

# COPPER WATERS by Marlene M. Bell

## EXCERPT

### Chapter Five

#### *Homicides R Us*

“Bill, get left!” I yell while checking for oncoming traffic. That’s when I notice a group standing in a semicircle near a driveway—around limbs. From here, it looks like a person’s body.

“Oh no.” I stare through the windshield.

We slow to a stop and park near the curb of a strip shopping area, leaving our engine running.

“We should help.” I jump out to investigate. Women wearing rompers and a guy in greasy mechanic’s overalls are standing over someone on the pavement.

“What happened?” I ask Bill, jogging to the scene and scanning the narrow two-lane road where no other vehicle has pulled over other than us. A familiar beige fishing hat lies a few feet from the victim.

“A mad driver went on a strop!” a female screams from the gawking crowd.

“It’s Alastair,” Bill mutters, his words loud enough for me to catch them. “Did he have a heart attack or did someone hit him?”

Bill reaches the bystanders on Main Street before I do and throws his arm out, blocking me with his body and a stern glare.

“Annalisse, would you please wait in the car?”

“Can’t someone help him?”

“It’s too late for that.”

I change my mind about approaching Alastair. He’s in a bad way if Bill wants to shield me from viewing him. Travelers like us from the US who allow a local to drive their rental car will shoot us to the top of the authority’s suspect list—even if Ethan sent Alastair to pick us up at the airport. Our first day in Temuka and a nice old man is sprawled out dead on the road less than an hour after he

stepped out of our vehicle. We're so naive when it comes to learning the customs of another country *before* making the trip. Why didn't I research this?

I can't help but think of the police encounters we've participated in and the hours of interrogation that happened not too long ago. This time we aren't witnesses to the crime and weren't in close proximity of Alastair when he was hit.

Who is Alastair McGregor, really? A chilliness penetrates my hands. Why did he insist on walking along the roadside? Did he want to throw himself in front of a moving car, or is this just an accident?

I wave Bill over at the same time one of the women throws up what appears to be her luncheon salad near Alastair's prone body. I've seen no movement and try not to think about what's staring me right in the face.

Bill speaks to the male witness and returns to the car. "I hope you didn't see him like that. According to one of the witnesses, Alastair was strolling his usual path. He takes this walk each day, rain or shine, and his reputation precedes him. They all know him well—a businessman and an environmental activist from their community."

"Was he hit by a car, or did he collapse in front of traffic?"

"He was struck from behind, then the car came back around to finish the job." Bill shudders.

"Not an accident?" I'm in utter disbelief. "Activists make enemies. Alastair mentioned a protest next week at Bluebasin Lake. I hope someone didn't do this on purpose to keep him from the protest."

"His cranium was crushed. Brain matter everywhere. The crime appears to be more deliberate, according to the ladies who saw the whole thing."

My fish and chips crawl up my throat where I can taste them again. I close my eyes to Bill's description of the crime scene and try not to relive it in my mind.

"There's no chance he could survive?" I ask.

"No way. His head was mashed under the tires. Once struck, he didn't have a chance to get out of the way. Per the eyewitnesses, the driver sped through like a crazy person in a rage." He verifies the navigation while we're stopped and makes his U-turn in the road.

"Shouldn't we wait around for the police?" If we take off, won't that look like we showed up to make sure—"

"This country has a constitutional monarchy where England runs the show here. I'm not familiar with how a monarchy works, not yet anyway—homework for later. Let the police interview witnesses who saw the incident as it happened. We'll go down to the precinct and tell them how we met Alastair and when we saw him last." Bill glances into his rearview mirror. "I should also bone up on the local

government in Temuka. We're tourists in their country and should understand our rights before going to the police."

"The cottage is that way." I point over the seat.

"We're taking the scenic route. I don't want to drive past that crowd with police on the way and remind them we could've staged this. It's not like they know us."

Poor Alastair. If he didn't meet us, he might still be alive. "I wish he wasn't sent to the airport to pick us up." I say what Bill could be thinking.

"We didn't do this to him. A person in a dark Land Rover did," Bill announces without warning.

"They saw the car? I hope the driver gets what's coming for murder. Knowing the make of the car will narrow down the suspects. How many Rover models can there be in a town of a few thousand people?"

"Land Rover has an entire line. Remember, we're in a British Commonwealth, and Land Rover is a UK company. You might not have noticed how many Brit vehicles we passed leaving Christchurch. Tons. They aren't all the boxy type we think about," Bill says. "The police will have their work cut out finding the hit-and-run driver if witnesses didn't get a license."

My heart sinks for Alastair's daughter. "Whoever gets the nasty job of notifying Alastair's daughter, I pity that person. Before you returned with the rental car at the airport, I spoke to a woman named Jenny at the sweet shop. She may hear about it first."

"Immediate family notification isn't going to be a problem."

"Why?"

"The women had strange expressions when I brought up his family in a general way. It seems that Sidney and her son died two years ago, with Alastair at the wheel of their car."

My hand flies to my mouth. "You're kidding."

"According to them, Alastair's alone and has no living relatives."

The ache in my heart increases, as does the sadness.

"The family were in a car accident together, and he was the sole survivor? That's painful just thinking about it. Why did he tell us that his daughter owns, *present tense*, the shop on Whaler's Street? I thought Jenny was an employee."

