

Book
Four
By the Sea Cozy
Mystery
Series

Murder Hosts an Event



Shannon Symonds

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Chapter One

Invited to Mind the Fish

A pebble flew through Esther's open bedroom window and bounced across her desk at the same time as her alarm chimed for school. When she rolled over to turn it off, her cat, Miss Molly, slid off her back. It was five thirty in the morning. Another pebble skittered across the desk and bounced on the hardwood floors of her third-story bedroom in the James family home by the sea. A slow smile spread across Esther's face. Molly stretched and Esther slid out of bed and leaned across the desk at the open window to see Sophie, her best friend, waving in the morning light.

"Open up!" Sophie was trying to talk quietly, but her voice carried all the way to Esther's window in the round turret of her Queen Anne Victorian house. Sophie picked up a full laundry basket and walked toward the front porch.

Esther quickly put on her glasses and pulled her favorite hoodie over her t-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms before she headed downstairs to let Sophie in. Her bare feet padded along the hall past Mary's room, the bathroom, and Mom and Papa J's room before she took the stairs at a run, crossed the spacious living room, slid on the entryway rug, and slammed into the front door.

Esther opened the door. "Hey. Did you run away from home? What's with all the things?"

Sophie snickered softly. "Are you kidding? You should run away and live with me. My house has the biggest television in town and a bank of computers. You could run Homeland Security from my basement. The basket has my necessary stuff: my laptop, fish, and things that wouldn't all fit in my backpack or my dinky suitcase. Hold the door, the basket is heavy."

Holding the screen door open, Esther let her in to the quiet house. Sophie was already dressed for school in her favorite plaid skirt and black cardigan, buttoned to the top. She dropped the basket onto the couch by the fireplace. The water in the fishbowl sloshed. She picked up the bowl and examined her fish, whose name was The Angel of Death, because he ate all the other fish in the tank.

After giving Esther the fishbowl, Sophie used both hands to push up her round black glasses before she slipped out of her backpack and put it next to the basket. "Mom and Dad just left for the airport. They didn't take Spam, so I'll have to walk and water him in the morning and evening. He has a doggy door and his own little doggy yard, but he gets lonely."

"Where are they going?"

“You know the Silver Pearls—the group that my grandma belongs to in Hawaii? The old ladies that go snorkeling, rock climbing, and wakeboarding together? Apparently, they tried something new, ocean kayaking. Grandma bought one and everything. Well, one of the members accidentally hit grandma with her paddle pretty hard. She went overboard and hurt her knee on the rocks.”

“Ouch. Is she okay?”

“She’s going to need surgery, so Mom and Dad are flying to Oahu to help her out. They called your mom last night. She said you would adopt me for a few weeks.”

“Perfect! We can get to work on scholarship forms and make a college dream list.”

“Whoa. Hold back.” Sophie put her fish on the fireplace mantle. “Don’t go wild on me, E. Can I plug in the fish tank filter here?”

Esther chuckled. “Sure. Do you want to take your stuff upstairs, or do you want to eat?”

“Are you kidding me? Food, of course. I don’t want to carry this stuff another five feet.”

The fridge was packed. Esther moved things around while Sophie looked in the pantry.

“There’s nothing to eat.” Esther shut the refrigerator.

“I know.” Sophie pulled out a box of granola. “Is your mom on a health food kick?”

“Don’t get me started. Do you want some Greek yogurt with that?”

“Sure.”

Esther gathered the yogurt, a basket of fresh strawberries, and two diet soda pops. “Breakfast of champions. Oh look, I found bacon.”

“See, you should stay with me. We have Toaster Tarts.” Sophie got out the bowls and spoons.

“You have all the good stuff.” After Esther used a hair holder from her pocket to tame her messy brown curls, she rinsed the berries and sliced them over bowls of yogurt and granola.

“Hey, did you get an invite to that one weird event?” Sophie put a cast-iron skillet on the large gas stove and opened the bacon.

