

IDLE

A Sadie Hawkins Mystery

by

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DEDICATION

For Dianne Burns, author, wine buddy, my go-to 'shot-in-the-arm' person and good friend. I promise to 'just keep swimming' for the both of us. I miss you.

To my readers...thank you for waiting. It's been a challenging four years.

And for *K* – always and forever my love.

CHAPTER ONE

Stepping out of the cool interior of the van, the Texas heat welcomed me as I made my way to the front door of my company. Hawkins Freight was in the semi-industrial outskirts of Houston with other offices and tech companies housed in nondescript cookie-cutter strip malls. It had come into my possession via a circuitous, troubling route and consisted of an office, a bathroom and a holding bay/garage where we kept the cube van. I dreamed of an expansion in the future, some more vans, perhaps even a big rig with a couple of containers to travel long haul. For now, one van sufficed.

It had been a long day, driving a client and her six poodles from Amarillo to Houston and I was hot, sweaty, tired and grumpy. That was probably why it took me a minute to register that the front door to the office was not latched properly. I was pretty sure I had locked the door before I left, but it occurred to me that Blaine, my brother and mechanic, might have stopped by before he left with his very pregnant wife and two-year-old daughter to visit the in-laws. Maybe in his haste he hadn't made sure the door was closed.

However, once I drew near, the telltale scratch marks of forced entry said otherwise.

Well, hell.

I could call the police, but if they arrived and found no issue, I'd feel like an idiot. And they had much more serious crimes to investigate. I'd have a faster response time with the volunteer fire department from my hometown in Alabama.

Using the end of a key, I gently pushed on the portal, which opened with a slight creak. My eyes scanned the broom-closet size of an office; desk, two beat-up vinyl chairs in olive green, and a four-drawer filing cabinet with a framed picture of my father and his brother, Stan. Nothing seemed out of order, no broken glass, no strewn files. It was as I had left it the other day, right down to the stack of ever present bills in the plastic inbox.

So far, so good.

Eyes peeled and ears perked, I crept to the connecting door that led into the bay area. The insane part of my brain wondered why I was tiptoeing in my Dan Post turquoise triad water snake cowboy boots instead of barging through the door with a baseball bat, hell bent on catching the culprits red-handed. Surely if anyone was still here, they would have heard the vehicle pull up outside and be long gone through the bathroom window. Mind you, this was how they did it in the movies.

The sane part of my brain tapped me on the shoulder and suggested it would be a smart to fetch Louis, my Louisville slugger from the van. The bat came with me wherever I went because, as an independent woman under five and a half feet, I took steps to protect myself. I had considered self-defense classes but hadn't gotten around to investigating it further. Most people would suggest a gun, but given my recent experience of being a reluctant witness to the up close and personal effect of a bullet plowing into a person's heart, firearms were a no-go. Memories of seeing the victim's wide-eyed shock, having their warm blood hit my face made a shudder of revulsion slither up my throat. The vision receded to the edge of my brain while I backtracked to the van, quietly opened the door and retrieved Louis from under the seat.

My passion was baseball, which I played for most of my life and reached the Single A fastball league in Texas. I was also the best female batter in the state and second best overall in the league before I got married. The thirty inches of solid ash was like an extension of my arm, and I held it like a weapon. At the connecting door to the garage/bay, I inched it open, knelt down, and peered through the slit.

Nobody. Not even a shoe scuffle of noise.

I took a deep breath and carefully pushed the door open until it met the wall. An empty garage greeted my view. Empty, as in no people, but Blaine's large black tool chest stood at the end of a bench along the far wall. The moving van hadn't moved. I squatted down and peered across the floor to see if someone hid on the other side.

All clear except for a darkish spot under the front part of the engine.

Even though it appeared no one else was here, I held my bat raised and ready and closed in on the cube van. Someone could be crouched behind the tires, masking their presence, so I sidled up to the side facing me, doing the same, and waited. One minute stretched to two, then longer, but all was silent.

Until the cell phone in my pocket warbled, *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*.

With a shriek like a soprano from the Vienna Boys Choir, I dropped the bat and almost passed out from hyperventilation. Any semblance of surprise to someone still lurking about was gone, so I zipped around to the other side of the van but the garage was empty.

