



Lila Abbott dropped her aluminum demo tray of Ritz Crackers, Cheez Whiz, and green olives on the unforgiving floor of Market Foods with an ear-splitting clatter. The sound echoed throughout the store, but no one turned around to look. Not even one person.

A pure panic swept through Lila, and it wasn't because of her lost Cheez Whiz demo. The panic was for Emily Ruth Griffin who lay face down on the floor of the produce department surrounded by lemons.

Lila ran past the spilled tray and fought her way through several other customers circled around Emily Ruth. *What in God's name did I do that would make Emily Ruth keel over?*

Larry Pierson had gotten to her first. He checked her breathing, which wasn't happening, and frantically began administering CPR to Emily Ruth. Lila prayed he could bring her around. *Please, God, don't*

*let the beautiful Emily Ruth die in our store.* She might be perfectly rich and perfectly dressed, and perfectly bitchy, but she didn't have to be perfectly dead, did she?

Mr Trent, the pharmacist, came running over. He kept checking Emily Ruth's wrists for something – maybe a pulse, and tried to talk to Larry.

Pilar, from the deli, called 911 from the upstairs office phone. She must have been looking out the observation window and seen the whole thing. Even with Pilar's very cool but complicated Argentinian accent the 911 crew must have gotten the general idea. Within twenty seconds Lila heard sirens.

Tom Boscov, the store manager, was running up and down the aisles trying to calm his regular customers. Tom would do that. The townies were the meat and potatoes of his year-in-and-year-out business. His short-sleeved white shirt had big wet spots under the arms and on his back. He was sweating it, for sure. Lila saw him round the back end of aisle two and heard his quick footsteps down the next row toward Emily Ruth.

Everything went all cold and slow during the next few minutes as the paramedics arrived at a run. Boy, those guys were fast.

Lila helped them back people away. A good-looking gray-haired man with a nautical outfit soothed a crying Mrs Gordon. The summer people and the townie people coming together over a tragedy, Lila thought. How touching.

Lila tried not to look at Emily Ruth's body, which wasn't pretty anymore, as the medics worked on her valiantly.

Larry Pierson was having a complete melt-down. He wept over Emily Ruth like his heart was splitting in two. Poor Larry, and what a good effort he'd made. The medics had to move him out of the way several times.

Lila kept thinking about the last thing Emily Ruth had put in her mouth.

It wasn't like Emily Ruth to eat a non-natural thing – that's what she'd said when they'd chatted just moments earlier. Lila remembered Emily Ruth carefully reading the ingredients on both the Cheez Whiz and the crackers, complimenting Lila on her olive and pimento artwork, then, ever so casually, popping one in her mouth.

She had commented how starved she was from South Beaching herself to bikini weight and that maybe just this one cracker wouldn't kill her. *Just one little carb moment.*

*Had* it killed her? What in God's name could be in a blob of Cheez Whiz that would *kill* someone? Was it a tainted olive? Was the cracker moldy? Lila trembled all over. It was like the shadow of death had formed a dark misty cloud over the entire store.

Emily Ruth was dead.

Dave McInnis, chief paramedic, declared time of death, then he and an orderly gently lifted Emily Ruth onto a gurney. Larry clutched the side rails. He was a high-strung kind of guy, and trying to revive

someone like that had probably been too much for him.

*Dead.* Dead as a doornail. Lila shuddered again. Then she thought how good-looking those McInnis boys were. Then she thought that was a terrible thing to think – *but, hey, she wasn't dead – just coming out of hibernation from seventeen years of being a single mother.*

Just suffering empty-nest syndrome from her only daughter Mallory leaving for college at the oh-so-young age of seventeen. Just freaking out for not being able to reach for and hug her only child right this minute. Her mom instincts went into high gear and all her fears about letting Mallory go early to that math-geek-club-sorority-rushing-welcome-to-your-new-life-away-from-the-parents thing came surfacing up. *Anything could happen to her!*

It must be the heat making her think like this. The summer heat always got to her. Plus, one tends to take stock when death comes lurking around. Lila's life flashed before her in a strange series of disconnected thoughts, including a certain summer night many years ago when she'd gotten herself knocked up.