“You mean the one online?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“The one with a photo of Madison’s new amphitheater and park?”

“What did you think?” Sophie asked.

“I thought it was seriously creepy. You’re invited to *The End* is all it says, besides the date and time.”

“What you guys doing?” Esther’s seven-year-old sister, Mary, stood in the kitchen doorway in her favorite rainbow unicorn onesie pajamas. She had the hood up, but her silver horn drooped to one side. She pointed at them with her glitter wand.

“Nothing, your royal highness.” Esther rolled her eyes at Sophie. Esther loved Mary, but as a little sister, she could be pretty demanding.

“I want bacon and marshmallow cereal. So does my friend, Amy.” Mary sat down at the long wooden table in front of the fireplace.

“Amy? Who is Amy?” Esther’s crooked smile made a single dimple pop on her left cheek.

“Amy is my imaginary friend,” Mary said. “You have Sophie Eats and I have Amy. Amy likes to eat too.”

“What does Amy want to drink with her bacon?” Sophie asked. She pretended to hug Amy.

“Amy likes kisses.” Mary tapped her chin and thought for a minute while Sophie kissed imaginary Amy.

“Orange soda.” Mary waved her wand. “Bring us orange soda.”

“Mary, you know I would get in trouble if I gave you sugary soda before school,” Esther said.

“You’re drinking some.” Mary pointed at Esther’s soda with the glitter wand, waving the ribbons tied to the end back and forth.

Esther sighed heavily. “It’s diet. How about orange juice or grape juice?”

“Grape and cereal.”

“Alright, little miss Mary.” She poured the grape juice. “Sophie, do you think anyone will go to the event?”

“Go where? Amy wants to go.” Mary sat up, excited at the prospect of going anywhere.

“The event isn’t for you or your friend, Shorty,” Sophie said. The bacon sizzled as she turned it with a fork. “I think I might go—just to see what it is.”

“I was wondering if Madison Merriweather is hosting the event to launch her next book. We should ask Bridget,” Esther said.

Sophie put a piece of bacon on a plate. “What do you think of Madison’s amphitheater, The Stone Circle?”

“I haven’t been up to see it yet, but the photos make it look amazing.”

The door to Esther’s Grandma Mable’s apartment on the back of the house opened and Nephi, her seventeen-year-old uncle, came into the kitchen, barefoot, in shorts, and right out of bed.

Esther loved Nephi like a best friend. They had been through a lot together since she began dating his buddy, Parker. He looked like an arrogant athlete, a popular girl magnet, but Esther knew his good looks often masked surprising wisdom. She also knew from experience that he would be there for her through the worst moments life threw at her while he laughed inappropriately at all the wrong times.

His normally perfect hair stuck up on one side. He scratched his belly under his torn t shirt. “Do I smell bacon?”

“You smell like something. Go back to bed. We don’t have enough,” Sophie said. She smiled and tried to swat his hand away from the plate. The more Sophie teased Nephi, the more Esther suspected Sophie likes him.

Laughing, Nephi ignored her and took the one she had off the plate and chewed on it.

“Hey,” Mary whined. “That was my imaginary friend Amy’s bacon.”

“Wait your turn, Amy,” Esther said.

“Who is Amy?” Nephi asked.

“My friend. Can’t you see her? She’s my imaginary friend,” Mary said.

“Then she can eat imaginary bacon.” Nephi smiled and sat by Mary.

“You’re sitting on Amy,” Mary said. Nephi kissed her head and she smiled back. Mary adored Nephi. He could get away with squishing Amy and anything else in Mary’s world.

Esther gave Mary a bowl of cereal. “Anyway, I think the amphitheater is beautiful. But the event gave me the shivers. Maybe it’s just the black-and-white photo of the stone circle with an ocean storm behind it.”

“We need to go see the new park.” Sophie put the rest of the bacon on the plate and turned the stove off. “Do you think the cement Stonehenge is authentically sized? I’ve always wanted to see the real one.”

