



A Triple Trouble Mystery

BEST ENEMIES

*Three sharp ladies will catch
a murderer, if they don't kill
each other first!*

Lynn Emery

“There’s someone here to see you.” Kay pursed her lips as though sucking something bitter. She looked at Cedric. “MiMi Landry.”

“Oh crap,” Cedric blurted out. “You tell her.”

“What is the matter with you two?” Willa looked at him then at Kay. When neither spoke up Willa frowned, started to ask if they’d lost their minds and then stopped. “Wait a minute. One of Jack’s women?”

“And this one is a true blue ribbon b—” Kay bit off the word when Cedric shot her a disapproving scowl. “Sorry, sir.”

Cedric merely lifted a dark eyebrow in response then turned to Willa. “I’ll talk to Ms. Landry and gently show her the front door.”

“Oh please, let me do it,” Kay blurted out. “I know how to deal with a loud-mouthed, classless woman like her.” She took a deep breath and let it out. “You two have more important things to deal with today. I can take out the trash.”

“Kay, really,” Cedric admonished. “I know you and Ms. Landry have a history, but—”

A steady rapping on Willa’s office door interrupted the back and forth. “Hey, Miss Secretary. I meant sometime *today*, all right? Just give me the files and I’ll be on my way. Thank you.”

“I told her you weren’t in, but I would check your calendar to see when she could come back,” Kay whispered.

Willa grunted. “And you thought that sounded like the truth? I’ve had experience dealing with Jack’s women. I got this.”

“No, I don’t think the office is a good place for...” Cedric seemed to struggle with a way to finish.

“A bloody cat fight? I wouldn’t break even one fingernail on Jack’s latest bump in the night. He had more miles on him than a Greyhound bus. I’d have spent every waking hour fighting some hoochie if I had tried.” Willa yanked open the door as Cedric and Kay gasped in unison.

MiMi Landry blinked in surprise then flashed a dazzling perfect white-toothed smile. “You a new secretary? If so, then it’s nice to meet you. I just need one tiny little file then I’ll be on my way and out of *your* way. Then you can go back to doing... office things.”

MiMi stood with her right hand on her hip. She wore a royal blue cotton knit tank dress and three-inch strappy white sandals. A white and metallic silver handbag swung from her left shoulder. What looked like two-inch sterling silver hoops gleamed beneath the florescent lights of the office. Willa took a moment to covet the fabulous hobo style purse and then she smiled back at her.

“No, I’m not the secretary. I’m Mrs. Jack Crown.” Willa allowed her smile to freeze in place as she stared at MiMi.

A kaleidoscope of emotions flashed across her smooth brown face. Shock, uncertainty, anger, calculation all took their turn as MiMi obviously worked out what to say next. She must have finally settled on a strategy because she nodded and sighed.

“Yes. How horrible for Jack to lose his life over pocket change. I hope the children are okay,” MiMi said with a solicitous expression.

The heifer had nerve. Willa glanced back at Cedric, who cleared his throat and looked down at the top of his spit shined shoes. Kay muttered something under her breath. Then Willa turned to face MiMi again.

“They’re holding up as well as can be expected given the circumstances. Thank you for asking. Now how may I help you?” Willa crossed her arms to signal she should bounce on out of there.

MiMi appeared in no mind to take a hint. She adopted a business-like manner. “Jack and I were seeing each other. Now I know this is awkward, given you two were still married. Though you were estranged.” Seconds ticked by as they studied each other.

“Hmm,” Willa’s said. She had no intention of giving this woman more information.

“If we could speak privately,” MiMi said, lowering her voice.

When Willa turned to Kay, the secretary mouthed the word “No.” Cedric looked like he wanted to be anywhere else. Yet he didn’t move. He put the folders he held down onto the table.

“Exactly what is it you need, Ms. Landry?” he said and stepped forward to stand beside Willa. Just then two security guards came in laughing loudly. They waved at him.

“Mornin’ everybody,” one called out with a grin. The other one merely waved good-naturedly.

“Kay, take the guards to your desk and give them their paychecks and their next assignment. Cedric, I’m sure they want to give you a report of how security went at the art gallery event,” Willa said and nodded for them to leave.

“Uh, right.” Kay glanced at MiMi once more before she left.

“I’ve spoken to the event coordinator for the art gallery. Things went fine.” Cedric tugged on his necktie when Willa’s right eyebrow went up at him. “But I can get a report from them as well. I’ll check back with you later to let you know how it went.”

“Thanks. Close the door, please,” Willa said as he walked out. He paused in the doorway, looked back at the two women then pulled door behind him. When Willa realized he’d left the door open an inch or so she walked past MiMi and shut it firmly.

“I realize you must be very busy, so I won’t take up more than a few minutes of your time.” MiMi took a seat without waiting for an invitation. She looked around the office as though trying to memorize the new layout.

