

A KILLER IN THE FAMILY

By Leah Bailey

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A KILLER IN THE FAMILY

“Oh, sweetie.” Nana Mae’s spoon clacked against the side of her teacup. “You don’t need to worry about me. I can take care of myself.”

I sighed. *I’m not getting anywhere with her.* For the past several months, I’d been trying to convince my great-aunt of a theory, a suspicion, she refused to believe.

Nana Mae’s perfectly coiffed hair set off her blue eyes, bringing out the green flecks I’d always envied. She raised her chin as she pursed her lips, meeting my gaze with one eyebrow raised. I couldn’t help but smile.

My childhood had been idyllic, thanks to my great-aunt. Living a life of whirlwind gaiety that she spread liberally in generous quantities to those surrounding her, she’d always been a woman I admired. A woman I looked up to.

Nana Mae’s life had been one of challenges. Orphaned at a young age, she’d been raised by my grandmother from the age of thirteen. Though born in the country, she had quickly adapted to life in the small town where my grandmother lived. The first in her family to finish high school, followed by college, she’d worked hard. She’d traveled the world, married three dashing men, raised two beautiful daughters, and, after my grandmother’s death, she’d returned the favor, taking my mother under her wing. Nana Mae had offered a sort of reliable stability, all the while popping in and out of our lives at will as work and romance sent her from one corner of the globe to the other.

A cultured woman through sheer determination to improve her lot in life, she’d returned home to her large manor in our small town the previous summer after marriage to her latest

husband Paul, remaining quite strong and healthy until late last year, when she began suffering a series of strange mishaps.

Mishaps I was beginning to believe were not mere accidents or coincidences as she claimed. *She's protecting somebody.* I studied her as she sipped her tea. *But who?*

It had all started the previous winter. While celebrating the holidays with our family, she'd fallen ill with a mysterious ailment. It worked in a strange manner. For weeks, she would initially improve, and then, after returning home, the illness would resume, sometimes hours, sometimes days later.

I'd spent weeks by her bedside as my cousins, Sarah and Karen, fought over who could best provide her care. As the months progressed, she'd gradually improved, but in doing so, she had distanced herself from us all, locking herself away in her mansion with only Paul for company.

But why would someone want to hurt Nana Mae? My gaze shifted to the painting over her head. It depicted an image of a woman cradling her child, who gripped her shirt in clenched fists, its face raised in a look of anguished yearning as it tugged fruitlessly at its mother.

Money. Nana Mae had worked hard her whole life. A ruthless businesswoman and a shrewd investor, she'd earned the extensive grounds, expensive furnishings, and fashionable, yet practical, clothes in her overflowing closets.

Widowed twice, she'd often been left to pick up the pieces and start over, but it hadn't stopped her.

“I’m attracted to the wrong type of man.” She shook her head as she recounted her life to me one of those endless days at the hospital. “Handsome and fun, but reckless.”

It was her only weakness, as far as I could tell.

“Nana Mae,” I tried again, “don’t you wonder why you’ve been so unlucky lately? It can’t all just be coincidence.”

She stared at me.

“First your mysterious illness this winter,” I pressed forward, placing my teacup on the table as I knelt beside her, “followed by the fire, and then…”

“The car accident.” Nana Mae gazed solemnly at me, her stillness complete. Months after her recovery from the illness that had ravaged her body throughout the holidays, she’d lost her younger daughter, Karen, while driving home from dinner one night. Nana Mae had sustained terrible injuries herself, requiring months of physical therapy and rehabilitation.

“Yes.” I gripped the arm of her chair until my knuckles ached. “None of it makes sense. It’s almost as if…as if someone is trying to hurt you.”

If I’d focused solely on Nana Mae’s carefully controlled expression, I might have believed her protestations, but as I leaned back, flexing my hands as I released my grip, I noticed the slightest tremble in her raised pinky, and I knew.

“You suspect the same thing I do.” I stood and paced. “In fact, you know something is going on with all this.”

Nana Mae sighed and reached for the teapot. I crossed to the window, staring outside as Uncle Paul pulled away from the house and started down the drive. He'd refused to be present among "the vultures," as he called our family.

The stillness of the empty house pressed upon us.

I turned back to her. "It's one of us, isn't it? Someone who's after your money."

She refused to meet my gaze as I resumed my seat before her. The steaming tea sent wispy clouds into the air between us, and I burned my lips as I took a scorching sip.

