

INVITATION
TO
MURDER

The Prequel

The Westport Mysteries

Alexandra

Chapter One

“Oh hi Chloe,” I said, standing on my doorstep looking at my parcel delivery lady.

“Hi Alex, I have a delivery for you.”

“Oh! I wasn’t expecting anything,” I replied, smiling. It was always nice receiving an unexpected parcel delivery.

“Yeah, well it’s lucky I know you and know where you live. This parcel has a redirection in place to one of the other apartments in this complex.”

I sighed. “Really?”

“Yeah, looks like the Westport Post Office has stuffed up again. Not that that’s anything new.” She smiled. “So, how’s life treating you today?” she asked.

“Can’t complain. I mean, I could complain, but nobody listens anyway.” I laughed. “How about you? How’s that gorgeous boyfriend of yours?” I gave her a suggestive smile. Chloe may be my delivery lady, but she was also a friend. Not a close friend, but a friend all the same. I’d also done a small stint of parcel delivery about a year ago and Chloe and I had our sorting stations positioned next to each other. I can honestly say that was the only part of the job that I’d enjoyed, and that’s probably why I’d only stuck it out for a month. Well, that and maybe the suggestion from my boss Gary, that the job wasn’t really right for me. Apparently people are picky about getting their own parcels and not someone else’s. Who knew?

“Brody’s fantastic,” she said, a very large grin spreading across her pretty face. I gave a contented sigh.

“Lucky you. If you ever get sick of him send him my way will you!”

“I keep telling you Alex, I have a brother that needs a nice girlfriend to keep him on the straight and narrow.” She’d mentioned this to me before, but I’ve had so many bad experiences being set up with brothers that this conversation went no further than me just smiling and changing the subject.

“I’ll keep it in mind.” I took the scanner from her, signed something resembling my name and handed it back.

“Just let me know and I’ll set it up,” she said, putting the scanner under her arm, handing me the package and turning to walk away.

“Will do. Thanks,” I said, closing the door with my foot. “Don’t hold your breath though,” I added to the back of the closed door.

I moved through my apartment and placed the package on my dining room table. I took the five steps needed to reach my kitchen, grabbed a knife from the knife drawer and took the necessary five steps back. As you can probably gather my home is pretty small. But I love it. It’s open plan and only takes twenty-five steps to get from my front door to my covered balcony door. I know because I’ve counted them. Also I’m pretty sure that the balcony is larger than my lounge area, which is useful on hot days and means I can sit outside on rainy days. Which is great, as the weather in Westport is temperamental to say the least.

I looked at the package on the table. It was about the size of a shoebox and wrapped in brown paper. I used the knife to slice the tape holding the paper together and pulled back the wrapping. What showed itself was in fact a shoebox that had been elegantly wrapped in white paper and tied with a red bow. I pulled on the end of the bow and watched as the ribbon gently fell to the table. Lifting the lid, I looked inside - then let out a small scream as nine dead butterflies stared up at me. A tenth one anxiously flapped its wings as I reached in and carefully lifted it to safety. Running the twenty-five steps to my sliding glass door, I used my elbow to pull the door back and stepped into the fresh air. Ceremoniously lifting my arms skyward, the butterfly shot upwards to freedom. The thought that I’d at least saved one of them ran through my mind. What happened however, was that the butterfly wasn’t quite up to flying and plummeted to the ground. Did I mention that I live on the fourth floor?

When I was a kid Mum had told me that angels came to Earth disguised as butterflies. God I hope that wasn’t right.

Peering over the railing to the ground below, I felt my day go downhill. What weird, strange, disgusting person mails dead butterflies to someone? And what the hell had the butterflies done wrong to deserve a fate like that?

I stepped away from the railing and moved inside.

Looking back into the box I could see that it contained other items as well. I lifted them out one by one. There was a letter, a map, a photo, a

notepad, a cipher key and a headband with a feather bow on it. I sucked in my breath as I looked at the headband. It was fluorescent pink with lots of sparkly beads, a big purple plastic butterfly bouncing on a spring, and the words 'Team Leader' painted across the front. Obviously there was one sick, deranged person out there. I sat heavily on the chair and took a deep breath. I needed to read the letter.