Nephi sat at the table with a large glass of orange juice. “Stonehenge is cool. We should all go. I’m guessing the event is just another party set up by someone at school. And I was invited because they want me to go. Everyone wants me.”

“You’re wanted alright. Get your feet off the table.” Esther pushed them off.

“Do you know what else is creepy, besides you?” Sophie said. She pointed at Nephi with her spoon. “Your new neighbor.”

“Right?” Nephi sat straight up. “Did you know he has like a thousand cats?”

“Four. He has four,” Esther corrected him.

“I don’t know how many cats he has,” Sophie said. “But he was sitting in the dark on his porch when I passed his house this morning, petting one. I wouldn’t have even seen him at all, except the cat was purring.” Sophie shivered. “Creepy is the right word.”

“I think he has some weird crush on Grandma Mable,” Esther said.

“What makes you think that?” Sophie asked.

“Gross!” Nephi got up and put a bagel in the toaster.

“Grandma’s a fox. Yesterday, he was leaning over the fence and waved wildly when she left for the grocery store.” Esther tipped her head and looked knowingly at Nephi.

“So, he waved at her,” Nephi said.

“Hey?” Sophie said. “What’s wrong with liking Mable? I love her. Your mom can take care of herself. She’s old Army. She worked with the M.P.s before women were allowed to. You should be more worried about what she could do to Marion,” Sophie said.

“That’s just gross.” He grimaced.

Mary folded her arms. “I’m telling Mom.” And with that, she ran for the stairs.

“Great. Now you’ve done it.” Nephi laughed. “I guess I should go take a shower.” He popped the bagel from the toaster and ran for the door.

“Coward!” Sophie called after him.

Chapter Two

Mable's Meet Up

Esther and Sophie sat on the porch swing, waiting for Nephi. The morning light shone through white clouds that floated at ground level, revealing the neighborhood in random pieces. Absentmindedly, Esther pushed the swing back and forth with her toes, knowing Sophie was too short to reach the deck of the large wraparound porch. The sun began to dissolve the clouds and gradually the grayish white morning became bright with blue skies.

Sophie sat up. "Did you answer the letter from your dad? Are you okay with all the letters your dad keeps sending from prison?"

"Sort of. I haven't really answered them. He keeps asking about school and what I'm doing. Dumb stuff. What do you say to the person that abused your mom, tried to kidnap you, and then asks you to forgive him? Seriously. Sometimes, I just want to tell him and the drama that follows him to go away."

"I don't blame you." They rocked silently for a moment. "Nephi's going to make us late." Sophie sighed and pulled her long black ponytail tighter.

Esther smiled. "You're not surprised, are you? It takes a long time to shake the wrinkles out of his face and flat iron his hair. You don't think he smells that way naturally?"

"He smells great."

One of Esther's brows involuntarily rose as she looked at Sophie who looked back and shrugged, giving her a cheesy grin. The wooden front door opened, and the screen door slammed. Nephi stepped out without any books. He was wearing a white hoodie, jeans, and flip flops. His hair was controlled by product, which also held a number two pencil in place over his left ear.

"Let's roll." He took the stairs two at a time and jogged across the dewy lawn to his beat-up truck.

Sophie stood up and sniffed.

"It's like a wake of man perfume," Esther said.

"Yes, it is."

Esther could see that Nephi was turning the key in the ignition, but nothing was happening. He pounded the wheel and said something she couldn't quite understand. When he got out of the truck, he slammed the door and leaned against it with his arms folded and his mouth in a firm line.

Nephi looked at the girls, "It won't start."

“We can’t be late,” Sophie said. “The school board meeting is today and since we work in the library, we said we’d help set up.”

“Chill. I’m calling for backup.” He took his phone out of his back pocket. “Hello, Mom? The truck won’t start . . . thanks.”

They all leaned side by side on the truck, looking at the new neighbor’s house.