"Who's in your will?" I added sugar and lemon to my cup, considering my words carefully.

"Your Uncle Paul, Sarah, your mother, my grandsons, and..." her blue eyes took on a mournful expression as she shifted her gaze to me, "yourself."

I nodded. "No one else?"

She hesitated. "A few small bequests to old friends, but besides that, no."

"Don't you see?" A prickling heat crawled up my back. "Everyone will be here tonight for your birthday. If I'm right, you'll be in danger."

"Oh, sweetie." Nana Mae sighed again. "I'm too old for all this. I wish you would let this go. I told you. I can take care of myself."

I shook my head. "We have to figure out who it is. We have to stop it before something terrible happens."

Nana Mae paused and then nodded.

“Now, I’ve been thinking about it a lot.” I took another sip of tea and winced. Too much sugar. “Uncle Paul makes the most sense. You’ve only been married a short time, and he stands to inherit more than he could ever have imagined owning in his lifetime before he met you.”

Nana Mae chuckled. “I certainly didn’t marry him for his money.” I could tell by her demeanor that Nana Mae was humoring me, and it rankled.

“We have to be serious about this, even if it’s uncomfortable. And Sarah, well, she’s fallen on hard times. It’s no secret.”

Nana Mae sobered. “No,” she shook her head as she placed her teacup and saucer on the table beside her and patted her lips with a napkin, “it’s not.”

“And Charlie and Mike, both of them are in and out of trouble.”

“Perhaps I did my grandsons a disservice by giving them the grandfather I did. It led both Sarah and Karen to choose the same no-good type to be the fathers of their own children. I suppose between it all, none of them stood a chance.”

Like Karen, Sarah’s husband had abandoned the family when her sons, Charlie and Mike, were little. The boys had certainly inherited every poor quality available in their genetic history, as far as I could tell. As dashing as their grandfather, shiftless as their father, lazy as their mother, and cunning as all of us, they’d both led charmed but reckless lives.

“Are you through yet?”

Sudden sympathy welled in my heart for Nana Mae. I pressed my hand to my aching forehead. “No.”

“You didn’t mention your mother.”

“I didn’t want to.” My voice fell to a whisper. My mother was thoughtless, carefree. She’d bloomed under Nana Mae, expecting the best of everything. And Nana Mae had spoiled her. Or so I had heard from a jealous Sarah.

“Or...” She gave her rapidly cooling tea another stir with the spoon, and it tinged against the side of the cup. “Yourself?” Frown lines formed between her brows as I drained my own cup. Thin folds I had never noticed before etched into the creases near her lips.

“Myself?”

She nodded. Her eyes were tinged with a deep sadness as she gazed at me.

“But I would never...” I leaned back.

She shook her head as tears glittered upon her lashes. “You were always my favorite, you know.”

I licked my dry lips, suddenly weary. “I know.”

“I was going to leave you pretty much everything.”

“But...”

She lifted her lipstick-stained napkin to her eyes, dabbing away at the corners. “So many questions. Why can’t people leave it well enough alone?”

“I didn’t...”

“My sister, my husbands, my daughter.... All these questions.”

I narrowed my eyes as she stood above me, her shrewd expression suddenly distant and cold. A stranger.

Through the haze clouding my vision, I saw the truth. It dawned on me as brightly as the morning sun reflecting off the lenses of Nana Mae's glasses as she knelt over me, the glasses dangling from a chain around her neck. Her parents, her sister, her husbands... "You."

She placed a cool hand against my forehead. "This is even harder than taking care of Karen after our 'accident.'"

"Karen was the one poisoning you. And the fire... she knew what you were. What you had done, and you couldn't risk it any longer." I wondered what she had put in my tea as the crunch of gravel came from outside.

"Poor Karen wanted revenge. For her husband. Her father. She knew I killed them. She knew I killed all of them. I had to."

"But then she died. With you."

Nana Mae lifted her gaze to the window. "Oh, sweetie," she whispered. "You shouldn't have worried so. You shouldn't have asked so many questions."

The distant thud of car doors shutting bled through the rushing noise filling my ears. My vision narrowed to a pinpoint gaze as she crossed the room and closed the door to the hallway. Her party would be starting soon.

"The guests can wait." She settled onto the chair beside me and patted my hand, the same ruthless spark in her eye I had seen so many times in my youth as she negotiated her business affairs. "I wish you'd listened. I told you. I can take care of myself. I always do."

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