Dear Alex

*Like trees our lives grow in many directions
yet our roots keep us connected!*

Westport Television Network Reunion

*Catch up with old friends and reminisce as you hunt for a
murderer!*

Saturday 23rd August

1 Television Avenue

Westport

*The fun will begin at 5pm and will finish when the sun
rises, so bring your sleuthing skills!*

RSVP: Rachel on 0433 615446

Oh well, that explained everything then. Westport Television Network was the local television station that I had worked for about ten years ago. It's number one in the street because it's the only building on the street. It was also number one in a long list of jobs that I've had, but I will confess to it being my favorite job. Not that the list was hard to top – driving instructor, bank teller, parcel post and now administration officer for a small electrical company. As you can see, working in television was much more exciting. Even though I never got a rostered day off like I was currently enjoying.

I probably should introduce myself to you. My name is Alexandra Anderson. I'm twenty-eight years old and I'm the youngest of four girls. I have long straight white blonde hair, I'm five foot five inches tall and have an okay figure. The only thing that sets me apart from all of my sisters is that I have gypsy like intuition. If it feels wrong – it generally is wrong. I've lived in Westport with my family for the last fifteen years, moving here as a teenager when my dad was transferred with work. And I love it. My one bedroom apartment is situated at 59 Amity Avenue and it's one of my favorite places to be as it overlooks the river. I'd like to say that I'd managed to pay for my apartment myself, but that would be a lie. My grandma passed away last year and left my sisters and me a small, but very nice inheritance. I used mine as a deposit to buy my home.

But getting back to the butterfly death trap. I now realize that the butterflies were supposed to fly out once the box was opened, but obviously the Westport post office was living up to its reputation, as the date stamp on the packaging showed it was posted quite a few days ago.

I left the butterflies sitting inside the box and walked it to the balcony. I'd set their poor little bodies free and allow Mother Nature to continue their journey from here.

Leaning over the glass railing, I upended the box. Only when the screams from my downstairs neighbor Dean drifted my way, did I bother to look down. There he was running around his balcony, trying to avoid nine dead butterflies that were sailing in on the wind and straight into his hair.

Oops.

I quickly retreated inside and locked my doors.

* * *

I'd organized with my friend Georgie to meet for lunch today. As it's my day off and not hers, she got to pick the venue. She chose the Bar and Grill as it's the closest to her work. Georgie is a year older than me and about the same height. She has big gray eyes, ridiculously long eyelashes and when she stands next to me she looks gorgeous. Actually standing next to anybody she looks gorgeous. Hence the extra time I put in deciding what to wear. Not

that it mattered. I was pretty much invisible anyway. It didn't matter who I was with or where I was, people just didn't notice me. I could be standing in a queue in a shop with no one else around and the shop assistant wouldn't even see me. Another customer would walk in and the assistant would immediately jump to attention to help. At one point in time it bothered me. Now I've just learnt to live with it. And the upside is I don't get bugged by annoying shop assistants all the time.

Today I had chosen to wear my favorite skinny jeans, boots and my new hot pink t-shirt. The color of the t-shirt seemed to suit me and the boots would keep me warm. Mum always said that if your feet were warm, then the rest of you would be warm. Or was that if you keep your head warm then you'd be warm? Oh, I could never remember. I threw a sweater over the strap of my handbag just in case, and slammed the door behind me.

My stomach growled in anticipation of having a large lunch, so I opted to give the elevator a miss and took the stairs, really hoping that it would burn off enough calories for a burger and chips.

I crossed the car park towards my yellow Mazda 3. I'd only bought the car a couple of weeks ago and I still loved the way the color shimmered as the sun shone on it. I smiled and beeped the doors open. Only nothing happened. I looked at the remote in my hand and wondered if the batteries had died. I pressed it again and heard the familiar doop-doop. I must have just pressed it wrong. Lifting the handle to open the door, I was stopped as the door appeared to still be locked. I pressed the button again. Doop-doop. Still locked. Well that was strange. I put the key in the lock the old fashioned way. It wouldn't turn.

What the hell was going on?

I peered in through the windows. I could see a sweater just like the one hanging over my handbag sitting on the seat and my little crystal angel hanging from the mirror. Hmmm. I walked around to the passenger side, hoping to try the key in that door.

"Alexandra!" I heard my name being called and turned to see who needed me. Then groaned. It was my neighbor, Dean. The one who I'd thrown dead butterflies all over no less than an hour ago.

“Alexandra!” he called. He moved towards me, his middle-aged muffin top jiggling as he walked.