"Jenny could've stepped in to take over the shop for Sidney, and Alastair might've been so lonely after her death that he took on the taxi service to give himself purpose."

"Whoa. It takes a story like Alastair's to remind us not to squander our time with friends and family."

“So true.”

“I’m glad we ate when we did because there’s no way I could handle food after all this mess. Who ran Alastair down in broad daylight—without fear of being seen and then drove away?”

Bill’s detour takes us to the cottage cutoff from the opposite direction. It’ll add a few extra miles, but I don’t mind when we have so much breathtaking countryside to absorb. I power the window down as we pass gigantic, smooth-barked, native trees filled with noisy birds that include hooked beaks and fat little bellies. Purple wildflowers that look like asters dot the meadows, and plants shaped like Scheffleras grow from the bases of those big trees.

A faded green sign marks the dirt road to Woolcombe Station’s cottage on an idyllic triangular property marked by old fence posts. Pristine hedges and more flowering shrubs in pinks and yellows line the wooden porch to the main entrance. Shed dormers break up the A-frame roof, a dead giveaway for their heavy snows during winter. As per Ethan’s description, weatherworn gray planks in vertical lengths give the home a rustic, country feel. Crisscross windows in washed-out white casings add to the ambiance, but the most glorious part of this little house is the pond and stepping stones that wind to the rear. Water spilling over rocks nearby from a stream to our left pulls me in to its sound. The trickle and movement of water is so calming.

We park next to clumps of small pampas-like grass finely maintained by a groundskeeper, I suspect. Not a blade of ground cover is out of place. Mowed volunteer grass on the outer yard matches what’s near the porch—a landscape that looks utterly natural and not at all commercially grown.

“The cottage is larger, and the outside is cleaner than I expected. Quaint and pretty. Ready to check out the inside, or would you rather get some exercise?” I ask Bill.

“Inside first.”

Bill’s standing behind me as I dig into my tote compartment that holds Ethan’s box with the key. I slip the key into the slot and the door opens to a spacious world of twenty-by-twenty neutral tile and monochromatic sage-green area rugs. Two leather armchairs side by side and an exquisite nubby sofa crowd a large, calf-height, wooden coffee table similar in color to the gray exterior of the home. A vaulted ceiling adds size to the space, an illusion of a much larger dwelling than it is.

“Chic. Someone has a knack for decorating.” I glance into the ugly mustard-tiled kitchen. “Ugh. Spoke too soon. We have early seventies over there.”

“Not a guy’s pad, that’s for sure.” Bill wanders past me, leaving the vast room for a short hallway. “Looks like two bedrooms and a main bath,” he remarks loud enough for me to catch his remark from the end of the hall.

The kitchenette is cubbyhole small, as if it's been left that way from a modern renovation of the living room. One bright window has a view to the pond from booth seating made from the same nubby fabric as the couch. The stove and oven are a single-unit throwback from the Nixon administration, with electric elements and a tea-stained, harvest gold range top.

"Not exactly gourmet cooking appliances." My fingernail scrapes off some of the old grease. "I see a lot of takeout in our future. Are the bedrooms nice?" I stroll to the hall and smell the pungent odor of fresh paint.

"Rooms are clean. Dresser, mirror, and a queen-size bed in each."

"I believe we've solved our travel problems, having only one car between us. Since the cottage is in the boonies, if you'd care to use the other bedroom, I'd like you to stay here. Having someone in the house will distract me from noticing paranormal activity at night." I'm holding a straight face but about to burst from his expression. It's priceless.

"Is that right? Alec didn't mention that you see ghosts." Bill settles himself against the wall, with wide eyes and hands hidden behind him.

"Drake, lighten up already. I'm kidding. We have enough to worry about without people in the hereafter joining our vacation."

"If you're sure you don't mind?" Bill's lips flatline. "I don't want to impose." He hesitates as something stirs behind his eyes.

"I'll let Alec know the arrangements, don't worry. Unless he plans on showing up unannounced? I don't know what the two of you talked about."

"He knows he's being slightly overprotective, but it's well-founded. Trouble seems to like you... a lot." Bill shoves a hand in his pants pocket and twists his mouth into a pucker.

Alec does the same pocket thing when he's frustrated with me.

"Come on." I bump him on the elbow. "I want you to camp here. Alec trusts you, as I do."

Bill's serious nature is absorbing everything I say as truth. I'll have to be careful teasing him. He hasn't crossed any line since we met last year, so I feel protected in his presence, as if Alec were here. "I hereby promise not to make a nuisance of myself. Cross my heart." I cross myself and hold up the Boy Scout salute. "Scout's honor."

He looks at the sofa and touches it as if soothing the fabric. "Considering the incident with Alastair, it's a good idea not to hang around town for lodging until we talk with police and explain how he showed up at the airport."

"I agree. The last time you spoke to Alec, what was his general mood?"

“Crazy worried,” Bill says. “In his shoes, I’d be the same way.”

I drop my gaze to the floor and consider how I left Alec with Noah. “He put you on the flight because you’d keep me from harm. You can’t do that from a motel in town. I’ll call Alec and give him the details about Alastair and tell him you’re staying at the cottage. I considered keeping the hit-and-run from Alec, but he should be told everything.”

“I’ll bring in our things. Thank you for taking pity on a detective out of his element.” He’s outside before I can thank him for his mediation.

Homicides R Us is back in business.