

**Serenade to a Cuckoo**

**A P.L. McGinnis Mystery**

**Flo Fitzpatrick**

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## Dedication

To Chelle Martin, who introduced me to the delights of *paczki* at more than one Jersey bakery and always drove me safely through Hole in the Wall.

## Chapter 1

“Dead body!”

Sid Rota’s voice wafted down from his perch at the top of the boat. “There’s *supposed* to be a dead body! Jeez! Will you get on with it, P.L.? What the hell’s wrong with you?”

I shrieked. “Dammit, Sid! I’m telling you there’s a *real* live dead body in the water, and it’s not moving, and did I mention it’s naked? And oh, my God, I’m friggin’ sliding in!” Two seconds later I was sharing space with the bobbing corpse I’d just spotted in the bay. I fought to keep my head above the water and struck out with my best side stroke to avoid touching the bloated man who seemed determined to wrap his stiffly frozen hand around any portion of my anatomy it could reach. All this while also fighting the worst case of nausea in my life’s history. Me, that is. Not the floating cadaver.

A hand belonging to another dead body grabbed me by the wrist. Xander Casella, the actor playing Victim Number One in this episode of *Crime Unit New Jersey*, hoisted me to a patch of sand-decorated rocks.

“Thanks.” I stared up at his face before calmly asking, “Uh, Xander, are you supposed to have a starfish covering your right eye?”

He nodded. “Yep. It itches though.”

Sid, *CUNJ*'s director, interrupted further discussion on starfishies by shouting, “What in bloody blue blazes is going on with you two? Xan, dammit, you're dead! You should be in a fetal position on that tarp. Quit flirting with P.L. and die already.”

Xander waved and yelled, “Can't! She's right. There's someone caught right at the edge of the bay and no way he's alive. I can see it—uh—him, from here. Somebody needs to call nine-one-one 'cause we've got an honest-to-God crime scene in the middle of our crime scene.”

That's when the shakes hit me. October in New Jersey with a freaky autumn temperature somewhere in the nineties, and I was freezing. Xander immediately noticed and guided me away from the water, the rocks, and the body onto truly dry land. I sank into one of the chairs nestled against the camera crew's trailer and gulped down one of the steaming cups of coffee that Agnes Boito, our wonderful wardrobe mistress, always seemed to have handy in moments of crisis. Finding a naked corpse seemed apropos for “crisis.” Someone threw a blanket over my shoulders, which didn't stop the trembling but gave me a nice feeling of security. I gulped down another cup. It tasted great and warmed me all the way to my toes.

I zoned out. I had no idea what the sequence of events was from the time I'd spotted the body until some kid, dressed in a black suit and black tie, took the empty mug from my hand, then helped me stand. The blurriness of that sequence and difficulty getting to my feet might have been due to that same wonderful Agnes Boito inserting

large nips of what I now identified as good Irish whiskey to my cup of java. Make that to my *many* cups of java. The tall child disappeared. In his place stood another tall child.

No, wait—definitely not a teenager. Nor a man in black. Green t-shirt, jeans, dark work boots. The front of the tee displayed the words, “*It’s Not Easy Being Green—It’s Vital.*”

“Nice,” I mumbled. “Lover of froggies and the earth all at once. Ribbit the Planet!”

Green shirt smirked at me. “You’re somewhere to the left of totally sloshed, aren’t you?”

“Possibly,” I stated with dignity. “Hold it. Not posh, uh, *possibly*—probally. Miz, uh, Miz Bo-Bo . . .” I paused and took a breath. “Miz Boito has been forcing me to drink coffee ever since I went swimming alongside Mister Deadguy. Well, she *said* it was coffee, and it was, and I may be wrong but it was definilly good with a really nice flavor that definilly wasn’t coffee.”

Green shirt’s smirk turned into a full-out grin. He turned to the black suited, black tied child behind him, “Agent, would you get Miz—” He turned back to me. “What’s your name?”

“P.L.”

“P.L. what?”

“Uh—P.L. McGinnis. Like the stout ale brand, Guinness—only with a ‘mick’ in front.” I giggled.

He ignored me. I can’t say that I blamed him.

“Would you get Ms. McGinnis a stinger?”

“Ouch! That sounds painful for the stingee,” I chortled.

“And about ten glasses of water,” he added.

Black suit hadn’t moved. He stared at me, then at green shirt. He growled in a voice far too bass for a kid who must still be in high school, “Excuse me, but who the hell are you to tell me what to do, and where am I supposed to find ingredients for a stinger in the middle of a TV show?”

Green shirt sighed and nodded at me. “I’ll be back. I forget that the Feds don’t carry the kind of equipment really needed in these situations, especially their ridiculously young newer agents—but I do.” He turned to black suit. “Sorry. I have a tendency to jump about ten yards ahead of everyone else and assume they’re with me.”

