

The Point Between

A Metaphysical Mystery

by M. A. Demers



Egghead
Books

Egghead Books, Canada

Copyright © 2015 Michelle A. Demers

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author, except by reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Trademarks are used without permission. Use of the trademark is not authorized by, associated with or sponsored by the trademark owner.

Cover photography and design by Michelle A. Demers

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Demers, M. A., 1964-, author

The point between : a metaphysical mystery / M.A. Demers.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-9916776-4-1 (paperback).--ISBN 978-0-9916776-5-8 (kindle).--

ISBN 978-0-9916776-6-5 (epub)

I. Title.

PS8605.E562P65 2015

C813'.6

C2015-906137-7

C2015-906138-5



THIS IS THE STORY OF A MURDER. Sort of. Not the murder part—that’s definitive—just the story part.

You see, at the moment the details are rather sketchy because Lily Harrington didn’t actually witness who killed her, which is an awkward situation to be in when you were an award-winning, bestselling crime novelist: Lily always knew before she wrote the first word who the culprit was. Thus you can imagine her embarrassment that she should be as baffled as the deputies staring up at her, their faces awash with that quizzical look one gets when you think you have seen it all only to find yourself in the presence of an immaculately dressed and stylishly coiffed middle-aged woman dangling at the end of a rope, with what can only be described as a perfectly formed yellow icicle hanging off the tip of her nose.

And, believe me, Lily was just as curious as you are as to what that peculiar thing was.

“What the hell *is* that?” the taller of the two deputies asked a middle-aged man who had joined them at Lily’s feet, a man she assumed was the medical examiner for he had the pasty complexion of one who rarely sees the sun, and the hunched shoulders and deep facial lines of a man who squints at things most of the day.

“It’s her brains,” Pasty Man declared.

You’re kidding me? Lily thought, horrified.

“Get ouuuuuut,” the shorter deputy drawled with a grin.

“Her internal organs have started to decompose and gravity has drawn brain tissue down through her nasal passages,” Pasty Man

explained. "When it hit the air it crystallized. Hence the brain icicle."

"Cool," the two deputies chimed together.

Yeah? Speak for yourself.

"Detective Paul Greene," a man introduced himself to the tall deputy who had remained behind while the other had gone off on a clearly less interesting call: the two men had flipped a coin as to who had to respond and who got to remain with Lily's corpse. The detective had traveled over from Bellingham, a fact Lily deduced from the deputy's earlier phone call and from her knowledge as a long-time resident of Point Roberts. With only two deputies to police this little-known American oddity on the southern tip of the otherwise Canadian peninsula of Tsawwassen, detectives from the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office are called upon to deal with all major crimes in "The Point," such as there are in this sleepy hamlet of sixteen hundred escapists from mainland Washington State.

The detective was altogether unremarkable, forgettable in a crowd of one, not at all like the handsome, virile men of Lily's imagination. He was in his early fifties, Lily guessed, dark haired but balding, with the bulbous nose and florid face of an alcoholic. His average height was diminished by his rotund frame, and his suit was clearly purchased about ten pounds ago. With chubby fingers he fished a handkerchief out of his tight trouser pocket and wiped his nose. If Lily's face were not frozen by rigor he would have seen creases of dismay creep stealthily across her forehead, and her lips purse with disapproval: Lily thought Greene might be no better a detective than his name suggested.

"Deputy David Thornfield," said the lucky one who had stayed behind, firmly shaking Greene's hand. "Thanks for making the trip."

Lily eyed them both. Thornfield had the muscular body and confident stance of a military man, yet he had bent over slightly to grasp his elder colleague's hand. Was this an act of subtle deference to the senior officer's age and rank, or the opposite, that Thornfield had exaggerated their minimal height difference to compensate for his relative youth and lesser status? Lily decided the latter, for the

deputy quickly tucked his fingers beneath his armpits as if he were afraid his hands would give him away should they be left unattended. Greene, however, did not seem to notice, or perhaps did not care, an underling's discomfort the least of his concerns.

The detective sniffled loudly and swallowed the results. "Why the hell is it so cold in here? It's seventy degrees outside." His voice was as gruff as his manner, and Lily quickly soured to the sound.

