but approaching the car, not from getting out of it—likely the anonymous guy who called it in."

“He said he looked in the driver’s window and saw the woman slumped over. The car was locked. He yelled and rapped, but when he couldn’t rouse her, he called it in. I’ll have the crime scene team check the driver’s window. According to the caller’s description of what he did, we should find smudges from his knuckles. If the caller was the perp he wouldn’t have knocked on the window.

“If we’ve got the timeline near right, I’d estimate this SUV’s been here something like eighteen to twenty hours. It rained yesterday, early evening, stopping around eight. There’s no rain spots on the windows of the SUV. That suggests it got here after eight.”

CC raised his eyebrows. “My guess is she was going down on the perp who was in the passenger seat. From there on, the woman’s luck turned to shit.”

“Don’t talk to me about luck. If I had luck I’d be a blonde with a filthy-rich, faithful husband.” Ann turned sideways, her silhouette enhanced against the lighter background. “And a drawer full of thirty-six-double-D designer bras.”

CC stepped back and took a long, exaggerated look at Ann’s shape against the low sun. “You didn’t get the blonde hair or, as far as I know, the rich husband.” His smile changed the angle of his mustache. “Then again, one out of three ain’t bad.”

“One out of four. I don’t have a drawer full of designer bras.” Still holding her flashlight in her right hand, Ann used it to poke CC in the gut. “The vic’s purse is on the floor in the back seat. Have you looked in it yet?”

“After we got the scene cordoned off, I took pictures while Scotty called in the plate and summoned the M.E. A few minutes later, you drove up. We’ll get to the purse and the glovebox when we work the inside of the SUV. That might be after the M.E. gets the body out.”

“On the positive side, the file shows your department was a lot quicker on the uptake after murder number two occurred on the first Friday in February—National Bubble Gum Day.”

Wilmer grinned. “Yeah. That time it only took us a day to make the connection. There was a bowl of wrapped pieces of bubble gum at the scene. The dispatcher’s got some weird calendar that shows the items recognized on each day of the year.”

Ann laughed. “I’m sorry. Murder should never be funny stuff, but damn, Fruitcake Toss Day, Bubble Gum Day ... funny stuff.”

“I figure this lady got killed last night somewhere between nine and midnight.”

“The rain. Yeah. Like you said it stopped around eight and the windshield isn’t spotted. Okay, that sets the low-end of the range at what, nine or later. How did you settle on the high-end being before midnight? It coulda been early this morning or even afternoon today.”

CC Wilmer stopped behind the red SUV. “I don’t think so. After the first two murders, before I headed out here I went up and looked at the dispatcher’s calendar to see the recognition items for yesterday and today. Yesterday was March fourteenth so, yeah, her being murdered yesterday is the better fit. That’d require the killing be done before midnight—that supports the backend of my range.”

Lieutenant Reynolds took a moment to settle her feet on the uneven dirt and gravel. “I can’t argue that yesterday was the fourteenth, that’s a fact. But how did you establish it’s more likely she was murdered late on the fourteenth rather than early on the fifteenth?”

“You, being not only a bigtime state investigator, but a gorgeous hunk of womanhood, don’t know March fourteenth, one month after Valentine’s Day, is the celebrated Steak & Knobber Day.”

“And that means?”

“Equality, my dear lady, eee-quality. You women love Valentine’s Day. You get flowers and candy and dinner at your favorite restaurant. Some years ago, a forthright DJ in San Diego, California, decided men should get a day of what they want. He declared March fourteenth, one month after Valentine’s Day, to be Steak and Knobber Day. A day set aside for us dudes to get our well-deserved eee-quality.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve never heard of it. What is it men get?”

“I’ll translate: Steak and Knobber Day means: Steak and Blow Job Day.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Now I understand.”

“And?”

“And what?” Ann faced CC. “Equality is good. It avoids claims of sexism. Equality should work for men as well as for women. Truth is, you men are much more reliable about holding up your end on Valentine’s Day. Let me apologize on behalf of women everywhere. Speaking for myself, in the future, I’ll try to be more cognizant of my responsibilities on March fourteenth.”

“On behalf of the eager, but patient men of the world, thank you for your support.”

“In fairness, we should acknowledge this scene suggests the woman was quite possibly trying to honor the occasion.”

“So?”

Ann raised her eyebrows. “So, it goes to show not all women shirk their responsibilities.”

“Let’s hope Doc Bones discovers this lady is holding some of the perp’s DNA.”

Ann walked around to the passenger side, turned her flashlight on, and searched the front floor of the car. After that, she cast her eyes on the ground around the SUV. “For mostly gravel, seems sort of level.”

“I thought so too. Steps push gravel this way and that. The footprints near this vehicle are only yours and mine, and we figure the guy who called it in. I took pictures. My guess is the perp smoothed or raked it, maybe with a palm frond.” He motioned just off the trail. “As you can see, there’s plenty of decaying fronds all over this area.”

“What you’re implying was going on here is something few women bestow upon perfect strangers. Does that say she knew her killer?”

CC smiled. “Or, imperfect strangers for that matter.”

“Hey, you’re saying we women need to be more cognizant of our Steak and Knobber Day duties. You’re saying this woman was quite possibly doing just that. So, how about showing a little appreciation.”

“I am sorry. If we’re right about what was happening here, then, yeah, the vic most likely knew the perp. I mean, we’re not discussing blowing on a cup of hot coffee.” Wilmer scratched at the late-afternoon stubble blossomed on his cheek. “No pun intended.”

Ann turned off her flashlight. “Aren’t investigations fascinating? They touch on every aspect of the human experience.”

Sergeant Wilmer turned toward a set of headlights pulling in behind Ann Reynolds’ car on the far side of the entrance to the reserve. “That’s the M.E. The rest of tonight will be formal stuff. While Doc Bones focuses on the body, my men’ll do a grid-search. Although, if anything was discarded it probably got tossed out into the deeper water.”

“You thinking the icepick?”

“If I’m right about the murder weapon, my guess is the pick was taken away and tossed somewhere else. A guy meticulous enough to comb his footprints out of the gravel would probably take the pick and toss it somewhere down the road. There’s dozens of these ponds and lakes within a couple of miles in any direction of where we’re standing.”

CC started walking toward the approaching medical examiner. While he did, Ann opened the backdoor of the car and reached in to pick up the woman’s purse. She pressed the clasp on the purse and let it fall open. She leaned out of the car and stood.

“CC! Come back here. In the purse. It’s a bloody icepick. You were right. The perp put it inside her purse. The arrogance of the bastard.”

CC took out an evidence bag and Ann, holding the pick with two of her gloved fingers, dropped it inside.

The medical examiner was half way to them.

CC turned to Ann. “Look, unless you just like this kind of thing, there’s really no need for you to hang around. I got no choice. The next coupl’a hours is pretty much paint-by-the-numbers. If you wanna boogie, you can pick up a copy of our preliminary report at the sheriff’s station in the morning.”

“Thanks, CC. I’ll leave this in your capable hands and nip off. Thanks for the edification on the duties of women in today’s evolving dating scene.”

Sergeant CC Wilmer put his hand on Ann's shoulder. "Just doing my part to spread the word. If the objective is to elevate Steak and Knobber Day to the level of Valentine's Day, we men have a lot of promotional work to do."

Ann grinned. "Take care, Sarge. I'll see ya at the nick in the morning."

"Later."

Lieutenant Ann Reynolds walked through the long, lowering shadows. She stopped and shook hands with the medical examiner. After that, Ann walked to her car, got in, and as she drove away looked back and grinned.