The pair disappeared. I closed my eyes and pretended I was still awake. Until a snore woke me. The snore came from me. Two men were staring at me and one was not smiling. Well, really there were two not smiling, since green shirt wasn’t exactly smiling—he was laughing. He pulled up a chair, handed me an ugly-smelling concoction I assumed was meant to remove the sting from my muddled mind, then sat back with a distinct smirk on his face. Not a bad face. Kind of a crooked nose, like it had seen one two many footballs—or fists. Hair so dark it was nearly black, and shaggy in an “I cut it myself; don’t bug me about it” style. Eyes the green side of hazel contrasted with skin the color of the new lightly cream-laced, non-boozed-up, blissfully steaming cup of coffee that had been placed next to the nasty cup of whatever.

The stinger hit before I had a chance to take stock of the rest of him. Thankfully, I’d kicked my spike heels off as soon as I’d hit dry land over an hour ago, so I was able to

sprint toward the nearest trailer I was positive held a clean restroom. What passed during the next few moments is best left unsaid, unimagined, and unremembered.

Weak, but with equilibrium at least mildly restored, I slowly and carefully made my way back to my chair, then just as slowly and carefully deposited my bottom onto its padded comfort. I sighed. A quart of water promptly was thrust into my hands. I gulped down the entire bottle, then slowly started sipping the coffee while glaring at the man who'd done the "stinging."

"Thanks. Sort of. Dang, what was in that, Mister, uh . . .?"

"Tabasco, salsa, and ipecac. Mike Chizoba Shimada. From the *Manhattan Dispatch*."

"Oh." I paused. "Isn't that illegal?"

"What? Being a journalist? Having an African middle name?"

"Huh? No, no, I'm referring to the stinkin' stinger. Or rather, whatever the hell is *in* the stinkin' stinger. Your chosen profession is still sanctioned by the First Amendment, I think. And I'm a firm believer in not hassling folks about their names. But that goo you cooked up is one pretty poisonous potion to force down unsuspecting throats. And now you have me curious as to why a member of the fourth estate is running around with the ingredients necessary to cause the unpleasant, but admittedly necessary, reaction I just suffered."

"Ipecac comes in every reporter's take-along first aid kit—at least those of us who have visited various geographic locations around the world and partaken of some seriously nasty cuisine. The spicy stuff was supplied by your food service folks. So, you up for questions?"

“You won’t believe anything I say.”

“Will too.”

“Won’t.”

“Will.”

“Won’t.”

“Wi—ah hell, why won’t I believe anything you say?”

“Because I myself don’t believe what just happened and—oh, my God, I may be sick again! Damn, that’s nasty stuff.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“No I won’t.”

“Yes, you wi— don’t start that again. Trust me, you’re okay; just a bit woozy still. Deep breaths. Let’s start with something simple. Where do you hail from, Ms. McGinnis?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“I will.”

“You won’t.”

Patience oozed in his next words. “Truly. I am ready, willing, and able to take on faith whatever you tell me, although why a simple question of geography should be so difficult is starting to irk me.”

“Fine. I’m from West, Texas.”

“Near Waco, right?”

I stared at him. “I must still be drunk. No one ever knows that. They always ask, ‘where in West Texas? Lubbock? Midland? El Paso?’ I’m impressed.”

“Did a story down there four years ago. Had a marvelous time eating *kolaches* and dancing polkas at the West Fest over Labor Day.”

I sighed. “I’m homesick. What, if you don’t mind my asking, was the story?”

Before Mike had a chance to respond, a deep voice interrupted with, “Ms. McGinnis.”

Mike turned and greeted the newcomer. “Special Agent Elijah Rossi, as I live, breathe, and eye with disdain. So lovely to see you.”

“I can’t say the same. Do you mind? I’d like a few words with Ms. McGinnis.”

I perked up again. “That’s me. Like the stout ale with a ‘mick’ in front. Got that? Yee Howdy!”

Mike snorted. “Good luck. I think Ms. McGinnis is still half-crocked, thanks to one Agnes Boito, wardrobe lady and bartender.”

“Make it P.L. Please.”

Three pairs of eyes stared at me. Shimada, Special Agent Rossi, and the tall child whose name I hadn’t gotten and didn’t really care to.

“P.L.” Mike paused. “That can’t be your real name.”

I scowled. “It’s on my Equity and my SAG cards. Gotta problem?”

“I just can’t believe your parents christened you P.L. when you were a small babe.”

“I was never a small babe. Twenty-three and a half inches long when I was born. But you’re right. That was not my given name.”

“What was?”

I sighed. “Princess Louise. Can you imagine? In honor of two maiden aunts on various sides of the family. It’s a very Texas tradition. I love Texas, but was not thrilled with the moniker. When I was tormented in preschool by various kiddies calling me Cinderella, Rapunzel, and Sleeping Beauty, I changed it to P.L. Jeez. Are y’all happy now?”