Nothing she could think right now would make any sense or feel correct so she gave up torturing herself about her thoughts. Apparently her mind was trying to grapple with the whole situation and doing a rather random job of it. It must be shock.

The local chief of the Port Gamble Police Department came in the store. He took a look at

Emily, talked to the paramedics and Mr Trent, all very matter of fact. Tom Boscov joined the other men in their short-sleeved-shirt pow-wow. Many forms were passed between the officials and signatures given. Why did life come down to paperwork in the end?

Lila skirted around the death area sweeping up fallen crackers and cheese and doing recon on the side. They extended the gurney and rolled Emily Ruth out of the store, no sheet to cover her once-beautiful face. *Talk about your clean-up on aisle one,* Lila muttered.

She picked up Emily Ruth's expensive lime green leather clutch. It was the size of a doll's purse. Or a little girl's. Lila clutched the clutch. Police Chief Bob Boniford came toward her. He looked a little flirty but still maintained his professional air, if such a thing was possible.

'Lila.' He tipped his hat.

'Chief.' Lila nodded.

'Looks like Ms Griffin had some sort of severe allergic reaction.'

'Oh God, Bob, I let her eat a Ritz with Cheez Whiz off the demo table. And it had a green olive and pimento garnish. I did it. I killed her.' Lila felt a little woozy. She leaned on her broom and tucked Emily's purse under her arm.

'Now, Lila, the woman was a grown adult. She would have known if she were allergic to any of that. It's not your fault. It was probably a fluke.' Bob got way close and put his arm around her. Bob was nice,

but . . . married. She took the comfort anyway. And the support. Support was always good.

‘The paramedics gave her a shot of epinephrine, but it was too late. Is there anything else you noticed? Did she have anything else to eat in the store?’

‘Not that I know of, I’m the only demo today,’ Lila answered. ‘Her cart is right over there.’ Lila pointed to the abandoned cart next to the lemon bin. She sort of disengaged herself from Bob at the same time.

‘I’ll take a look at the cart. Just let me have all those food bits, and the containers – we’ll have the lab in Seattle run a few tests on the stuff.’

‘The food is all in this trash bag. I can get you the containers. I’ve got them under the demo table,’ Lila answered. It occurred to her that the store might have some liability issues if indeed some part of the sample food was tainted. That would be terrible. ‘Just take it.’ Lila picked up the bag and handed it to the chief. She felt too guilty to sort out liability issues at the moment.

‘I’ll get the containers,’ Bob said.

Pilar came up behind them and tried to tell Chief Bob something that looked important. Bob spoke pretty good Spanish and they managed well despite the difference between her Argentine Spanish and his local yokel. Lila had only taken one term of high school Spanish in her sophomore year. Getting pregnant had sort of cut her academic education short. But she’d picked up quite a bit since.

‘Lila, Ms Griffin’s dog is locked up in her car

barking its fool head off. Let's get the keys and take the poor thing out of there. It's damned hot today.' Bob indicated the purse.

Guess the expensive little green purse didn't much blend with her white poly pants and blue checker's vest. Not that she'd entertained stealing Emily Ruth's purse. Lila snapped open the bag. Inside was a sleek black tube of Chanel lipstick, a round gold compact, a set of car keys, and a miniature wallet, folded and snapped, with quite a bit of money in it from the bulge factor.

Just the Emily Ruth essentials nestled in the lime green silk lining. Lila pulled out the car keys. Bob looked at her with a smirk and took the purse away from her, leaving her with only the keys.

'*Chief Boniford?*'

Everyone turned at the sound of one booming male voice.

'Lucas, over here. Lila, get that dog, will you?'

Lila wasn't moving. Lucas Griffin was too amazing for her to leave the scene of *this* crime.

He walked like he owned himself and everything else. He looked like tennis in the afternoon, expensive cars and country clubs. His dark brown hair behaved just the way it should.

He had on Ray-Bans or some other sunglasses that only the rich could afford. When he removed them his blue, flashing eyes made Lila's throat catch with surprise. A small sound squeaked out of her. Those eyes did not behave at all.