“Oh hi Dean,” I replied, attempting to keep my tone cheery. I took in his stony expression as he stopped in front of me, pushing his glasses up his nose. I guessed Dean to be in his late forties, he had a reasonable head of gingery blonde hair and one of those old fashioned mustaches that he curled continuously whilst talking to you. I was also pretty sure that his entire wardrobe consisted of sweat pants and t-shirts, as that was all I ever saw him wear – even in the middle of summer. I guess that explained the sweat stains under the armpits of his t-shirts!

“Are you ignoring me?” he asked, twirling his mustache.

“What? No, of course not.” Even though I was feeling bad about the butterflies.

“Well why didn’t you stop when I called?” He ran his fingers over his top lip, ensuring that all the hair was perfectly in place.

“Oh, sorry Dean. I mustn’t have heard you. I was concentrating on getting into my car.”

“Alexandra please. I called you when you got into the elevator.” He sighed heavily.

I looked at him confused. “I didn’t take the elevator. I walked down the stairs.”

Now it was his turn to look confused. “But I’m sure it was you.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Sorry. It wasn’t me.”

“Hmmm.” He looked at me, his eyes narrowed, obviously trying to decide if I was telling the truth or not. I gave him my most innocent look and fluttered my eyelashes slightly. “Well...I guess I could have been mistaken. Even though that t-shirt is hard to miss.”

I wondered if he needed to clean his glasses or maybe get his eyes checked. Jiggling the keys in my hand, I absently pressed the remote for the car door lock. Dean turned his head towards the car as we heard the doop-doop. I lifted the door handle, keeping my fingers crossed that it would open and I could escape.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his expression changing to curiosity.

“Trying to get into my car.”

“But this isn’t your car.”

“What?” I asked confused again.

“Your car’s over there.” I looked to where he was pointing behind me, and saw that indeed there was another yellow Mazda 3 just like mine. “You have that stupid Peace sticker on the back window,” Dean explained.

I felt the heat creep up my neck from embarrassment caused by trying to get into someone else’s car, and looked around hoping the owner wasn’t watching. But, what were the odds that someone else living here would have the same car?

“Oh, silly me,” I mumbled, moving towards my car as I spoke.

“I wanted to ask you what the hell you thought you were doing this morning throwing those awful butterflies onto me?” he asked, following me.

“I’m sorry Dean. I didn’t mean to. Well I did mean to throw them. Just not all over you. The wind kind of picked up at the wrong moment,” I explained hoping that he would laugh it off. Dean was actually an alright guy – despite his appearance.

“Well, I didn’t appreciate it. I really should report it to the Body Corporate. You’re not supposed to throw things over the balconies you know,” he said, stopping behind me, his voice loud and bellowing. I cringed as a female resident walked past us, looking our way, frowning. I couldn’t tell if she was frowning at me or Dean.

“Yeah, I know. I’m really sorry. I honestly didn’t mean to throw them on you. Please don’t report me Dean,” I pleaded, as the female walked up to the other Mazda 3 and beeped the doors open. She pulled her sweater tighter around her body as she looked back at me and gave a half smile. I’m pretty sure it was sympathy she was conveying. Either that or us Mazda drivers stick together. As she got in her car and started the motor, I looked back at Dean and fluttered my eyelashes again.

He sighed and his shoulders drooped.

“Okay. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure I got them all out of my hair anyway.” He gave me a small, friendly smile. Relieved, I beeped my doors unlocked. The last thing I needed was the Body Corporate chasing me again. Even though, to be fair, I didn’t think it was actually my fault last time. I mean,

how could I be blamed for my pipes bursting and flooding Dean's apartment in the process.

"Thanks Dean. You're the best." My compliment seemed to please him, as his smile turned into a grin and his cheeky eyes twinkled back at me. He may bellow sometimes, but underneath the bad clothes and sweat, he was actually a sweetie.

However, by the time I managed to get in my car and drive away from him, I was starting to reconsider that opinion.

Chapter Two

Georgie and I have been friends since we worked together at the Westport Television Network, or WTN, as we like to call it. In a lot of ways we were very similar. I know they say that people who are too similar often clash, but Georgie and I had never had a single argument. We first met when I started work at the station and we instantly became good friends. She took me under her wing and helped me make friends with the other sixty or so staff that it took to get a regional television station to air. Our job was in the traffic department. No, that didn't involve lots of vehicles, but instead, with the help of another girl, we prepared the schedules for the programs and commercials that were to go to air.

Today, I watched in awe as she munched down on her steak and salad sandwich that was about the size of her head.

"So your invitation was different to mine?" I asked, going back to the phone conversation we'd had in the car on my way here.