“Did he rip all of Mrs. Anderson’s rose bushes and her entire lawn out?” Esther asked.

“It looks like a giant kitty litter box.” Sophie pointed to a cat sitting on top of a pile of sand.

“Hello!” The neighbor came down his steps in a red silk robe, sweatpants, and slippers, holding a cat in his arms. The cat was the same color as his chest hair, medium brown, and stood out against the robe. So did the dozens of other cat hairs stuck to his velvet lapel.

The neighbor smiled. “I don’t think we’ve had a chance to meet yet. I’m Marion Joseph Herbert and this is Anni-Frid. Do you kids need a lift to school?” He stroked the cat, who growled at Nephi.

Esther didn’t know what to say. It was clear Nephi wasn’t going to talk, and she was afraid Sophie would. Finally, she said, “We noticed you have a lot of cats.”

He giggled. “Oh, not so many. Just four, Anni-Frid, Benny, Bjorn, and Agnetha. Isn’t she beautiful?”

“Wait. Aren’t those the names of the members of the band called Abba?” Sophie eyed him and pushed her round glasses up her nose.

“Are you an Abba fan too? I absolutely adore their music.”

“My parents are. They like classic rock.”

“Classic?” He threw his head back and laughed. “I guess that makes me a classic too.” Then his eyes lit up, and his mouth fell open.

Esther followed his gaze to the front porch, and Grandma Mable. Her red hair was on fire with flecks of gray, like a lit match in the morning sun. A seagull called and landed on the roof of the porch.

Mable looked up. “Shoo, bird. You’re not getting me today.”

Esther looked back at Marion. He was still staring at Grandma Mable and petting his cat. His eyes were fixed on her.

Grandma Mable shook the keys to the Jeep. “All aboard.” She started down the steps.

Then Marion strode past Esther. He struck a pose between Mable and the SUV. “Hello. I just had to come and introduce myself. I am Marion. Marion Joseph Herbert. I just bought the house next door.”

“I know. You destroyed the one-hundred-year-old rose bushes. I would have come over and transplanted them for you, you know.” Mable folded her arms. “Kids, get in the car.”

“Oh, dear. I had no idea they were that old. I didn’t destroy them. I actually donated them to the men’s shelter on the Washington Peninsula.”

“That’s a relief. You better call them and tell them what they have. Those were grown from a cutting from the Captain’s Cove Mansion.”

“Really?” Marion stepped back and put his hand over his heart. “Now I wish I hadn’t pulled them out.”

“What are your plans for the moonscape?” Mable asked.

Marion chuckled and beamed. "I thought I would bring a little bit of the Arizona desert with me. I am putting in a beautiful rock garden. They're low maintenance."

Mable didn't flinch. Her face never changed. "Are you retired?"

"Oh, not even close. I am a licensed clinical social worker. I am working on getting everything in order to do couples counseling in that beautiful space over the carriage house I use as a garage."

Mable's gaze shifted to the three-story carriage house. Esther studied her face. But if Mable had any emotions, she wasn't sharing them.

"I hope you don't mind. I will only be holding sessions during the workday, and quarterly weekend retreats. I promise to make sure parking doesn't become an issue. The city already cleared my zoning."

Mable had done it. Esther had experienced it a thousand times. She would stand silently until you found yourself blathering on about every little thing you never wanted to tell her.

"Mom. We're going to be late." Nephi stood at the car door with Sophie. "It's locked."

"Excuse me, Marion. It was nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine." His shoulders relaxed and he waved enthusiastically as they pulled away from the curb.

"He is so weird." Esther leaned toward the front seat. "Did you hear him? His cats are named after the members of a band?"

Nephi, who was sitting next to Mable, took a piece of gum from the glove box. "I think he likes you."

Mable didn't flinch. "Haven't you all learned anything about judging people?"

Sophie cleared her throat. "In today's world, it behooves us to determine if the adults operating in proximity of our personal space are safe and trustworthy. We're practicing skills that will be extremely useful when we manage fortune five hundred companies."

