



Mystery, Ink.

MYSTERY HEIR

STACI TROILO

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A Mystery, Ink. Novel

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*To Seth and Samantha
For your enduring enthusiasm, interest, and support.
I love you both.*

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Chapter 1

Naomi Dotson didn't know what she found most annoying at the moment, and the list was long. She was always bothered by the raven statue in the center of the town square. As she took a photo of a middle aged woman chugging out of a giant beer stein, she pointedly turned away from the raven statue. Anything that she didn't know the origin or meaning of irritated her, and no one knew where that creepy bird came from, so it made her list.

Also on her list was the fact that Centerville was having an Oktoberfest celebration at all, and that she and her twin had been tapped to take photos of it really steamed her. She pointed and clicked at a little boy eating a giant mustard-slathered pretzel. He smiled back a yellow-smearred grin and she snapped another picture. That almost made her grin. Almost. She got a whiff of the pretzel and mustard and her stomach growled. Too bad she couldn't break away and grab something to eat. She skipped dinner planning on eating at the festival, but had been grabbed by the mayor the second she hit the square.

"I've tried Naomi, I've really tried. But I just don't know why this curse won't break. Here, take a picture of me with this strudel." Mayor Kerr paused with a piece of Mrs. Armstrong's flaky apple pastry at his lips. It smelled of cinnamon and was dripping with syrupy juices. Her stomach growled again.

Naomi gritted her teeth and snapped the photo. She was now certain she knew what had made the top of her "Most Annoying Things In Town" list. Mayor Kerr.

Everett Kerr had run for mayor of Centerville nearly a year ago, and he had won because the citizens were nearly as superstitious as he was. Most of the town believed they were cursed, and he had promised to lift the cloud of darkness they had all been living under and restore Centerville to the joyous community it used to be. He was failing miserably.

“What are the odds that everything I plan would go so horribly wrong?”

“Yeah,” Naomi muttered. “You would have thought you’d have stopped trying to fix things at some point.”

“I didn’t think anyone would end up dead! I mean, who would have thought an innocent Easter egg hunt at Town Hall would have resulted in so many cases of food poisoning?”

“Who could have seen that coming with real eggs in freakish ninety degree heat?”

“Take a picture of the orchestra, Naomi. It’s the trumpet solo.”

She snapped a photo of the trumpeter and thought wistfully about food again.

“I thought the town would rally behind a Memorial Day parade. I never expected the Grand Marshall to wreck his car and break his neck.”

“Who could have foreseen the town drunk crashing his Chevy into the watch tower?”

That stupid watch tower. That was on Naomi’s list, too. Every hour it chimed the time, but the bells never sounded cheerful the way church bells did; the tower always sounded ominous, like it was counting down the time until some impending evil occurred. It was probably the juxtaposition of the tower to the raven statue that fostered Naomi’s ill-will toward the bells, but whatever the reason, she was annoyed with them. Just as she thought about them, they struck eight, sending chills down her spine.

“I really thought fireworks on the fourth of July would have buoyed the town spirits,” the mayor said, bringing her back to the present annoying moment: his obsession with his past failures.

“It should have worked, in theory.”

“Don’t miss a photo of the dancers on stage, Naomi.”

While Naomi snapped photos of the lederhosen-clad dancers, she spotted her twin walking by. Before Penelope could get out of the way, Naomi snatched her hand and pulled her into the conversation. “Maybe you’d like to tell Pen about it.”

“No, no. It’s nothing.”

Penelope grinned and dashed off again. Naomi gritted her teeth.

“I didn’t think the mortars would explode on the ground, Naomi.”

“Who wouldn’t trust explosives to sixteen year olds trying to impress the cheer squad?”

“Jimmy Sylvis is still in the hospital getting skin grafts. You know,” he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “his parents might sue the city. That should have been the worst it got, right?”

“You would have thought.”

“Naomi, how can you stand there and tell me this town isn’t cursed? Look at everything that’s happened. Now someone’s murdered Joe Harbaugh right before my beautiful Oktoberfest!”

“Maybe it’s not the town that’s cursed, Mr. Mayor. Maybe it’s you.”

When the mayor’s jaw dropped open in shock, Naomi snapped his photo.

“Do you really think so?”

“I don’t believe in curses, sir.”

How had she become his therapist? She was a biology professor, not a psychologist. She couldn’t bear to stand there looking at his pathetic stare another second. She turned to walk away, but he grabbed her hand and spun her back.

“Delete that last one.” He waved his hand at her camera. “Do you think I should shut this thing down early? Just send everyone home and let them grieve for Joe in their own way?”