She bobbed her head up and down. "Yeah, mine only had the invite in it," she said in between mouthfuls. "I phoned Mum and she said on the night of the reunion we have to get into groups and your name got pulled from a hat to be a team leader," Georgie explained. Georgie's parents also worked at the station, but unlike us, they still work there.

"Lucky me," I grumbled, looking around to see where my lunch order had gotten to. We were sitting at an outside table at the Bar and Grill. Even though it was August and officially still winter, today was a beautiful day to sit outside with the sun beaming down and warming us through.

"I think they may have forgotten about you," smiled Georgie, wiping tomato sauce from her lips with a napkin.

I sighed. That was nothing new. "I knew we should have gone to Archie's."

"Yeah but the steak is better here."

"I hate steak," I replied.

"Well thank you for being a good friend then." Georgie smiled, toasting me with her glass of lemonade.

“Who organized this reunion?” I asked, watching a waiter clear a table across from me. As soon as he was finished I was going to wave him over and ask about my lunch.

“Rachel.”

“Oh, well that explains why I got picked to be team leader.”

Georgie raised her eyebrows at me questioningly.

“She hates me. Don’t you remember that really big fight we had? The day that she threatened to walk out and leave you and me to run the traffic department on our own.”

“Oh that’s right. You’d only just started working there.”

“Yep. I nearly crapped myself when she walked out. Luckily the station manager at the time liked me.” The waiter finished wiping the table across from me and started to move. I lifted my arm and waved. “Excuse me!” I called to him. But he didn’t hear me. He just walked inside the building.

“I’m sure he’ll be back in a minute,” said Georgie, nodding towards the waiter.

“I hope so. My stomach is making some very unladylike noises.”

“Oh! Is that what that was?” Georgie grinned.

“Do you know who’s going to this reunion?” I asked, sighing.

“I’ve heard of a few.”

“Is Jake going?” Jake was my ex boyfriend from the days when I worked there. We were together for two years and he’d been my first serious relationship. And definitely the first one that I’d gone past first base with. And it had taken me years to finally get over him.

Georgie nodded. “I think so. He still works there you know. He’s now production manager.”

Shit. I’d been hoping that he was in a dead end job also.

“He’s also married. I’m pretty sure he’s bringing his wife along and apparently she’s gorgeous. Maybe you should spend some time in the beauty salon before you go,” said Georgie, reading my mind.

I sighed. “Why can’t asshole ex boyfriends be decaying away in some unappreciated job, lonely and sad?”

“Yeah I know. I think Todd is going too.” Todd had been the love of Georgie’s life. He was also the one who had gotten away.

“Maybe we should decline our invitations.” I smiled.

“If only I could. Mum would kill me. And as you’re my best friend, that means you have to go to support me.”

Damn it. “I’d better be booking that appointment pretty soon then.”

Georgie laughed. “Make it an appointment for two will you?”

“Like you need to go,” I mumbled as the waiter finally brought my order to the table.

I looked at the delicious burger and chips and thought about what Georgie had said about Jake’s wife being gorgeous. Suddenly I wasn’t so hungry anymore.

* * *

I was pushing my chips around my plate, listening to Georgie tell me about one of the men at her work and how he was chatting her up all the time, when the television on the outside wall of the Bar and Grill caught my attention. It was broadcasting a news update and one of our local reporters, Matt Wilson, was talking into the camera.

“Are you listening to me?” said Georgie.

“Hmmm?”

I heard her laugh. “What are you looking at?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m looking at the television. Matt Wilson is so damned cute. Look at him,” I said to Georgie, making her turn her attention to the screen.

“He’s just as cute in person. I was at mum’s the other day when he popped in. He’s really clumsy though. He broke one of her favorite vases and sent her flowers flying across the room.”

“That’s what makes him even more adorable. He’s cute, sexy and clumsy as hell,” I said fanning myself.

“You think he’s sexy. You should meet his cameraman, Sam.” Georgie fanned herself with her napkin as her eyes glazed at the thought.

“Will they be at the reunion?” I asked, suddenly a lot more excited about going.

“I don’t see why not.”

“Okay. I’m definitely booking that appointment at the beauty salon.” I laughed.

I turned back to look at the television screen. Matt appeared to be reporting on a story of a missing person. As they showed the photo of the missing woman, recognition flashed.

“What’s going on?” asked Georgie, following my gaze.

“My dentist is missing!”

“What?”