"It's the air-conditioning," Thornfield explained, jutting out his chiseled chin in the direction of the air vents. "Was on full blast when I arrived. I figure she put it on to maintain her dignity."

"Come again?"

Yes, Lily thought, *come again?* She did not feel the cold, but if it were freezing in here she felt some comfort that this likely meant she was not in hell.

"You know, keep her body pristine for whoever finds it. As a mystery writer she must know what happens to a dead body in the June heat."

"Hmhmh," Greene grunted and wiped his nose again. His handkerchief was made of smooth white cotton and monogrammed in one corner in navy blue thread, the typeface ornamental. The incongruity suggested a gift, likely from a mother who sought to elevate his station, a futile attempt to match his exterior to her romanticized interior image of him.

Thornfield was unable to interpret the grunt, whether it meant the detective agreed or not. The ambiguity was disconcerting. Thornfield was a man who needed to know where he stood at all times; uncertainty threatened his center. He straightened his back and hooked his thumbs over his equipment belt, a gesture meant both to detract from his insecurity and to compensate for it, and which seemed to confirm Lily's earlier assumption. "Anyhow," he added, hopeful he sounded confident, "I thought it best to leave it as is until everyone arrived."

"Good call." Greene stuffed his handkerchief back in his trouser pocket, briefly sucking in his abdomen to make room for his hand. He looked up at Lily, his face curious. "So, this is the mighty Lily Harrington," he declared with feigned admiration, leaning back on worn heels as he looked up. "My wife reads her stuff. Loves all that

romantic mystery nonsense.”

The man has a wife? Lily thought, incredulous. *Dear God, no wonder she reads my books.*

“The one and only,” Thornfield confirmed with a wave of his hand, like a magician introducing his pretty assistant just before he proposes to cut her in half. “Point Roberts’ resident celebrity. There’s going to be a media frenzy. Thank the Lord we only have the one small inn down here; the press will all have to stay up in Canada.” He laughed at the thought.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Greene snorted. “You watch, people will be renting out rooms in their homes faster than you can say ‘cash under the table.’ And there’s also the RV park. That’ll sell out quick.”

Thornfield nervously scratched his arm, his mistake eating away at him like psoriasis or a rash of tiny insect bites. “Damn, this is going to be a nightmare.”

“Which is why we’re going to get her out of here as fast as possible,” Greene assured his colleague. And Greene meant it. He was only here because Lily Harrington was famous. Normal procedure would be to treat the death as the obvious suicide it is until and unless the medical examiner concluded otherwise, but by then the cops would be days behind in their investigation and evidence compromised. Those were unfortunate facts best kept from public scrutiny, and the death of someone famous always invited scrutiny. Thus, and only so as to avoid any potential embarrassment for the Sheriff’s Office, Harrington would get special treatment. This irritated Greene, but he was a team player and would take this one for the department.

Changing track he asked, “Who found her?”

“The housekeeper, Runa Jonsdottir,” Thornfield answered, grateful to be certain of at least that fact. “Comes every Thursday morning at nine to clean and do laundry. Let herself in, saw the missus and ran back out. Called me from her cellphone. Said she was too scared to stay inside to use the house phone.”

Well that explains the shout I heard earlier, Lily concluded, wrongly: it would be another two days before she would learn the truth behind the raised voice that awoke her to her new reality.

“Where is she now?”

“At home beside the RV park just up the road. I told her to wait there until you come to question her.”

Greene nodded his approval then tilted his head toward Lily. “Any idea why she killed herself?”

Lily’s head shot up in alarm. *Killed myself?! I didn’t kill myself. What on earth would make you think that? Look at me, Detective. I’m wearing Armani. I had my roots done day before last. And my nails. Who goes to the salon then kills herself?*

“If she killed herself,” Pasty Man chimed in, pushing his thick John Lennon eyeglasses up his nose. “She seems a bit dressed up for a suicide.”