Then there were his perfect rich-boy jeans and his

black polo shirt. The real Polo: Ralph Lauren. Great shirt. Great body.

‘What happened to Emily Ruth?’ he asked.

‘I’m sorry, son, she’s dead. It was very quick. She didn’t suffer.’

‘Too bad.’ He stopped in front of both of them and looked straight at Lila.

Bob ignored Lucas’s horrid comment. ‘Are her parents in town?’

‘No, they moved to Seattle permanently last year. Her lawyer can get in touch with them.’

‘Did she have a severe allergy you know of?’

‘Peanuts. She was a walking time bomb. Is that what got her?’

‘Looks like it. How did you know to come here?’

Lucas took a small pause. ‘I went looking for her. She missed an appointment we had. I saw her car in the parking lot.’

‘Oh, the dog. Her dog is in the car. And where would you like her vehicle taken?’

‘Geez, Bob.’ Lila gave them both a stern look.

‘I’ll take her car. Hell, I paid for it.’ Lucas held his hand out in Lila’s direction, indicating the keys.

Lila just about dropped the keys on the floor, gaping at Lucas for all the comments that had just come out of his mouth. *Darn, buddy, that was just cold.*

*Didn’t Mr Griffin know it wasn’t proper to speak ill of the dead?* Her mother’s etiquette-phraseology voice popped into Lila’s head. Rose Abbott would no doubt be giving Lucas Griffin the evil eye for his crass, cruel comment. Lila did it for her.

‘What is that *look* for?’ Emily Ruth made everyone’s life she touched a living hell.’ Lucas glared back.

‘I thought your legal issues with her were settled,’ Chief Bob interjected.

‘Hardly, she’ll probably find a way to screw me from the grave.’

Lila shut her mouth tight. Nothing good could be coming out of it anyway. Her best friend Bonnie told her she’d heard Lucas Griffin was a no-good cheating son-of-a-rich man that messed around with a string of townie girls here in Port Gamble while his wife, the former townie, formerly alive Emily Ruth, was skiing in Switzerland – or something like that. That was enough to put him on her permanent s-word list. Lila didn’t want *anything* to do with Lucas Griffin.

On second thought, the dog deserved better. ‘Your dead ex-wife’s dog is in the car. I am going to get it out of there.’ Lila gave him the iciest glare she could possibly muster and walked past him, car keys in hand.

Lucas shrugged and followed the nasty, but appealing, woman with Emily Ruth’s car keys dangling from her pink manicured fingertips.

He knew he should feel really, really bad about his ex-wife’s untimely demise, but the relief it was going to bring to his life was so immense it prevented him from any initial grief. Later, perhaps, he’d reflect on the woman he thought he’d married years ago. Or at least the woman she’d pretended to be. The fantasy

she'd fed him before he'd caught her in bed with his own brother.

Oh hell, there was nothing to reflect on except that a woman as smart and beautiful as Emily Ruth had wasted her talents in the wickedly evil pursuit of wealth. His family's wealth, to be exact. He regretted she'd misspent her God-given gifts on manipulation and lies, and that his family had been destroyed because of it.

If he had anything to reflect on it was the swift and deadly karmic retribution of her death. *Damn, that was fast.*

Here they were last week in court over his brother's will, the stupid local judge gives her a life estate in the beach house and she drops dead four days later. That was one short life estate. Of course, she'd been living there with Jason since . . . since it all went down with them, so she'd had a few years of fun.

Poor Jason, he never knew what hit him when it came to Emily Ruth. But he should have been stronger. He should have put his family first.

There wasn't anything that could be done about it now, no chance for reunion, reconciliation, or communication. Jason's motorcycle accident last winter took that chance away. And so did Emily Ruth.

He might as well take her car. Maybe he could sell it. He needed the money. He'd come back for his Jeep later.

As the automatic doors of the grocery store swooshed open and Lucas stepped outside, the heat

of August midday rolled over him like a wave of lust. Something he hadn't felt for a while. This was somewhat connected to the very nice behind of the woman walking in front of him. He liked a girl with some curves. He could see her pink lace bikini underwear through her white pants.