“They just showed a picture of my dentist, Stacey. The television in the bar has volume doesn’t it?” I moved away from the table and towards the building, not waiting for Georgie’s reply. Pushing my way through the door, I entered the darkened room, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the poor light. Moving straight to the screen positioned above the bar, I strained to listen and caught the tail end of what was being said.

“...so is this a robbery gone wrong?” asked Matt, looking into the camera as he spoke. “Staff have been very quiet about what’s happening, but there is some information coming to hand that all dental records have been erased from their computers and that the server they use as a back up has been hacked. The question remains – what records did it hold that needed to be erased?”

The vision flipped back to the newsroom as the newsreader asked Matt a few questions regarding Stacey’s state of mind.

I looked to the bartender. “Do you know what happened? What did he mean by robbery gone wrong?” I asked him, my curiosity piqued.

“Staff went to work this morning to find the surgery overturned and blood splatters on the floor,” he explained.

The sounds of the bar disappeared as a ringing started in my ears. “Oh my God! That’s awful,” I said, but the bartender had moved on and was already serving a man propping up the opposite end of the bar.

I’ve known Stacey for quite a few years, and even though we aren’t close friends, I was still concerned. The hair on my arms stood up as I thought about what could have happened to her.

Georgie squeezed my shoulder and I turned to look at her as the sounds of laughter once again filled the air.

“Are you okay?” she asked, concern creasing her perfectly smooth forehead.

I nodded, as I sunk onto the bar stool next to me.

“Poor Stacey.”

“It was probably drug related. Dentists are targets all the time because of the drugs they keep on the premises.”

“I guess so. But the report didn’t mention that. Matt only said that the dental records had been wiped.” I sighed. “I really hope she’s okay and that the blood they found isn’t hers.”

“I’m sure she’s fine. She’s probably just at home with her phone switched off,” said Georgie, but I don’t think she believed that any more than I did. “If we don’t hear anything else about it we can ask Matt at the reunion next weekend.”

“Hopefully they find her before then.”

Georgie sat on the stool next to me and signaled the bartender for a drink.

* * *

On the trip home I kept the radio playing in the car, hoping for an update on what happened to Stacey. Georgie had told me that she would call her dad later that night and see if he’d heard anything around the newsroom about it.

I was just walking up the stairs to my apartment when my upstairs neighbor Nadine stopped me.

“Hi Alex,” she called.

“Oh hey Nadine.” Nadine was mid fifties in age and dressed like a retired hooker. But underneath the skimpy clothes and three-inch thick make up, she was a sweetie. That’s what I love about living in this complex. Ninety percent of the residents are really lovely people. The other ten percent are transient, only staying for short-term leases and then moving on.

“Have you seen Dean at all today?”

“Yeah, I saw him this morning.”

“He was supposed to be at the Body Corporate meeting but he never showed.” I gave a sigh of relief. At least he hadn’t gone and ratted me out about throwing things off my balcony.

“As I was getting into my car he mentioned something about going into town. He needed to report something to the Police.” I shrugged. Dean was always reporting something to the Police. In fact, I think he had his own chair at the station.

“Did he say what?”

“No. I didn’t give him time to tell me to be honest. You know Dean. He’s always complaining about something.”

“Yeah. He means well though. He’s always got his eye on things around here. He keeps it safe, if nothing else.”

“If I see him, I’ll tell him you’re looking for him.”

“Thanks,” said Nadine as I turned and continued my walk up the stairs.

Taking them two at a time, I reached my apartment. Unlocking the door, I entered and dropped my bag on the kitchen counter and moved to open the doors to my balcony. Looking out over the river, my thoughts strayed back to Stacey. The news on the radio hadn’t mentioned anything about the story at all, so I switched the television on and lowered the volume just enough that I could hear it. Sinking onto the couch, it didn’t take long for me to fall asleep.

* * *

I’m not sure how long I slept for, but I was awoken by the sound of something metal clanging onto what sounded like a hard floor.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. I knew that would be something I’d regret later as I could already feel the panda eyes, but I ignored the mirror and went in search of what made the noise. As I said earlier, my apartment’s pretty small, so it didn’t take long to see that the kitchen was clear of anything broken. I moved to the bedroom and the first thing I noticed as I entered the room was that my wardrobe door was open and a couple of the boxes I use for storage were no longer on the top shelf. They were now on the floor, their contents scattered. I felt the hair on my arms rise as the goosebumps broke

out. Rubbing my arms, I moved to the mess and looked into my cupboard. It was an even bigger mess. I heard my breath draw, as my heart rate accelerated.