Exactly! How was this not obvious to Greene? Who sent him here? One would assume the Sheriff’s Office would have assigned their best detective to Lily, but it seemed they had sent their failure—you know the kind: long in the tooth but so close to retirement that nobody has the heart to fire him. Lily was both insulted by this and fearful of the consequences. She had a mind to call the governor and complain. She glanced over at the phone on the kitchen counter, then up at the rope she was hanging from. *Huh*, was her next thought when she realized that phoning the governor, or anyone else for that matter, was currently not an option.

“Of course, we won’t know for certain until the autopsy is complete,” Pasty Man continued.

“Fred,” Greene said with barely concealed irritation, “why are you in here? You know you’re supposed to wait outside until we release the body to you.” Fred lowered his head and skulked off. A moment later the slam of the front door was heard.

“Isn’t he the medical examiner?” Thornfield asked, scowling.

“Nah,” Greene shook his head dismissively. “That’s Bag and Dash. Real name’s Fred Helder. He’s on contract to pick up bodies for the medical examiner if he’s too busy to attend in person.”

Damn, thought Lily, *Fred had seemed so promising*. That Greene might actually be the best man in the room was a sobering thought.

“Ah, my bad then,” Thornfield apologized and ran a hand over his dark crew cut. “When he showed up in the transport van I assumed he was the M.E. and invited him in.” He hoped he sounded nonchalant but inwardly he cringed. His errors were adding up; any

minute now Greene might dismiss him, which was the *last* thing Thornfield wanted.

“Don’t sweat it.”

“Couldn’t anyway,” Thornfield chuckled awkwardly. Greene responded with a blank look. “The air-conditioning,” the deputy said, pointing his finger in the air. “Probably explains the brain icicle.”

“Brain icicle?”

He pointed to the icicle on Lily’s nose. “Fred said it was decomposing brain tissue.” Thornfield grimaced, suddenly remembering Fred’s true position. “*Are* those her brains?”

Greene scrutinized Lily’s face. The same peculiar look she had seen earlier on Thornfield’s face now fell across the detective’s. “Hell if I know,” he shrugged, “but it’s definitely a first.”

2

GREENE AND THORNFIELD HEARD THE SOUND of footsteps behind them. They turned to see two crime scene investigators, dressed in white forensic “bunny” suits and their arms laden with metal suitcases, walking into the great room. The CSIs glanced up at Lily, hanging from one of the thick cedar trusses that spanned the width of the space. She stared back, and the first thought that came to her mind was how inarguably unflattering their outfits were, especially the puffy surgical hats. It took her back to the time she’d had surgery to fix a deviated septum, broken in a skiing accident the winter before; how her then-teenaged self had refused to put on that silly hat until the very moment she was out of sight of everyone except her medical team, and even then had cringed when her handsome plastic surgeon came in and greeted her. That he was twenty years her senior, married and off market, had done nothing to alleviate her embarrassment.

“Hey, Paul,” one of the Forensics officers greeted Greene, interrupting Lily’s thoughts. The CSI was taller than the detective, slimmer and better looking even with the bunny suit. If it were not for that humiliating brain icicle—and the inconvenient fact that Lily was currently strung up like a possum—she would probably offer him her phone number.

“Hey, Mick, Kerry,” Greene welcomed his colleagues. “This is Deputy David Thornfield, first attending.”

“Mick Sheraton,” Sheraton introduced himself as he put his cases down.

Thornfield reached out to shake the man's hand. The gesture was not returned. The deputy's hand hung awkwardly in the air for a few seconds before he realized Sheraton's was already gloved and sealed and touching anyone meant contamination. Thornfield felt like a leper, and quickly pulled his hand back to his side.

"And this is Kerry Reeds," Sheraton introduced his partner next, charitably glossing over the deputy's mistake.

"Do you?" Thornfield asked Reeds, a twinkle in his eye.

Reeds' face puckered. Was this doofus seriously flirting with her at a crime scene? She turned the question back on the deputy. "Do I what?"

"Read," Thornfield soldiered on despite the poor reception.

"Ha, ha," Reeds replied with a forced smile. "Why?"

"It might come in handy on this one." Thornfield smiled anxiously: somehow he could not stop putting his foot in it.