He had a twinge of guilt for thinking like that in the oh-so recent aftermath of his ex-wife's death.

But hell, *she* died, not him. He'd just been so pissed off at spending the summer in lawyer's offices trying to wrestle his family's estate out of the clutches of Emily Ruth instead of regaining some much-needed tranquility, he hadn't had time to think about much of anything else.

Even now his younger brother's stupidity in marrying her after Lucas divorced her, and not making her sign a prenup, grated on him – like gravel under the wheel of a motorcycle going too fast around a corner. If he didn't know better he'd think Emily Ruth killed Jason herself. She'd sure vanished for a while after the funeral, only to turn up like a bad penny this summer.

The pale yellow Jag sedan looked fairly undamaged from Cruella De Emily Ruth being at the wheel. The dog wasn't just yapping, it was howling. Its tiny red furry nose with its black button tip stuck through the crack in the window Emily had left for her. He could see a bowl of water on the floor. At least she was kind to animals, just not people.

The pissy but curvaceous girl that had commandeered the keys was cooing at the dog, but nothing was

working. Howls were punctuated by growls and snaps.

‘I’m going in for dog treats. Stay here. Don’t you dare hurt that dog.’ She ran back in. That left him with Schatzie, Emily Ruth’s crazy dog.

‘Schatzie, shhhhhh.’ Lucas kept his voice low. He reached over and tried to pet Schatzie’s little nose. He got snapped at instead. Emily probably trained the damned thing to bite him. He kept at it until Schatzie reduced herself to a whine-howl. He got a little closer and managed to stroke her under the chin. That seemed to calm her a tiny bit. He kept it up. Poor thing, we don’t get to pick our owners.

He thought about the store girl. She was familiar. Thirty-some summers in Port Gamble gives a guy plenty of time to get to know the locals.

He remembered who she was in an interesting flash of long-ago gossip and foolish attractions from his teenage years here. Lila Abbott.

Foolish attractions. Too bad he hadn’t had the sense to let his attraction to Emily Ruth slide on by. These local girls were nothing but trouble.

‘Move.’

‘Aren’t you Lila Abbott?’ Lucas asked.

Lila was slightly impressed with the fact Lucas had calmed the dog down just by his touch. She’d come through the door and seen him bent over, stroking it under the chin. Of course, if he stroked her under the chin like that she’d probably calm down, too. Or get excited. One of the two.

‘Yes, I’m Lila Abbott. What’s the dog’s name?’

‘Schatzie. She’s a girl. Emily Ruth named her after a character in a movie. You know, Lauren Bacall in *How to Marry a Millionaire*?’

Wow, interesting. Emily Ruth must have had a broader understanding of her own life than it seemed. She’d lived out that ‘how to marry a millionaire’ part. It wasn’t often a townie girl nabbed one of the summer boys. Emily had done a pretty good job of it. Lucas was a hottie.

Lila thought about her own situation and gritted her teeth. She hadn’t nabbed a summer boy; the summer boy had nabbed her, used her and thrown her away. Oh well, she was a big girl now. She was long over it. Really. And she’d gotten a terrific daughter out of it. A daughter she missed terribly today. She’d have to call Mallory later just to hear her voice all the way from that college she couldn’t have afforded if Mallory hadn’t gotten all those scholarships – Stanford University in California.

Well that, and the bribe money she’d been getting all these years from a rich family in Texas that didn’t want their name sullied with an illegitimate child. Hey, it worked for her. It’d kept rubber boots and books and bread on the table.

‘Here you go, yummy yum, here, Schatzie.’ Lila held her hand out flat so Schatzie couldn’t nip off a finger. The dog licked the treat off her palm. Oh, if only men were that easy.

She unlocked the car door and made sure she was armed with more treats. The smell of hot white leather

baked by the summer sun and long-haired dog mingled with the clean, outdoor scent of Lucas Griffin, who had wedged himself close in – apparently to prevent Schatzie from bolting into the parking lot.