She hid her smile as she looked at his image on her camera screen. He was only thirty,

but he was the only thirty year old she knew who would wear a plaid suit and striped bow tie to a festival in the town square. With his wavy blond hair, he looked like a modern version of Harpo Marx. She pretended to hit delete on the image of the mayor with his grey eyes wide and his mouth hanging open, but she just had to keep it.

“Look, Mayor Kerr.”

“Everett.”

She ignored him and pressed on. “The people who want to be home grieving are home grieving. Everyone else could probably use a few games and some music to take their minds off things. You probably could, too. Go get yourself a bratwurst and relax a little. Or find some of Joe’s buddies and have a pint in his honor.”

“Yeah, yeah, I think I’ll do that. A guy like Joe deserves a good send off. A happy send off.” And he hurried off to toast Joe’s memory to the sound of “Danny Boy” being played by the orchestra. The music was also on Naomi’s annoying list. She wondered who gave them the play list, and realized it had to be Everett. Only he could royally screw up something as simple as a polka playlist. It drove her crazy that an Irish ballad was being played at a German folk festival, but no one else seemed to mind, so she figured she probably shouldn’t either.

While she thought about the music, she wondered how Everett settled on this motley crew for his band. All the Oktoberfests she’d been to had lively polka bands, and she’d actually been to some in Germany when her dad had been stationed there. She knew Everett had held auditions for three weeks, and anyone in town aged sixteen and older could try out. Why had he settled on what she’d have to call an orchestra? There were brass, strings, woodwinds, percussion... even a harpist. She didn’t see a single accordion player, and she knew for a fact there were five of them in town. Wedding photography had taught her that. Was he going for classy or fun? He was getting neither at the moment. If he wanted a symphony under the stars, he should have just scheduled that. The band started playing “Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture.” She

rolled her eyes and shook her head. A Russian number. Where was the “Beer Barrel Polka” when you needed it? Penelope walked up to her.

“Stop rolling those baby browns and enjoy yourself, would you?”

“How dare you leave me with him?”

Penelope laughed. “Ah, little sister, you looked like you were doing fine without my help. Besides, I intimidate him.”

“Stop calling me little sister. You only beat me by five minutes.”

“On the clock it was five minutes. On the calendar it’s a whole day.”

Even though they were twins, Penelope was born just before midnight and Naomi just after, giving them different birthdays. A fact that Penelope never let Naomi forget. While most of the time Naomi enjoyed having her own special day to herself, when Penelope started lording her birth order over her like it gave her superiority or better standing, it really grated on her nerves.

“I don’t care what the calendar says. It’s a matter of minutes. And even then, you only beat me because you’re pushy.”

Penelope laughed. “That’s why Everett finds me intimidating. That, and the pink and purple streaks in my luscious hair.” She ran her free hand through long blonde tresses tinted with vibrant colored stripes. “He finds your boring brown pageboy sexy.”

“My hair is not boring, it’s practical. And the mayor is not interested in me.”

“How long did he walk the square with you? Anyway, you’re single, he’s eligible, and cute in a dorky, clueless kind of way. Why not give him a go?”

“Not if he was the last man in the galaxy. You can have him.”

“The galaxy? I guess you feel pretty strongly about it. But me, I’ve got a guy, thanks.”

“I think I’d rather date Everett,” Naomi muttered.

“What?” Penelope asked, leaning in to hear Naomi over the crescendo of the music.

“Nothing. Stop screwing around now. Do we have enough pictures? I’m ready to get out

of here.”

“Probably. Let’s look and see.”

As they scrolled through their digital files, the band finished the loud music and moved on to softer, contemporary melodies. Naomi was able to hear conversations around her, and she was relieved that the mayor wasn’t standing beside her.

“... believe that Joe’s gone. And to think that the mayor didn’t cancel this festival. With one of our councilmen dead. I think he’s playing a political game.”

“The only person willing to celebrate the death of such a great man would be the one who killed him. Wouldn’t surprise me if we found out Mayor Kerr was the one who did it.”

“Wouldn’t have been just him. Rumor has it they have a witness. Someone said it was a man and a woman in the park that night.”

“Well, the mayor’s certainly a man.”

“And did you see him earlier? He’s not hurting for female company. Laughing with...”

Naomi was thrilled when they walked out of earshot. She prayed the mayor didn’t get wind of gossip like that. She’d have to invest in a leather couch and charge Everett an hourly rate for therapy sessions. She prayed to God they weren’t talking about her.