Mable finally lost her composure and cackled. "We shall see, Sophie. We shall see."



The drop-off lane moved slowly. Madison Merriweather's Range Rover was ahead of them by a car length. When it was her turn in the Oceanside High School Roundabout, she parked.

"Only Madison would park." Nephi chuckled and shook his head. "Become a world-famous author and they stop yelling at you in the drop-off zone."

Sophie leaned forward. "Maybe she didn't get the eighteen-point pickup and drop-off zone red letter in the orientation packet. Whoa. Look at her."

"Who is that?" Nephi put his head out the window to get a better look.

Madison had changed. She wore black sweatpants which accented her muscular legs. And she had on tennis shoes instead of her usual heels. For the first time in Esther's memory, her hair was up in a ponytail. She still had on her typical layers of jewelry, but Esther had never seen her in workout gear and tennis shoes. In fact, she had rarely seen her without a large coffee or drink in her hand.

"Those are some expensive shoes." Nephi whistled.

Madison's head snapped around and he ducked back in the truck. She smiled and waved. He weakly waved back. Esther couldn't help it, she started laughing at him.

Sophie gave him a friendly push. "Seriously? We can walk from here. See you, Grandma Mable."

The girls were still giggling when they shut the car door and waved goodbye. Esther's phone chimed twice. She pulled it out of her pocket.

Text from Parker. *Lunch together today?*

Text from Esther. *Yes, please!*

Esther waved at Bridget and called her name. Bridget waved back and walked toward them.

"Oh, no. Mrs. Boxer is coming for Madison," Sophie said. An intimidating woman in an orange traffic vest and matching hard hat was marching towards Madison, waving a hand-held stop sign with a whistle dangling from her lips.

"You can't park there! Move it!" Mrs. Boxer yelled after blowing her whistle.

Madison looked surprised and pointed at herself. "Me?"

"That's right! Don't you know the rules?"

"Rules?"

"Move it!"

"It's just for a moment." Madison raised her eyebrows and held her hands out. "Please?"

"Move it or I will!"

Esther heard a car honk but couldn't figure out who the rude culprit was. Madison shrugged and hugged Bridget, whose face was now bright red. She got back in her car and the drop-off line slowly inched forward again.

Bridget, Esther, and Sophie walked together up the stone steps to Oceanside High School.

"Your mom looks great," Esther said.

"Yeah. What happened to her?" Sophie asked.

Esther elbowed Sophie. "Sophie!"

Bridget smiled. "It's okay. I'm not sure. About two months ago, Mom said Parker and Paisley's mom, Mrs. Stuart, was doing this life coach thing that came with workouts. I guess Mrs. Stuart is studying to be a personal trainer or nutritional life coach. Something like that. She asked Mom to workout with her."

"What kind of diet are they on?" Esther asked.

"Well, that's the problem. She is so into it. She thinks we should be on it together. She says it isn't a diet. It's a lifestyle change. But I am dying. It's a lot of whole organic foods, no sugar, and these horrible green shakes that she adds spinach to."

"That's disgusting," Sophie said.

Esther pushed the heavy front door open and held it for Bridget and Sophie. "I think my mom is on the same diet. She stopped buying anything that tastes good, and she has a massive new blender."

Sophie's eyes opened wide. "Crepes! You mean I'm staying with you, and your mom isn't going to make popcorn or cookies? I'm going to starve to death. What happens if I need fries and a burger? What if I want ice cream infused with an extra megadose of chocolate syrup?"

Bridget laughed. "You're right. Your mom joined the group. She was at Mrs. Stuart's Power Meeting. My mom made me go."

"Why do you have to go? You're already healthy," Esther said.

"She calls it our bonding opportunity. She thinks I am growing up too fast, and she is going to be alone soon. I have to spend more quality time with her before it's too late." Bridget listed her mother's reasons in a monotone voice, like a rehearsed script, and rolled her eyes.