Reeds stared blankly at the men. "Vic's a novelist," Greene explained. He paused to let Thornfield's lame joke sink in then returned to business. "Okay, here's the warrant," he announced, pulling out a folded document from his breast pocket. "Colby signed off on it."

"It's freezing in here," Reeds observed, perplexed. "How long has it been like this?"

"Don't know," Thornfield responded. "The air-conditioning was on when I got here."

"Damn," Sheraton complained. "That's going to make time of death difficult."

"I know," Greene lamented, shaking his head wearily and wiping his nose again, the linen's monogrammed corner crushed in his fist. "We're going to have to retrace her movements to the minute."

"I don't understand," Thornfield said. "I thought the cold preserves evidence." He shivered as he spoke, the frigid air finally piercing his thick biceps to reach the bone.

So did I, Lily thought and immediately regretted it: that she might be as clueless as this Thornfield was proving to be was cause for reflection.

"Well, yes," Reeds explained, pouncing on the opportunity to show up the deputy, "but rapid cooling brings the body down to

ambient temperature faster. Once that happens, time of death based on body temp is no longer an option. The cold then slows normal insect activity and bacterial decomp, which would have been our fallback data. Bugger us.”

Bugger you? Lily thought, staring down at her dangling feet. *I'm the one who's dead.*

“Yes, indeed,” Greene said, nodding his head in agreement, “bugger us.” He turned to Reeds and Sheraton. “Okay, room’s yours to start. I’m going to take Thornfield on a walk through the rest of the house, see if anything looks unusual from a local’s perspective. Check in with you later.”

The CSIs nodded, opened their cases and got to work. Sheraton found and turned off the air-conditioning while Reeds took out a digital camera and began photographing Lily. The intrusion made her uncomfortable. She was used to being photographed—there had been numerous headshots over her career, photos taken by journalists to complement their coverage, and of course the multitude of selfies taken by fans at public signings—but this was different: not only did Lily look ghastly, but she couldn’t control the angle, couldn’t put her best side forward, couldn’t tilt her head just so to make her eyes the focal point. The lack of command was unnerving. And then there was that wretched icicle. How would she ever live that down? Oh wait, she was dead. Damn.

Annoyance turned into anxiety when Lily saw Greene and Thornfield climbing the stairs to the second floor, headed, she knew, for her private quarters. To her surprise she found she was able to leave her body, briefly glancing at it hanging there before racing up the stairs after the men.

She spied on them as they entered her bedroom, pulled on latex gloves and began opening drawers and closets, invading her privacy as if it no longer mattered to her. She felt the heat rise in her cheeks when Greene opened the goodie drawer in her bedside table and lifted out her vibrator. “Hey, check this out,” he smirked as he flipped the switch, “the queen of romantic suspense needs a mechanical boyfriend.”

His words filled her with fury. “Well of course I need one,” she snapped at him. “Have you *seen* the men my age? Either they’re in my

social class, in which case they're pompous bores, or they're fellow writers, in which case they're pompous bores who look like *you*." She tried to snatch the device from Greene's hand only to watch her own swipe uselessly through the air. Her impotence was exasperating.

Greene did not respond to her anger, just looked right through Lily as if she were not there. Her invisibility made his disrespect all the more infuriating. To Thornfield's merit he merely smiled awkwardly at the intrusion then quickly averted his gaze, and Lily felt a surge of gratitude for the man whom she had passed on the road on several occasions but, she was now ashamed to admit, had never bothered to address or even to remember his name.

The men found nothing of significance in her bedroom and moved on to the large en suite. Their eyes swept over the bathroom, looking for anomalies. Lily walked around them and sat on the edge of her tub overlooking the sea, and pondered the many wonderful moments she had spent in this porcelain cocoon. It was especially magical at night when she would watch the lights from the ferries as they left the Tsawwassen terminal less than two nautical miles from her window. She would sometimes imagine passengers on board and create stories about them in her head, stories that often became plots in her novels. She did her best writing in the bath.

On the gray marble countertop Greene found Lily's estrogen gel and the antidepressant paroxetine, both prescribed by a doctor in Bellingham but filled at a pharmacy in Blaine. Lily watched as Greene pulled out his cellphone and snapped photos of the medications, then the three moved on to the guest rooms. The bedrooms were clean and showed no signs of any recent use, and the officers quickly abandoned them for the open media room.