I yanked the phone up to my ear. "Hello?" Yup, still sounded like a singing soprano.

"Hello?" I swallowed, tamping down my rampaging heart.

No answer.

The caller's number had flashed off. Thumbing through the log, the last number dialed in was unknown. It didn't even show any digits.

How was that possible?

I did a fast spin, eyes darting around the garage. Did someone dial the wrong number and just hang up, or were they watching me? Goose bumps two-stepped along my skin and it was probably a good idea to lock up, get out fast and call the police, but what was there to say? It is *possible* someone broke in but it looks like nothing was disturbed?

I marched over to Blaine's toolbox and started yanking open drawers. The full extent of his inventory was unknown to me but it seemed everything was still there. No big empty spaces where tools may have rested. Most of the drawers were full but in order.

The bathroom door hung wide open and because it was so small, there was no place for anyone to hide and the window was shut, still locked in place.

If anyone was here, the last place left to hide was the back of the cube van, which could only be accessed by the back doors. Not taking any chances, I grabbed a screwdriver and slid it through the hole where the lever handle rested against the bumper, using the tool as a lock so the lever couldn't release from the inside.

Back in my office, a quick search of my filing cabinet showed everything was pristine, nothing missing or out of order.

Was I being paranoid? I returned to the bay and did a very slow turn, inspecting every corner of the room. Nothing was out of place. My gaze passed over the floor under the front of the van. Although not perfect, we tried to keep the floor as clean as possible in case we have to stow items that needed hauling. I grabbed a flashlight, knelt down, and peered under the engine section. A fair-sized glob of pink shone dully in the beam's reflection. I dipped my finger in the slimy substance and brought it to my nose. Engine coolant. Blaine would need to know about this to circumvent major problems later. Besides helping me with the moves, my brother was an excellent mechanic. He understood the importance of keeping this business afloat and was adamant about maintaining our vehicles in top running condition. At least he was only gone for a few days before his wife, Karen's due date.

After replacing the flashlight and cleaning my fingers of the coolant, I questioned the break-in even more. Had the scratches at the office entrance always been there since I took over the business and I'd just forgotten because at the time there were irrelevant? And as for the door being left open, it was plausible Blaine had visited the shop before he and his family left earlier that day and hadn't locked the door. I hated to bother my brother but knew if I didn't call him it would bother me until he came back.

He picked up on the third ring. "Hey."

"Hi yourself. You there yet?"

"Yes, arrived about an hour ago. What's up? How was the doggy delivery?"

The grimace was still on my face from the four-legged howling little heathens. "Fine. Listen, did you go into the shop today before you left?"

"Yeah, to redirect the calls to your cell."

Good, he'd been in here.

His voice held a hint of concern. "Why? Anything wrong?"

I paused. If I told him about the door and a possible break in he'd immediately want to return. He'd always been the big brother every sister wanted but ever since the attempt to frame me for murder he'd been protective. Make that almost over protective and the last thing he needed was to come charging back here.

“No. Just making sure you did because no calls came to my cell.” The lie didn’t taste bitter on my tongue. The man needed a break and once his wife gave birth to their second child, he wouldn’t get a chance for a while. “How are Karen and my favorite niece, Shanty?”

“She’s your only niece and she’s fine. They’re both taking a nap.”

Before he could get suspicious, I brought the call to a close. “Have a good time and don’t worry about a thing.”

“Okay, talk to you soon,” he said.

“Take it easy, Blaine.”

“And don’t let Moose on the furniture,” he added.

Moose was the Saint Bernard I rescued from its former owner the wicked-witch-wacko who tried to frame me for murder but because I lived in an apartment, the dog was better off at Blaine’s house since he had a backyard. Doggie duty over the next week was payment for using Blaine’s van, which was no big deal because Moosie was great and I loved him.

“What? I can’t hear you, you’re breaking up...”

“Sadie!”

The grin died on my face after hanging up as I stared at the vehicle. Maybe my brother hadn’t made sure the door was locked when he left but should I take that for granted? Were culprits in the back of the cube van, waiting for me to leave and hoping someone would come back later to get them out?