I jumped as the wind blew through the open window, causing the blinds to rattle against the frame.

“Is anybody there?” I called. Did I expect a response? Not really, but somehow I felt a little bit better saying it. I moved to look in the bathroom, holding my breath as I gently pushed the door all the way back, still keeping my feet firmly on the bedroom carpet. I didn’t really feel like walking into the room until I knew it was empty. “Hello,” I sang, attempting to keep my voice light and airy, almost as if I were calling to a friend. Not sure who I was kidding. I could hear it trembling as the sound reverberated around the tiled walls. Thankfully the room was empty of people, but the cupboards were also open, their contents scattered across the tiled floor. I backed into the kitchen and grabbed my handbag, looking for my phone. It was right where it should be – in the inside pocket made especially for phones. My hands shook as I pulled it out and dialed the Police.

Chapter Three

“You have dialed emergency triple zero, your call is being connected.” I waited a beat whilst I was connected to an operator. “Do you need Police, Fire or Ambulance?”

“Ummm, Police.”

“Please hold. I will connect you to the nearest centre.” The phone went quiet whilst I was being transferred (very quickly I may add).

“Police emergency. What is the location of the emergency?”

“Ummm...” Oh God. They sounded so efficient. “It’s unit 403, 59 Amity Avenue, Westport.” I was grateful that my voice sounded a lot more controlled than I felt.

“Please tell me your emergency.” The male voice sounded reassuring in my ear.

“I think I’ve been broken into,” I explained, my voice only wobbling slightly. I wasn’t going to cry. I wasn’t. Okay, that was a lie. I was totally going to cry. I’m known in my family as being a crybaby. I’ll cry at a McDonald’s advertisement. Why did I even think I wouldn’t cry when my home had been broken into while I was sleeping on the couch?

“Are you in danger? Is the perpetrator still present?” asked the very in controlled voice.

“Ummm, no. Well, I don’t think so.” I looked wildly around the room, my eyes stopping on the open balcony doors. I’d normally never fall asleep without closing and locking the security screen, but today I’d drifted off like a baby.

“What’s your name?”

“Alex.”

“Okay Alex. Can you explain the situation please?” The voice actually sounded like its owner would be good looking. How can you tell by the sound of a voice? Well, you just can, okay?

I quickly filled him in on what happened.

“And you’re sure no one is still on the premises?”

“Yes. I’m positive. Only me.” I hoped. I mean, I didn’t check all the cupboards. My eyes drifted to the cabinets attached high on the wall. Surely nobody could hide in those.

“I don’t think this is really an emergency as such, but I will send someone out to help. Please stay on the line while I contact the local Police station.”

“Oh okay.” I waited a beat for the voice to return.

“The local Police have been informed and will be there as soon as possible. If you feel you are in danger call triple zero again, but please remember this line is for emergencies only. We need the lines to stay clear for those who need us.” I heard his smile over the phone. “You’re lucky today is a quiet day.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, my cheeks flaming at my mistake. “And thanks.”

“You’re welcome. And don’t hesitate to call back if the situation changes.”

I heard the connection click off. Placing my phone on the counter, I felt alone and scared.

* * *

I sat in the corridor outside of my apartment for a while waiting, but then I felt stupid. And what good was it going to do anyway? I mean, whoever had been there had obviously gone by the time I’d woken up. In fact, I was pretty sure it was them leaving that had woken me. So, I pulled up my brave girl pants and went back inside to use the time waiting for the Police to make a list of what was missing. Grabbing some rubber gloves, I got to work. By the time I heard them knock, I had a very strange list in my hands.

I looked through the little peephole in my door and checked to see who was out there. My anxiety levels dropped seeing the uniformed officers.

“Hello,” I said opening it and smiling up at one of the men. Whoa. He was tall. Wow. He was good looking too.

“Hello. Alex?” he asked, his dark mocha skin reminding me of melted chocolate.

“Yes,” I answered, clearing my throat.

“Hi. I’m Sergeant Ed Helms of the Westport Police and this is Constable Jason Davidson. We received a call about a break-in at this address.”

“Oh yes that was me. I mean not me exactly. But I called triple zero and they called you.” I had no idea why I was explaining all of this to him, but he graciously smiled, obviously used to babbling women. His partner looked at my rubber-gloved hands.