The cozy space was dominated by a high-end but modestly sized flatscreen television in front of a large sectional littered with throw cushions and quilted blankets that invited you to put up your feet and find a ball game. Greene briefly gave in to temptation on the pretext of checking the DVD player and PVR for any recent activity; both came up empty. He rifled through the few magazines that sat atop the glass coffee table, before reluctantly rising once again to his feet.

The three moved back down to the main floor and entered Lily's office. It was an expansive room facing west to the strait, its rolling

waves visible between two tall trees rising from the cliff side. Late morning sunlight poured in through the large window and bounced off a lower bank of white custom-built storage units. Greene glanced up at a huge panoramic painting of a field of flowers that hung above the built-ins, and smiled unintentionally: something about the relaxed ambition of the flowers, the way they reached for the sky yet bent willingly in the breeze, moved him, though he was not the type to articulate such thoughts.

In the middle of the room sat a reading sofa and lamp. When her eyes fell on the couch, Lily stopped dead. She suddenly had the sensation of falling, the soft give of the red cushions bending beneath her weight. But why the creepy feeling? Lily did not know, and she wasn't certain she wanted to.

She looked over at Thornfield. He was standing in front of the south wall, its floor-to-ceiling bookcase (also white, custom built, with an antique brass ladder to reach the higher shelves) packed with tomes of every kind, his eyes scanning the titles. At eye level, in pride of place, were first-edition hardback copies of Lily's forty-nine novels, arranged in chronological order: *Bitter Revenge*, *The Haunting of Elside Manor*, *Mantova's Secret*, *Mystery at Castle Rock*, *Rendezvous Under the Moon ...*

Thornfield's voice broke the silence. "When you see them all in a row like this, they look kind of ..." He paused, searching for the right word.

"Formulaic?" Greene suggested.

"Yeah, that's it. Formulaic."

Lily bristled at the allegation. Sure there was a formula to the genre, but each book, each character and plot, was original, born of her mind and nursed at her bosom. These were her *babies*, each with its own personality. To suggest they were formulaic was like insisting identical twins were incapable of their own uniqueness. She was really starting to dislike this Greene.

"They serve a purpose," he shrugged. "Just like James Bond and Jason Bourne do for us, I suppose."

"Never thought of it that way." Then, failing to censor himself yet again, Thornfield added, "You said your wife reads Harrington's books. What purpose do they serve for her?"

Greene glanced over but did not answer, and the deputy realized he had touched a sore spot. He had done it again, another foot in the mouth. He could almost taste the dusty leather of his combat boot, the dirt on his sole gritty against his teeth. The sensation made him crave a drink, but his canteen was in his cruiser; leaving the scene to retrieve his water bottle would only draw yet more attention to his ineptitude. He was beginning to think he would have been better off responding to the other call and leaving Collins to this.

To Thornfield's relief Greene ignored the impertinent question and instead opted for diversion. "What was Harrington like?"

"I dunno," Thornfield replied truthfully. "This is the first time I've met her, so to speak. I'm told she hobnobbed a bit with the yacht crowd that come in off the islands, played golf with the club's richer members. She'd do a reading at the library whenever she had a new book out, but I haven't been here long enough to attend one. She was known to frequent our few local businesses, and they all have a photo of them with Harrington on display. I saw her once in a while at the Marketplace or getting gas, but like most folks around here that was it: groceries, gas, and golf. She crossed into Canada or went to the mainland for just about everything else."

"What about fans? Paparazzi?"

"Not many. Most of the time outsiders just got a chance encounter if Harrington was out and about, and if they recognized her. We'd get a few drive-bys, but as you can see the property is set well back from the road and shielded by trees. The gate keeps vehicles out. There's a staircase down the cliff to the water but it's too shallow to get a large boat near; you'd have to row in on something smaller like a dingy, or walk across the flats during low tide. I heard a few fans made the trek here when Harrington first bought the property, but quickly realized it was difficult and pointless. And people here look out for each other. If anyone sees someone skulking about, they call it in. There's no record of any previous calls to this address. I've never had a reason to attend in the short time I've been here."