"It's not like you're going to die or something when you get out of school," Sophie said.

"Right?" Bridget said. "That's why she is coming in today. You know the park she's contributing to the city? She has this hairbrained idea for launching her next book there and wants me to be center stage with her."

"I knew it." Esther gave Bridget a broad smile, with white teeth and both dimples. "I love it when I'm right, just like Sherlock Holmes."

"Or Shaggy and his dog," Sophie said.

Just as the bell rang for class, someone grabbed Esther's arm and pulled her around.

"Parker!" Every part of her face smiled.

"Good morning." He gave her a hug. "I can't be late. Meet me at the library for lunch? My treat? Sophie and Bridget, you come too?"

"Burgers?" Sophie asked.

"Whatever you want. We're celebrating."

"What are we celebrating?" Esther asked.

"It's a surprise. Gotta go. I can't be late." Parker and Bridget melted into the steady stream of students, leaving Sophie and Esther to walk to the library on the west side of the old school. Lockers slammed, kids scattered, and the last bell rang, leaving behind a piece of paper floating to the linoleum floor.

Esther and Sophie had so many credits in their junior year, they were allowed to take a study period and library sciences for several hours a day. The beautiful library was the heart of the school for Esther. It was their sanctuary and the place where she'd first talked to Parker and gathered with their friends.

The Oceanside High Library was the only place she felt truly safe. In between the shelves and among the books, everything was predictable, quiet, organized, and so unlike the fights of her early childhood. By opening a book, she could run away from high school drama in the library. In this place, the librarian, Miss Priest, and Sophie understood her. She could open any volume and escape into another world where people like her, invisible, introverted, observers became heroes. She had read every *Agatha Christie* novel and loved the little-old-lady who outwitted the police. When she was still Mary's age, she was already consuming *Nancy Drew* novels. When no one was looking, she would open a book and just breathe in the scent.

The wooden doors to the library were beautifully carved by some unknown workman in the 1800s. The ancient, hand-blown glass was still wavy and pitted. Not far into the spacious two-story library was the front desk. It was carved to match the door. But something was different.

"Hello. What's this?" Sophie said. She reached out and touched a new tablet on a stand.

“Good morning,” Ms. Cynommon Priest called from her office. “Do you like our latest edition?”

Esther put her backpack under the counter and hung up her hoodie on the coatrack behind the desk, silenced her phone, and stuffed it in the back pocket of her jeans. “I don’t know . . . Do we still get to use my favorite date stamp and ink pad?”

Ms. Priest laughed lightly. “If you want.” She joined the girls.

“Nice dress,” Sophie said. “What’s the occasion?”

She smiled and bowed in her black jumper and matching jacket. “Thank you. The school board meets here today, remember?”

“Do we get to use the tablet to check out books? Does it come with a barcode scanner?” Sophie asked.

“We’ll be gradually including a bar code system for loaning books, which should speed things up. It’s been in the school budget for two years. They finally agreed to go forward as long as I have you two to help me prep all the books and get the system running. They might even give us one more student aide to work on the project. If you’re game, we’ll all get trained next month. It’s a big undertaking. We won’t have it fully rolled out until the end of summer.”

“That slaps!” Sophie said.

“Excuse me?” Cynommon cocked her head and raised her brows. “Slaps?”

“She’s trying not to food swear so much. I encouraged her to read the urban dictionary and collect more slang.” Esther grinned from ear to ear.

“So, what does it mean?” Ms. Priest said.

“It’s awesome. The bomb. You know?” Sophie said.

“No. But I see Madison Merriweather is on the way in. You’ll have to bring me up to speed later.” Miss Priest smiled and left them to meet Madison Merriweather at the door.

The west doors opened, and Madison, their friend Bridget’s mother, their new friend, and passionate school board member, made her usual grand entrance. “Hello, my lovelies!” Arms open wide and a joyful grin on her face, eyes twinkling, she gave them each a perfumed hug. “I had to come in and invite you all to workout with us tonight. We’re having so much fun, you simply must join.”