“I didn’t want to contaminate the crime scene with my finger prints,” I said, waving my hands around as I spoke. “Please come in.” I moved aside and allowed them to enter, but not before I had a good look at them. Like I said, Sergeant Helms was tall, I’d guess around six foot, had dark mocha skin that I wanted to crawl into and had the body of a God. And he smelled of Gucci Guilty aftershave. Geez, if he was arresting me, I’d probably plead guilty.

He looked around. “This is your home?” he asked.

“Yes. All mine. Actually that’s not true. I think the bank owns a good portion of it.” I giggled at my own joke.

He didn’t seem to get it. “So why are you wearing the gloves?”

“Oh! I was going through the stuff that’s been ransacked to see what was missing,” I waved the notebook at him, “and I didn’t want to put my finger prints all over the place.”

“But if this is your home, then wouldn’t your prints already be everywhere?”

Shit. I hadn’t thought of that. I sighed and took off the gloves as I felt the heat creep into my cheeks. As I threw the gloves onto the kitchen counter, Sergeant Helms looked at me and smiled.

“Thanks for trying though,” he said. “Now can you tell me everything that has happened?”

“Sure. Would you like to sit down first?” I moved to the couch and pointed to the spot that he should sit. His partner followed him. I grabbed at my blonde hair and twisted it into a knot, feeling pretty stupid about the gloves. Blondes aren’t dumb, but I didn’t think I was helping their case.

Sergeant Helms sat on the couch, taking up way more space than I ever did, as Constable Davidson sat next to him. He opened his notebook and looked at me patiently. I quickly filled them in on what had happened.

“Okay,” he said, when I finally stopped talking. “You mentioned earlier you made a list of what’s missing.”

“Yes. It’s a strange list though.”

“In what way?” asked Constable Davidson.

“Well, nothing of any real value has gone. Everything that I can tell is only personal stuff that’s virtually worthless to anyone but me.” I passed the list to Sergeant Helms. He read aloud. “Gray sweater from Just Jeans, old jeans with the hole in the knee, fluffy winter socks, ugly necklace that Grandma gave me, old WTN t-shirt, photo album from WTN days, my favorite Mac eyeshadow, tampons and my book from my bedside table.” He stopped reading and looked to me. “Tampons? You didn’t just run out of them did you?”

“No. I only just bought a new box. They were sitting on the bathroom counter.” I shrugged. “Maybe the burglar was female and had a bit of a situation.” Honestly I had no idea why they would have taken my tampons, but they were definitely gone.

“Okay. Can we take a look around?”

“Sure. Go for it,” I replied, sinking my back into the couch cushions.

I watched from my spot as the two officers looked around my bedroom and bathroom, making notes as they went. Constable Davidson took a few finger print dustings (which was really interesting, and if it had been in anyone else’s home I would have been a bit excited about it). They were just moving back to the lounge room when I heard their radios crackle. Constable Davidson adjusted the volume of his and listened to the dispatcher. Personally I had no idea what she was talking about as it was all in numbered codes, but I did recognize the address when it was called. Apartment 303, 59 Amity Avenue, Westport. The apartment directly under mine.

* * *

I didn't mean to, but I found myself following the Police down the stairs to Dean's apartment. Curiosity and anxiety swirled in my stomach. It was only as we reached the door that Sergeant Helms turned and told me to go home. I looked up at him and nodded. But honestly, I wasn't going anywhere. Especially when I found Nadine standing at Dean's door, her complexion pale and tears in her eyes.

"Hello. I'm Sergeant Ed Helms and this is Constable Jason Davidson. I need you to tell me what happened."

Nadine stared at him, her eyes wide as she looked him up and down and then gulped. But when she turned to look at me, the tears that were pooling behind her lashes spilled over and down her cheeks, leaving a mascara trail as they went. I grabbed her and pulled her close for a hug.

I heard Sergeant Helms sigh. "Alex I need you to go home," he said patiently.

"No, please let her stay," begged Nadine. Maybe she thought I'd be a good support person. When she looked at the tears pooling in my eyes, I saw a moment of reassessment.

"We had a call about an assault on the premises," said Sergeant Helms, obviously deciding it was no use arguing with two emotional women.

"Yes," said Nadine, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her sweater. I made a mental note to avoid that sleeve. "I think something has happened to Dean."

"Dean?"

"He's the owner of the apartment. I've been looking for him all day and it's so unlike him to just go missing."

"Why do you think there's been an assault?" asked Constable Davidson.