"Which is exactly why I chose this place," Lily confessed as she looked out her office window at an eagle swooping low over the strait. The Point's isolation was often inconvenient but the upside was limited access by strangers: one needed a boat to get here by water,

a small plane if by air, and if by land then a passport or an enhanced driver's license to pass through Canada first. And the Canadians, well, they didn't give a damn that Lily was famous. She could walk freely among the aliens and be left alone.

That last part was particularly important to her. The hustle and bustle of New York had been fun in her younger years, but as she aged she began to resent the constant intrusion of the city: the traffic beneath her bedroom window that often kept her awake later than she intended, the constant social invitations that cut into her writing time, the fans who loitered outside her Park Avenue apartment, hoping to meet her. Then the towers had fallen, and Lily traded the lights of the Big Apple for the starry sky and small town life of Point Roberts.

"Good thing I didn't bring the wife, then," Greene said, bringing Lily's thoughts crashing back to the present. "When Harrington first moved to The Point, Ellie begged me to drive her here for a look at the house; I said that was stalking and it wasn't going to happen."

"And I suppose a selfie's out of the question now," Thornfield joked, and laughed. His earlier apprehension had begun to wane: he was connecting again with the detective.

Greene walked over to Lily's desk, a plain but finely crafted double-pedestal mahogany piece that Greene rightly assumed was from the Victorian era, though this was less an educated guess than a fluke: every antique looked Victorian to him. The desk had previously belonged to Lily's father, and she paused to finger the spot on the green leather inlay where the cufflink from his left sleeve had scratched its history into the desk, a hieroglyph that only the Harrington sisters could decipher.

Greene opened the lid of Lily's laptop. To his surprise the computer was on, an open Word document on the screen. He leaned down for a closer look. "Looks like a novel," he said after a moment. "That's odd."

Odd? Lily thought, dismissing the man for yet another perceived inadequacy. *How is that odd? I'm a novelist. Seriously, this is not funny. Somebody get me the governor.*

"Why is that odd?" Thornfield asked. "She was a novelist."
Exactly! Twit.

“Who works on her novel, gets dressed up like she’s going out, then hangs herself?”

“A vain but frustrated writer?” Thornfield suggested, chuckling.

Okay, now I’m starting to hate you both.

Greene clicked on Lily’s email program. It was opened on a message dated six p.m. Tuesday, sent by Donald Martin at Creative Minds Agency and copied to Jarod Ross at Sellinger Press. It read:

Lily, darling, are you crazy? You mustn’t do this to them, to you, to us. I beg you to reconsider. I’m coming there. Don’t do anything foolish until we talk.

Harrington had not answered the email, but she had read it—or somebody had—and there were later messages, also read, followed by several unopened ones. Greene opened the last read email and checked its file properties. It had been received at 5:03 p.m. on Wednesday and “modified” at 8:38 p.m., indicating this was when the email had been read. Harrington had likely been alive until at least then.

“Hey, Dave,” Greene called over to Thornfield, “there’s an email here from someone named Donald Martin. Says he was coming out to see Harrington. Did the housekeeper say anything about a guest?”

“No.”

“Hmmm,” Greene murmured. He stared at the text, his brow furrowed. Had Harrington threatened to kill herself? And who was “them”?

He closed the laptop but left it and the program running; this way CSI would not need to crack her passwords. Beside Lily’s laptop sat her cellphone; Greene turned it on but it was password locked. Forensics would have to open it. The detective put the phone back exactly where he found it—Reeds would need to photograph the scene before any evidence was removed—then began looking through the papers on the desk. Within easy reach was a thin red folder; Greene opened it and began perusing its contents.

“What the hell?” he said, thinking aloud.

Curious, Thornfield walked over to the desk to see for himself what Greene was looking at. It was a notebook with pages of Lily’s

nearly indecipherable handwriting, printed Internet pages on various knot configurations, information on types and widths of sailing rope and their maximum loads, another sheet on the sedative effects of paroxetine, and a Wikipedia entry on hanging. “Jesus,” Thornfield said, shocked. “She was researching her suicide.”