“Ecstatic.” Mike grinned. “It’s still a weird name.”

“So sayeth Chizoba standing next to Elijah.”

“No comment.”

“Excuse me,” Agent Rossi scowled at the two of us. “If you’re quite finished with the name game, I have some serious questions to ask Ms. McGi— uh, P.L.”

Mike bowed and backed away about a foot. “Fine.”

“Dammit! Move, Shimada! As in *now*. I can’t stop you from questioning Ms. McGinnis, but you’re not doing it before or during my interrogation. I don’t know how the hell you got in the middle of this crime scene anyway. Doesn’t matter. Go away. Be a good snoop and start noting all the pretty details of the bay and the sun and what everyone is wearing.”

I groaned. “Don’t mention my soggy clothes in your report, though. Gad, I feel disgusting.”

“Ms. McGinnis, please. We need to talk to you.”

“Oh, yeah. Right. Sure. I’m still disgusting though.”

Mike waved at me. “Bye, Princess Louise. I’ll check with you later to see how you fared under Rossi’s interrogation. Eli? I’m off. Don’t pull a gun until I’m out of range.”

Special Agent Rossi ignored him and turned back to me. I quit staring at Mike's nicely shaped rear end trotting away from me and began staring at the federal agent. Another nice face. This one had the strong jaw line and regular features one has come to expect from the Feds—if one watches TV, that is (which I do, since it's the industry that pays my rent and I adore all crime shows). Grey eyes were shaded by the kind of lashes only three-year-old boys and truly macho males over thirty can get away with. Blond hair, short, but not buzzed, fell over a nicely shaped head. A ridiculously full mouth was uttering something at me. I pulled my focus back from thoughts of lust and tried to listen to his question.

“Can you remember the sequence of events today that led to the discovery of the body?”

I nodded vigorously, then winced as my head tried to leave my neck. “Ah, hell, yeah. I'm almost sober thanks to that killer stinger. I feel like crap, but I'm clear-headed and rarin' to share the details of this lovely day.”

“Go ahead.”

I squinted at him. “Do you have a tape recorder or are you jotting notes only?”

“I have remarkable shorthand skills. Go ahead, please.”

“Uh, where do I start?”

“Be like Alice and try the beginning.”

“Gad—you are annoying, aren't you? Two annoying men in one day.”

Lifted brow. “Only two?”

I shook my head. “Make that *many* annoying men, starting with a dead naked body and a pissed-off director, but so far you and Mr. Shimada get prizes for the worst. Where was I?”

“Beginning at the beginning.”

“Okey-dokey. I assume you don’t care to know that I got up at five a.m. and snarfed down a fruit and flax power shake and showered and hauled my butt to the location site by means of New Jersey Transit, since they didn’t send the limo for me today, since Jared and Noelle aren’t in this scene, and ate two raisin bagels from the food cart, which were really awesome and . . .”

“What happened at the start of the shoot, Ms. McGinnis?” Elijah asked patiently.

“Sid gave me the direction to crawl down the rocks and peer into a spot at the edge of the bay, and then I was supposed to say, ‘Body’s been moved. Where is it?’ and then look over to that flat rock and see Xan and say my next line which, so help me, Saint Anthony Patron of lost things, although I’m not sure that includes scripts, but anyway, I can’t remember it right now. The line. It was a pretty good one. I think.”

“Xan?”

I nodded. “Xander Casella. Did you talk to him? He was playing the first victim of the helicopter pilot who’d dumped his body from that helicopter onto the rocks below, and he looked amazingly good for having been tossed from the air, and he had a starfish on his face. But Xander always looks amazingly good. It’s those Rudolph Valentino features, I suppose.”

Elijah Rossi blinked. “Back up. Did Xander start the scene before you did?”

“In a way. I mean he’d taken his mark, where he was blocked, you know, and was lying there before I came sliding down the rocks in a skirt shorter than your tie and my flippin’ spiked heels, which I still think is not only a health hazard for the wearee—me—but looks absurd for a female-forensics-crime-unit-detective-type person. Can’t seem to convince the powers that be of that though.”

“Ms. McGin— P.L. Where is Xander now?”

“I have no idea. He said the starfish itched, so he was probably off to makeup to remove it, but that was—oh crapezoid—how long ago was it?”

“It’s nine-thirty now. You started drinking spiked coffee around eight, just after you found the body—at least that’s what I was told.”

“Oh. Dang. Missus B. must have put one helluva lotta Irish whiskey in that sucker. I don’t usually get schnockered so fast. Of course, I was kind of in shock.”

“Xander.”

“Where?”

“That’s what I’m asking.”