"Because of the blood," sniffed Nadine. I felt my stomach lurch. I wasn't good with blood. In fact the last time that I saw it was when I'd accompanied my sister Daphne to get an ingrown toenail removed and I'd been the one to pass out.

The officers looked at one another. "Is there anyone in the apartment at the moment?"

“I don’t think so. I came looking for Dean and when I knocked, his door swung open. I called out to him, but when he didn’t answer I thought that I should make sure he hadn’t fallen or something,” Nadine explained.

“Okay. We’ll check it out. Please do not follow us into the apartment,” instructed Sergeant Helms.

No need to tell me twice.

I held Nadine close as we waited for Dean’s apartment to be searched. After a few minutes Sergeant Helms came back out to us. “When was the last time you saw Dean?”

I quickly explained how I’d spoken to him this morning, and Nadine explained how he was supposed to be at the Body Corporate meeting and never showed. “We’ll check with the hospital. He’s probably just hurt himself and gone to get himself stitched back up.” The sergeant flashed us a smile, but I wasn’t a hundred percent sure that he was convinced that’s where Dean had gone. “Do either of you know anything about dead butterflies?”

I felt my heart miss a beat.

“Why do you ask that?” I quietly asked.

“Because we found a box of them on his coffee table. I thought it was a strange thing to have.”

I felt the blush start to creep up my neck as Constable Davidson stepped back out of the apartment and whispered something to Sergeant Helms. I saw him nod and then turn back to us. But neither of them were in the mood to share.

* * *

After the Police officers informed us that they were going to check the hospital and doctor’s surgeries, and if Dean turned up would we please let them know, I walked Nadine back to her apartment on the ground floor.

I told her about the break-in at my place and wondered if Dean’s disappearance could be related. It was unusual for the Police to be called twice to the same apartment block in one day. This was normally a very safe, quite block, where the biggest news was whether or not Norm Aldershott from

apartment 104 was going to blow his top at the latest Body Corporate meeting.

I was just saying bye to Nadine and making sure that she locked up properly, when I turned and bumped into one of the other residents. It was the lady that I'd seen this morning getting into the car like mine. I blushed at the memory and gave her a small smile and noticed that she owned the same sweater that I owned. It was my favorite gray one from Lorna Jane that I'd paid a fortune for, but it was just so soft that I couldn't leave it on the hanger. She obviously had good taste.

She kept her head down as we both waited for the elevator to arrive. Thankfully my phone started to ring, saving me from any awkward small talk. I pulled it from my pocket and silenced Meghan Trainor singing All About That Bass. It was a ringtone Georgie had given me as a joke and I'd never gotten around to changing it back to Old Phone.

"Hello," I said.

"Hey, it's just me," said Georgie, as the elevator arrived and the doors opened. I stepped inside and watched Mazda 3 lady's back as she pressed level three and level four. If I hadn't been distracted by the phone call, I may have wondered about how she knew which level I needed.

"Hey," I said into the phone.

"Have you heard the news yet?" asked Georgie.

"No. Sorry. It's been a crazy afternoon. Wait until I tell you what happened to me."

"Yeah, okay. Hey they found your dentist Stacey. Her body turned up on the beach this afternoon. Apparently bits of her are missing."

"Bits?" I asked, my stomach flipping as I spoke.

"Yeah, like an arm or a leg or something."

I felt my stomach churn as the elevator stopped on level three. Mazda lady got out and the doors closed again.

Bodies washing up onto the beach wasn't a common occurrence in Westport, but it wasn't unheard of either.

"Do they think a shark got her," I asked, feeling sick as I spoke.

"Yeah. But they don't think that's what killed her. Unless she went swimming fully clothed."

“What?”

“She was wearing her dentist uniform,” explained Georgie.

“So what are you saying?”

“Well, Dad spoke to Matt Wilson and he said the Police are treating it as a murder.”

“Oh my God. Poor Stacey,” I said, thinking back to the last time I saw her. “And her poor family.” The elevator doors pinged open and I stepped out into the corridor that led to my apartment. I hesitated as I put the key in the lock, as a chill ran down my spine. “It’s been a really awful day,” I said, sighing. I turned the lock and entered my home. I quickly went around checking that it was secure and nobody had entered while I was out. “It started with the dead butterflies this morning.....” I really hope those butterflies weren’t a bad omen.

But I should have known better.

To find out what happens to Alex and her friends, check out Invitation To Murder!

http://www.gemmahalliday.com/Halliday_Publishing/ourauthors/Beth_Prentice/- Invitation