“How can I help you?” Willa sat at her desk, now thoroughly organized. MiMi seemed to have noticed the lack of clutter as well.

“This is kind of awkward. Under the circumstances I mean.” Despite her words MiMi did not appear to be all that nervous.

“You mean the wife meets the mistress kind of circumstance? Yes, I can agree that it’s an ‘awkward’ moment. At least it was the first three times. After that I got used to it.” Willa flashed a big smile at her. “The reason for your visit?”

MiMi stopped looking around the office and focused on Willa. She exuded attitude as she lifted her nose in the air. “Listen, I’m not looking for drama. I mean the final divorce decree was a formality.”

“True,” Willa shot back at her then waited.

“What I mean is—” MiMi affected a congenial expression. “I was saying that there is no reason for us to be angry at each other. I wasn’t with Jack before you two separated.”

Willa bit off a retort that she only had MiMi’s word for that. Instead she nodded. “Believe me, I moved on emotionally from Jack several years ago. Now you came here for a reason?”

“Right. Well, this is the truly awkward part. You see Jack owes me money..., owed me money. You see I helped him out in a business deal and I was supposed to get back my investment plus thirty percent. He had a file with the name Strafford, Inc. on it. It has a gold circle around a blue logo. Maybe you’ve seen it.” MiMi leaned forward.

“No, I haven’t. Cedric didn’t mention any such business deal to me.” Willa gazed back at her, figuring the matter was settled.

MiMi frowned back. “I doubt Cedric had anything to do with this venture. Jack wouldn’t have shared something so sensitive with a subordinate.”

“First of all Cedric is chief of operations, much more than a subordinate. Secondly, Jack went into business with you?” Willa crossed her arms and continued to stare at MiMi.

“Okay, I’m not just here trying to run a game,” MiMi shot back, her upper-class manners slipping. “Now if you let me look for the file, it’s probably in that second cabinet, then I’ll be outta here.”

“I’m not going to let you search my office, Ms. Landry,” Willa said in a ‘you must be crazy’ tone.

MiMi blinked rapidly then smiled. “Of course you’re quite right. What was I thinking? Kay probably knows where the old files are now and can—”

“And Jack’s estate has to be settled. If you have a claim then have your lawyer send the written agreement you had with Jack to my lawyer. I’ll give you his name.” Willa pulled a note pad toward her and started to write.

“Written agreement. Well, that’s the thing. Jack and I, well, you know our relationship was close, special. We didn’t need to put things in writing. We were engaged. Practically,” MiMi added when Willa glanced at her left hand looking for a ring.

“Hmm. Witnesses?” Willa stopped writing and looked up at her again.

“We were alone. Look, we’re talking about a lot of money. Now things have changed drastically and I need that money. I’m sure he had the details somewhere about the deal and location of the money.”

“Even if I wanted to, Ms. Landry,” Willa said, making it clear she didn’t want to give MiMi even a nickel. “I can’t just write you out a large check from Jack’s estate. As the executor I have a responsibility to handle things correctly. Not to mention minor children are involved, and both are beneficiaries of the estate.”

“But—”

“Just so I can document your claim and discuss it with my attorney, how much money are we talking about?” Willa said.

“Three hundred thousand dollars. Part of that is the equity in the home Jack and I bought,” MiMi blurted out. “I have to get that money back to pay the mortgage, insurance, the lawn service...” She blew out a gust of air in exasperation.

“I can see why you’re so anxious to find out about this deal. Did you buy the home in both your names?” Willa affected a sympathetic tone.

MiMi started to answer then stopped. Her flustered state quickly changed to a wary one. “The home is mine. I really need to have this matter settled. If you just let me copy the file that would help.”

Willa didn’t believe her. She wondered how to find out about this sweet valuable asset that just might be part of the Jackson P. Crown estate. “I can’t do that, Ms. Landry. However, if you give me information about the house, the loan you took out and any other details it will help. You can document your claim to this estate debt and maybe we can expedite the matter.”

This time it was MiMi’s turn to look skeptical. “Sure. Listen I have rights under the law. Let’s keep this civil, shall we?”

“Under Louisiana law I can’t do anything until the will is probated. At that time you can present evidence of this alleged debt—”

“Alleged?” MiMi yelped. Her mouth worked like a gold fish sucking for air and finding nothing.

“And we’ll take it from there. Now this may take several months. Of course it could be longer if some other woman contests the provisions of the will.” Willa rocked the leather executive chair and watched MiMi with amusement. “Years even.”

MiMi pressed a palm to her forehead. “Kay knows. She was here that day when I met with Jack.”

“You said you two were alone,” Willa reminded her, her voice cool as water dripping from an ice cube.

