

MURDER BY PAGE ONE: A Peach Coast Library Mystery by Olivia Matthews EXCERPT

“It’s nice that you’ve all come to support Fiona.” I turned to Fiona’s friend. “Especially you, Mr. Pelt, coming from South Carolina.”

Willy glanced up from his wristwatch. He seemed surprised that I knew his name, then he noticed Nolan. Willy inclined his head in a silent greeting to Fiona’s business partner, the expression on his pale, square face pleasant but vague. He drove his fingers through his shock of thick auburn hair. “I’ve known Fiona’s family for years.”

“I wonder what Fiona will do now?” Nolan’s attention bounced from Jo to the rest of the group. “Will she give up her share of the business to write full-time?”

It was a good question, although I knew most authors continued to work full-time. Popular media’s depiction of fiction writing as a lucrative career was greatly exaggerated.

Betty snorted. “Well, she doesn’t need a job, now does she? Not like the rest of us. When Buddy died, he left *her* well provided for. The rest of us have to work for a living.”

The bitterness in her voice seemed to come from far more than envy of another person’s good fortune—literally and figuratively. Then I made the connection: Fiona Lyle-*Hayes*. Betty Rodgers-*Hayes*. There was a story there, one that could explain Betty’s hostile disposition.

“I was wondering the same thing.” Willy crossed his arms over his chest. His brown jersey and tan slacks were slightly wrinkled, as though he’d recently pulled both from a suitcase. Had he just driven into town from Beaufort? How long that had taken? “Her late uncle left her his vacation property. The house’s in good shape, and the land is pretty. It’s in a quiet area on the outskirts of town where she could write without being disturbed.”

Bobby shoved his broad hands into the front pockets of his navy blue cargo pants. “She’ll probably go on a lot of tours.” He sounded disappointed, as though he was going to miss Fiona’s company.

“This is ridiculous.” Jo’s words ended the discussion. Her eyes flashed with irritation as her gaze swung to the back of her store. Her ponytail arched behind her. “The signing has started, and Fiona still hasn’t brought out her books. Now, I’m going to have to hustle to help her set everything up.”

“I’ll help.” I hurried to follow Jo as she whirled toward a book aisle.

“So will I.” Spence’s voice came from behind me.

Jo stopped long enough to give us a grateful look. “Thank you, but I can’t ask you to work for me. You’re here as guests.”

Spence arched a thick black eyebrow. “We’re also your friends. Let us help.”

“Okay, since you’ve twisted my arm.” Jo turned to continue her agitated march down the aisle. Her ponytail swung back and forth in a tscking motion. “I wish she’d let me and my team handle her books from the beginning. Unloading them now will be disruptive to the other authors who got here early and actually set up.”

I struggled to both keep up with Jo and speed read the titles on the passing shelves. We were in the young adult section. I loved young adult fantasy novels. I hesitated in front of a newly released title. Spence nudged me along.

I caught up with Jo. “This won’t endear her to the other members of her group.” I remembered the way Zelda had acted, as though Fiona was She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

“I don’t think Fiona likes them, either.” Jo’s tone was dry.

“What makes you think that?” Spence asked.

Jo glanced at us over her shoulder. “It’s just a feeling I got from her when we were organizing this signing.”

Jo crossed into the storage room. Spence and I were right behind her. The room was dimly lit in comparison to the main part of the store. Empty boxes stood to the side, waiting to be flattened for recycling. Step ladders and carts were stored in a corner for easy access. Shelving affixed to the walls held office supplies such as paper, printer inks, packing tape, markers, and box cutters. In the center of the room, two matching dark wood tables balanced open boxes of books still to be shelved. On the far table, Fiona’s books had been unpacked, only needing a cart to carry them out. But who would operate the cart?

Was I the only one feeling uneasy? “Where’s Fiona?”

In front of me, Jo frowned as her store owner’s attention seemed to catalog the room’s contents. To my right, Spence appeared to be scanning the room, searching for the source of the disquiet. I stepped forward.

“Marvey, wait.” Spence’s voice stopped me.

But not before I saw the body, lying in a pool of blood on the far side of the rear table.

I must have rocketed a foot into the air before landing on semi-solid ground. Spence’s large, strong hands gripped my shoulders to steady me.

Jo gasped. “Oh, my God. Fiona.”