“I think we’re good,” Penelope said.

“Great. Let’s get out of here.”

“Have you eaten? I had a pretzel earlier, but I’m still hungry. I overheard Mandy Kardos saying the schnitzel was really good, and when I was by the spaetzle, it smelled divine.”

“I’m starving, but if Everett’s anywhere near the food booths, I’m just going home. We’ll order pizza.”

“Deal.”

They stayed on the outskirts of the square, walking on the cobblestone street. They skirted the backs of the booths, carefully stepping over power cords and around boxes and

coolers. On the back of many of the booths were “Have you seen this man?” posters. Naomi assumed Stephanie Jordan had been by, posting signs looking for her missing husband Clay. After seven years, she still had not given up hope of finding him. Most of the town didn’t seem to notice the signs any longer, but Naomi always felt sad when she saw them, especially lately. Ever since her parents had been killed, she had been especially sensitive to Stephanie Jordan’s plight. She wasn’t sure what was worse: grieving after death or not-knowing if a loved one was gone. She wondered briefly how Stephanie Jordan handled the situation. But before she got lost in thoughts of the Jordan family, she noticed the orchestra playing a string and brass band rendition of “We Are Family” by Sister Sledge. “Did you even know they made orchestral music for that song?” Naomi asked, irritated.

Penelope laughed and linked her arm through her sister’s. “Let it go, Naomi. We aren’t in Germany anymore. This is Oktoberfest, Centerville-style. What do you want first? Sausages? Schnitzel? Strudel? I’m buying.”

“Are we going for an ‘S’ theme?” Naomi asked and laughed. “Let’s go where the line is shortest.”

They stepped off the rough cobblestones and into the grass toward the front of the food booths. Approaching the spaetzle counter, they each asked for a bowl. Before they were served, Naomi heard a voice behind her.

“Oh, there you are! I thought you’d gone. I’m glad I didn’t miss you.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, relying on her martial arts training to keep her temper in check. Opening her eyes as she turned around, she saw her sister trying to stifle her laughter. That only made her angrier. “Mayor. What can I do for you?”

“I was just wondering if—”

But his words were cut short by a security alarm shrieking down the street. Pandemonium hit the town square. Children stood crying, separated from their parents and frightened by the

noise. The parents of those children tore through the crowds looking for their lost kids. Nosy citizens scrambled to be the first to reach the scene while the sensible and superstitious ran away from the commotion. The few police who were on duty split their focus; some responded to the alarm while others struggled to enforce a calm and orderly departure from the town square. It was chaos, and it was going to last.

Naomi grabbed Penelope's hand. "Come on, Pen. Let's see what happened."

"Where are you going?" the mayor asked.

Naomi held up her camera. "Crime scene. They may need photographers."

"Well, I'll come with you." He didn't sound very sure of himself, and Naomi had no interest in him tagging along.

"You know, Mr. Mayor—" Naomi began.

"Everett," he interrupted.

"Sir, I think the officers here could really use your help with crowd management."

He didn't look too sure of himself.

Naomi pushed harder. "I'm sure someone with your people skills and governing abilities can handle a situation like this." She looked at him, expecting him to leap into action.

"I guess I can maybe do something here, then?" he questioned. It wasn't a leap so much as a crawl, since he didn't sound at all sure of himself, but she took it. She smiled and ran off with Penelope while the mayor stood looking hopelessly lost and confused. A child ran up to him and grabbed his hand. Naomi never looked back.

"That wasn't nice," Penelope said as they rushed to the scene. "He's liable to get trampled on. He doesn't know anything about crowd control."

"He doesn't know anything about crime scenes, either," Naomi answered.

The alarm only came from down the block, but it took them ten minutes to get there. The street was dark, light from the cast iron streetlamps blocked by the throngs of people. Naomi and

Penelope weaved through the hoard, twisting their ankles on the cobblestones and feet and ankles of others in the street. They grasped each other's hands so as not to get separated. The twins were jostled and pushed, and at one point Penelope was yelled at and shoved by a large man wearing beer-stained clothing. A protective streak surged in Naomi. Despite the man's size, she felt no fear, only the desire to defend her sister. She dropped into a tae kwon do fighting stance, and Penelope did the same. Everything around her slowed as the adrenaline rushed through her system. She was primed, ready to block, ready to strike.

For whatever reason, the man acquiesced. He threw his hands in the air, backed off mumbling an apology, and helped Naomi and Penelope fight their way down the street. Naomi grinned at Penelope, grabbed her hand again, and followed the man to the scene of the alarm.

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