“In his... I mean your... in this damn office, yes we were alone. But when we left for lunch to celebrate she must have overheard him thank me. Get her in here.” MiMi jabbed a finger at the phone on Willa’s desk.

Without answering Willa picked up the receiver and hit the button that connected her to Kay’s phone. “Kay, step in here a minute. Thanks.”

Kay broke some kind of secretarial speed record getting back into the office. Willa saw Cedric out in the foyer across from Kay’s desk. He craned his neck for a look into the office but Kay shut the door blocking his view. Not before Willa saw him mutter an expletive.

“Yes, ma’am.” Kay kept her gaze on Willa as though MiMi did not exist.

“Ms. Landry claims she had a business arrangement with Jack. Do you happen to recall hearing anything at all about this?” Willa asked placidly.

Before Kay could answer MiMi stood. “It was about ten months, maybe a year before Jack died. I came to his office with an envelope. Okay, so maybe you didn’t see it. I had it in my purse when I came in.” She chewed her lower lip.

“You were here several times,” Kay said. She blinked at MiMi as though puzzled then shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Okay, okay. Now think. Take your time. I had on that turquoise wrap silk blend top that Jack bought for me at Neiman Marcus, and a black pencil skirt. We went to Houston.” MiMi turned to Willa. “Not that he dressed me as a rule. I was not that kind of mistress, uh, woman.”

“Hmm,” Willa replied.

“Doesn’t ring even one bell,” Kay said with a smirk she couldn’t conceal.

“Shit,” MiMi blurted out and stomped one Gucci sandaled foot.

“Thanks, Kay.” Willa smiled at her.

“If you need me again just call.” Kay smiled back at Willa. She shot MiMi a smug glance before she walked out.

So as I said before, file a petition with the court to be listed as a debtor to Jack’s estate.” Willa stood as a signal that it was time for MiMi to leave. “Sorry I couldn’t be more help.”

MiMi shot her a dirty look. “Paralegals aren’t real lawyers, so please stop tossing out legalese as if you’re one.”

Willa wanted to know more so she pushed down the urge to body slam the heifer. “You know more about me than I know about you, Miss Landry. What is your profession?”

“Beauty consultant and fashion coordinator for a major retail outlet.” MiMi squared her shoulders and lifted her nose in the air.

Willa figured that translated as cosmetics counter salesgirl. “I see. Well, unfortunately that’s about all I can do for you right now. Unless you can give me a lot more details about the business venture and the house in question.”

“Okay, listen. All I know is some of Jack’s creditors won’t be so patient. Let’s just say his other investors aren’t as polite as I am. If we can pay them back...” MiMi blinked rapidly. Beads of sweat on her forehead glistened beneath the ceiling lighting overhead. Without looking MiMi yanked a tissue from the box on Willa’s desk and dabbed her face dry.

A cold shiver crawled up and down Willa’s back. The woman was obviously scared out of her wits. Willa thought about Detective Miller’s questions. Maybe he wasn’t just asking form questions because it was procedure. What had he found out?

“Could these impatient creditors have had something to do with Jack’s death?” Willa asked quietly. MiMi’s reaction caused the cold shiver to spread all over Willa. Her cinnamon brown skin went sallow. Suddenly Willa didn’t want to know the answer.

“That folder is *my property*. When you find it you’ll see that, and I want it back. I’ll call you in a few days. Give you time to look. Trust me, you really want to just give it to me” MiMi spoke fast as she snatched up her purse from the floor. She started to leave then changed her mind and spun around to face Willa again. “No need to discuss this with Detective Miller either. I mean this is a civil matter like you said, involving probate and the will and all.”

“Conceal information from the police regarding a murder investigation?” Willa raised an eyebrow at her.

MiMi let out a combination hiss and groan as she seemed to realize she’d said too much. She whispered a cuss word. “I’ll be in touch. Bye.”

Cedric must have met MiMi going as he was coming into the office. The door to Willa’s office was still open when he strode in. “What is this about MiMi claiming she was in business with Jack?”

“So you don’t know what she’s talking about either?” Willa answered his question with her own.

“Nonsense. She’s just upset that her little private line of credit and cash source has dried up.” Cedric frowned as he studied Willa’s expression. “What?”

“Let’s find out more about Ms. MiMi Landry. I mean that is what we do here. Background checks.” Willa gazed at Cedric.

He blinked rapidly for several seconds then a slow smile spread across his face. “We sure do. I’ll be back in two hours. Three max.” Cedric started out but stopped. “Anything else I should know?”

“I’ll fill you in later.”

Once he left and closed her office door behind him Willa picked up the phone. She planned to do exactly the opposite of what MiMi wanted her to, talk to Detective Miller. MiMi Landry was no friend of hers and she sure as hell wasn’t going to take her advice.



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