Having had to take matters into my own hands in order to survive more than once in the past, I didn’t want to tempt fate, so instead of phoning the police and looking like an idiot if the van was empty, I called Wayne.

Wayne Timmins was a cop and a friend. He came to my rescue after I had been thumped on the back of the head when thieves stole my load. Since then, I’d helped him move to Houston and we even went on a date. He was nice, in a boy-next-door kind of way and easy on the eyes. And he loved baseball, a big plus in the right column.

“Hey shortcake,” he said.

I do not take kindly to people putting labels on me because of my size, but Wayne used the term as an endearment.

The warmth of his greeting brought a smile to my face. “Hi. How are you?”

“Good, you?”

“I’m fine.”

“When are we going to go out for the double rain-check dinner?” he teased.

On moving day, we’d both wanted to spring for meals for the other, but ended up too tired after the day. We hadn’t had time to collect on that yet.

My heart gave a light flutter. “How about tomorrow?”

“Sounds good,” he said, an upbeat tic in his voice. “Is that why you called?”

“No, but that worked out well. I was wondering if you’re busy.”

“About to get off shift. What’s up?”

“Well...” I hesitated, feeling sheepish making something out of nothing.

“Sadie?”

“Umm...when I got to the office, the door was open. Blaine was here this morning but he said he'd locked up.”

Wayne's tone changed to a no-nonsense demeanor with a hint of curiosity. “Anything taken?”

“Not that I could see.” Sheepishness tangled with foolishness. “Never mind. Forget I called.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes, the place checks out and everything is fine.”

“You searched alone? Didn't you learn your lesson the last time?” he said, an edge to his voice. He was referring to how he'd first found me.

“I have Louis with me.” I could end it at that, put on the brave no-nonsense front which was like a second skin. Yet perhaps the trauma of what had happened a few months ago affected me more than I cared to admit, manifesting phantoms that weren't there. A part of me demanded I confront my apprehension, fling open the doors of the van and face what might be inside. But if someone was waiting for me and things took a turn for the worse what would that prove?

I smothered a reluctant sigh. “The reason I'm hoping you'd come by is if anyone is still here the only place they could hide would be in the cube van. It's jimmied closed now but I would prefer not to open it by myself.”

“Halleluiah for minor miracles. I'm done in about twenty minutes. Go outside and wait for me.”

“They can't get out, Wayne.” It was difficult calling for help; the damsel in distress was not part of my nature.

His voice hardened. “Wait outside.”

I tamped down the urge to argue. What would it hurt whether I waited at my desk or in the van with the air conditioning running?

“Okay.”

“I'll see you soon.”

“Thanks, Wayne.”

His tone softened. “You're welcome.” He disconnected.

During my drive from Amarillo earlier with a client and her dogs, my phone had pinged multiple times with voicemails so I snatched a pen and some paper to make notes. In Blaine's van outside, I cranked over the motor, letting the blessed cool air drift past my face as I listened to the messages.

The first was from the previous night. I had been on the other line when my best friend, Tanya Woods, had called and then it got too late to phone her back.

“Sadie. It's Tanya.” Her voice sounded odd, strained. My fingers tensed around the phone.

“I...I need...I need to see you. Call me tomorrow, please. You won't be able to reach me tonight.” Another momentary pause. “It's important.”

I'd heard that one last night already and moved to the next two, which were requests for moving quotes. I'd get back to them soon unless Wayne found someone in the van and there would be the inevitable delay of a police report.

After the two requests came three hang-ups. No big deal.

The next call had me sitting up straight in the seat.

“Sadie, it’s Will. Call me. It’s important.” His tone was indicative that something was wrong.

Will Ellington was one of the rehabilitated convicts from StreetSmart that worked under my friend Tanya who was the organization’s manager. He and another StreetSmart client were the main reason I was walking around as a free woman.

The last message began to play. “Sadie, it’s Tanya again. Listen, I know things have been awkward lately, but would you contact me? Not on my cell. Will can give you the details.” She halted, then went on with a soft hitch in her voice.

“Please Sadie. I’m scared. I’m in jail and the police believe I killed someone.”