He made her nervous. ‘Could you give me a little space here, Mr Griffin? The dog doesn’t seem to like you.’ Lila had Schatzie by her little jeweled collar and held her tight against her store vest, but the little thing was squirming like a weasel. Long red hair flew up in Lila’s nose. She flipped it away with her other hand. ‘What kind of a dog is this, anyhow?’

‘Pomeranian.’ Lucas put his hand behind his neck and smiled at Lila.

Oh, he had quite the smile. As if that would do him any good, the snake. ‘Oh, that’s right, Pomeranian. I should have known that,’ she stumbled through the reply.

‘You two have the same color hair,’ Lucas said.

Oddly, that was true.

‘And what do you intend to do with her?’ Lila asked, ignoring the hair comment, holding a growling Schatzie so they could both look at Lucas. She was a little sensitive about the whole red-haired thing anyway.

‘I don’t know, I was thinking of putting her in the dog shelter, or a kennel or something.’

‘Why can’t you just take her to your place?’

‘I’m staying with friends. I don’t think they’d appreciate my ex-wife’s dog.’

‘Don’t you people have any sense of charity? The poor thing just lost its owner.’

‘You people?’ Lucas stared at her.

‘Oh, you know perfectly well what I mean. Like it would kill you to have a little dog in whatever fifty-room, fifty-acre estate your friends own.’

Lucas took in a quick hissing breath through his teeth. ‘My, my, we are quick to judge.’

‘Oh, *please*.’ Lila wasn’t going to let him get away with that bull. I mean *really*. ‘Fine, *I’ll* take her while *you* find poor Schatzie a good home. And no, we won’t be putting her in the pound to be gassed. I think the dog deserves better, don’t you?’

‘I didn’t mean I’d let her be gassed. I just thought they might find her a new owner, but I can do that just as well, as you’ve pointed out. Thank you very much for your generous offer.’ Lucas looked into her eyes with a deep, edgy, too-bright stare that made her stomach flip over for some reason.

He reached into the open car and popped the glove box open. ‘She always keeps the dog’s leash in here.’ He handed the red leather leash to Lila.

Then he shut the passenger door, moved around the back of the car, and slipped himself into that Jag. He started the engine before she had time to thank him for the leash. Jags always purred. Lila remembered that from . . . another time. He was out of there in a sleek streak of expensive car.

‘Heartless snob!’ Lila yelled after him. Schatzie yapped in agreement. Lila looked down at her and the dog’s little black eyes gleamed as if she knew something. Schatzie was shaking like a leaf. Well, if Lila was going to be a dog-sitter . . . oh, good

grief, she'd just gotten herself in the middle of a commitment with Lucas Griffin.

Lucas. What an arrogant ass. He probably would have killed Emily Ruth himself if he could have, and her little dog, too. What the heck was his problem anyway? These summer boys, they had everything in the world and yet their discontent ate them up. Good looks, money – old money, even, girls at their beck and call. What else did they want?

Poor Emily Ruth had been a beautiful, intelligent woman. The short interaction between her and Emily had been fairly civil. They'd gone to the same high school; just hardly known each other. Emily Ruth, the elusive, disappearing and reappearing in town several times over the last few years.

Sure, Emily did have – or had, in her past tenseness – that slight condescending edge all the wealthy people had toward the 'help,' but not overly so. The woman did *speak* to Lila, and even moaned about her diet woes and confessed a weakness for cheese and crackers.

So why did a man like Lucas not find her enough of a wife to stay faithful to? Why did they end up divorced? These guys were never satisfied. No woman was ever good enough for them.

And she should know.

She hugged Schatzie, who growled. They marched back into the store and headed straight for a cart. She was going to need doggy supplies. She plopped Schatzie in the child seat and held on to her. Schatzie scrunched down and started whining.

Poor thing. A dog can mourn, too.

It was hard to believe they had to finish up a work day after the death of a customer. Only two people had come into the store since it happened, and they'd acted very nervous. This was not going to be good for business.

Lila couldn't get Emily Ruth off her mind.

Or Lucas Griffin for that matter.