“No, no, no,” Lily insisted aloud as if they could hear her. “It wasn’t like that at all.”

“That’s what it looks like,” Greene surmised as he snapped photos of each page.

“Should make this easy then,” Thornfield concluded, looking relieved.

The detective shook his head. “It’s never easy. Just some are harder than others.” He tucked his phone away in his breast pocket then left the office, Thornfield and Lily in tow.

“No, no, no, you have it all wrong,” she persisted as she followed the men back into the living room. “You need to listen to me. I did *not* kill myself.” She stopped short when she saw Sheraton helping Fred load her tiny frame into a long white bag. It was a truly unsettling image.

Sheraton closed the zipper and the two men lifted Lily up. “She’s a wisp of a thing, isn’t she?” Fred remarked as they lifted the body onto a stretcher. “I’ve bagged twelve-year-olds bigger than this.” It was the kind of backhanded “compliment” Lily had heard her entire life, and what she whispered next about Bag and Dash was too defamatory to print.

Fred said his goodbyes and wheeled Lily’s corpse toward the west patio doors. “You need to follow the body through Canada and down to Bellingham, maintain chain of custody,” Greene instructed Thornfield.

“What do I need for the Canadians?”

“Nothing. They know the drill.” The deputy headed for the front door. “Hurry back,” Greene called out after him. “I’ll need you to help with the canvass.” Thornfield nodded then disappeared from the house.

Anxious to keep watch over her dignity, Lily followed Fred out the patio doors. As her body was wheeled down the path toward the waiting white transport van, Lily caught sight of a man loitering about her back lawn, the sparkling waters of the strait framing him

with light. His broad shoulders were evident beneath a black trench coat, cinched at the waist despite the June heat. Wisps of silky dark hair peeked out beneath an equally unseasonable black wool fedora. His hat was down, shielding his face, but she could feel his eyes on her. Had the media intrusion already begun?

Lily strode over to the man, believing that somehow she could pierce the veil between worlds and give him a piece of her mind. As she approached he looked up at her, his dark-brown bedroom eyes smoldering under the shade of his hat. *Could it be? No, that's impossible!*

"Marcus?" Lily asked, disbelieving her eyes.

"Lily, darling, I came as soon as I heard," the man cooed in a velvety voice. "What compelled you to do such a terrible thing?"

"First of all, I didn't *do* anything," Lily replied, her voice shrill. "I was *murdered*. Secondly, you are a product of my imagination, so clearly I'm imagining this too. And now I'm leaving before this gets any weirder."

She turned to follow her body to the morgue. Fred had already disappeared around the side of the house; he would be leaving any minute now.

"On the contrary, Lily, I'm very real," Marcus called out after her, and she heard in his voice a hint of mockery. "I always have been. That's what imagination is; it's a portal to the other side."

She stopped at the corner of the path and turned back around. "What are you talking about?"

"You didn't create me, Lily. You only gave me form in your world, the words on the page. And now I'm here and I can help you. If you were truly murdered, who better to help you get to the bottom of it than your most successful detective?"

"This is crazy. In fact, I bet this whole 'I'm dead thing' is just me hallucinating. I just need to see Dr. Nelson to get my antidepressants adjusted. I haven't been sleeping well again." She was babbling now, a rising panic inching through her body.

"I can assure you, Lily, I'm not an hallucination. And you are very much dead."

The panic reached her throat. It was all starting to sink in. Her initial anger at the discovery of her death was giving way to despair.

She looked over at the transport van. The bag containing her remains had already been loaded and Fred was shutting the doors.

He got in the driver's seat and started the engine. And now Lily could hear Thornfield starting his. If she really was dead she needed to follow her body, needed to ensure no further insults were heaped upon it, but if she left would she be able to find her way back to the house and to Marcus, to the mystery he had just dumped at her feet?

She looked at Marcus then over at Fred, torn. "Okay," she said, giving in. "I believe you. But if we're going to solve this case together, we'd better get going."

Marcus nodded and the two ran for the van, jumping inside just as Fred started down the gravel drive to the road beyond.