Before I had the chance to tell him again that I didn’t know, the man himself popped up.

“P.L.”

“Xan! You okay?”

“That’s exactly my question to you. You’re the one who’s been through hell today.”

“Well, you had a scratchy starfish.”

“That’s an understatement. I’m going to drown my face in cortisone for the next month.”

“Does that work?”

“Stop!”

We both turned and stared at Elijah, who’d uttered the command.

“Xander Casella?”

Xander nodded.

“Do you mind telling me where you’ve been for the last hour or so?”

Xander spat, “Our makeshift infirmary, if you must know.”

“Oh?”

He growled, “Yes. I swear I’m killing the makeup crew, if any of the idiots are left on set after eating every damned thing on the service table.”

“What’d they do this time?” I asked with honest interest.

Xander blushed “Ah, hell. This is embarrassing. Not only did that crappy starfish itch, but the costume had a few other spots that itched as well and were spreading. I broke out in a major rash and thought it would be nice to have that taken care of before I lost my ability to father children.” He glared at Special Agent Rossi. “Is that sufficient enough explanation, Mr. Agent?”

“It’s fine, and it’s Agent Rossi. Can you tell me what you saw this morning?”

Xan hadn’t been drinking, so Xan was faster on the ball than I. “I didn’t see anything until P.L. screamed about the body in the water. But I’m pretty focused when I work, and I generally block out anything outside my immediate area. It’s hard to play dead. Anyway, I was lying on the rock with the stinkin’ starfish on my face, and I heard

P.L. and naturally I ran to the edge of the water, and I saw her swimming with the corpse and I hauled her out.”

Elijah nodded. “Fine. I may need to talk to you again, but for now, that’s it.”

“I’m staying.”

“You don’t have to.”

Xander’s eyes glinted. “I’m staying while you talk to P.L. I trust you have no problem with that?”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He turned back to me. “So, what happened when you were balancing on those rocks at the edge of the bay?”

I rolled my eyes. “What happened? What the fee-uck *happened*? Shee-ii-it! Oops. ’scuse me, I guess one shouldn’t curse in front of the Feds—anyway what happened was—like I told you before— I was about to say my first line when I spotted a body floating at the edge of that bay. A real live dead body. Not Xan here, who wasn’t supposed to be found in the bay anyway, but up on the flat rock. And next thing you know, I’m sliding in my four-inch spike bloody heels right down into the bay, and why the hell I have to wear them to play a crime scene investigator is beyond me. Wait. I said that before, didn’t I?” I stopped. I shivered. “My God. There really *was* a dead person. I’ve never seen a dead person.” My voice grew progressively louder and squeakier as waves of hysteria welled within me.

“Okay. Calm down, Ms. McGin— P.L. Did you touch the body?”

“Fu—huh-hudge, no! Are you effin’ nuts, you stupid bastard?” I winced. “Sorry. I’m a little upset here. Normally, my language and my manners are much better.”

“Not a problem. I’ve heard far worse. You’re actually quite tame.”

“Oh?” I squinted at him, wondering if he was being sarcastic, kind, or truthful.

“Yes. So you didn’t touch the body. Great. But did you get a good look at the body?”

“Just his back. Thank God he was floating on his stomach. I think a naked dead front would have sent me into a catatonic state for the next ten years.

“Can you describe anything out of the ordinary?”

I shuddered. “Other than the fact he was *dead*? Yikes, what a question!”

“Sorry. I mean, did you see anything on him or around him?”

“What? That’s an odd thing to ask, don’tcha think?” I closed my eyes and replayed the morning’s horror. “Wait a second. I don’t know how you knew, but yeah. This *is* kind of out of the ordinary, I guess.”

Special Agent Rossi leaned forward. “Please. Go ahead.”

“Well, it might or might not be ordinary, depending on how clean this bay normally is.”

“Clean,” was his response.

“Okay. Um, this sounds stupid.”

“I don’t care—just say it,” Elijah’s tone hardened.

“Hey! Be nice. P.L. went through hell this morning, and she doesn’t need crap from the FBI.” Xander scowled at the agent, who ignored him.

“P.L.—what was it?”

I kept my eyes closed, focusing on what I thought I’d seen and didn’t realize I wasn’t speaking in complete sentences or phrases. “Um. Plumber. Friend.”

“Another body! Oh my God!” came from Xander.

“No, no! Not a person. Sorry. *Plumber’s friend*—as in two words. A toilet plunger. Sorry. For an actress with normally great articulation, I’m just slurry as soup this mornin’.”

Rossi stared at me. “You sure?”

“Hell, yeah. I was upset, but I still have great observation skills thanks to Acting *one-o-one* and I know damn well what I saw. Why?”

“Because when we recovered the body, there was nothing floating anywhere within thirty yards of him. That plunger is gone.”