“Is that the class Bridget was telling us about? Parker and Paisley’s mom, Mrs. Stuart teaches it?” Esther asked.

“Yes. You’re all invited. It’s a great group of women. We don’t just workout. We bond, we relate, and we get to spend quality time with Bridget and Paisley. I know Bridget would be happier with you girls in the group.”

“Or some boys,” Sophie said, elbowing Esther.

“Come one, come all.” Madison flung her arms out wide.

“It sounds great,” Miss Priest said. “I definitely need to leave the library once in a while and do a little bonding. I’m also a pretty good cook. I could share some of my favorite recipes and maybe get some new ones.”

“It’s a wellness journey. We are finding our authentic selves—peeling away the layers we hide in. Melissa is brilliant. She’s training to be a life coach as well as our wellness coach. Please, you must join us at least once.”

“What times do you work out?” Sophie asked.

“We work out Tuesday and Thursday at 4 p.m. at the brick church on the hill, and Saturday mornings we will work out in the new park, weather permitting, at seven thirty

in the morning. Bridget can pick you up.”

Esther stepped back. “We have to help Parker finish a project this week.”

“I might try a Saturday.” Ms. Priest smiled. “Is the park open?”

“Oh yes, but we haven’t had the official ribbon cutting ceremony. We are saving that for the summer when tourists arrive. I’m just glad the city approved it. We’ve needed some kind of arts or a theatre in the area. We don’t give our children enough culture and opportunities to explore their creativity. Having an amphitheater and concert stage will allow us to enrich the lives of everyone in Coho County—don’t you think?”

“Ms. Merriweather,” Sophie said. She cocked her head and folded her arms. “I have a quick question. How is an outdoor amphitheater on the Oregon Coast going to work when we get on average over one hundred inches of rain on more than half the days in the year?”

“Sophie!” Esther put her hands over her eyes. She couldn’t watch.

Madison laughed musically. “Oh, my dear, I do adore you. Not to fear! We have a large sloping glass roof over the round stage. And in the future, we will build a twin glass ceiling over the audience.”

“Did you plan the event on social media? You know, the one called, *The End?*” Sophie studied her face. “If you did, it’s genius. It made me curious.”

“*The End?*” Madison’s brows drew together, and she look up, thinking. “I wish I had. Fascinating name, *The End*. But not to worry. It’s a public park. I am sure they have a permit or something.”

Ms. Priest gently put a hand on Esther’s and Sophie’s shoulders “Well, I love the backdrop of the Stonehenge replica on the cliff with the ocean behind it. I hiked to the park last week. It’s gorgeous. And the terraced seats are a feat of engineering that blends in with the landscape. I think we need to thank Ms. Merriweather.”

Madison grinned broadly. Esther thought, if she didn’t have so much makeup on, she might be blushing. She shook her head, and her earrings made a tinkling sound. “I did it entirely for me. Not only is it a tremendous write off, but I am also going to launch my newest book at the park. The unexpected bonus has been the amount of time I hope to spend with my Bridget and you amazing young ladies. Sophie, you’re a caution.”

Sophie brows gathered over confused eyes. “A caution?”

“Google it. Now girls, Ms. Merriweather and I have a short meeting.” Ms. Priest shook her head and she and Madison exchanged knowing looks.

“Is it in the urban dictionary?” Sophie asked Esther.

Esther shook her head, no.

“Cynommon, why don’t I treat you to a cup of coffee at the Coffee Shack. We can talk on the way?” Madison said.

“Can you girls take care of things if I’m back in ten minutes?”

“I’ll keep Sophie under control Ms. Priest.” Esther said. “Let’s try looking up ‘you’re a caution’ on the new tablet, Soph.”

“I’m googling it now.” Sophie was rapidly typing on her smartphone.

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