

Long Pig

Carolyn McSparren

“Harriet, I’m going to kill him,” Nate Huffman said.

“You always say that,” I replied. “This morning I may help you.”

And a nasty morning it was, too. Nate and I had been forced to park his van three blocks away on top of the river bluff and slog our way down the hill to Tom Lee Park at six in the morning.

If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome, Nate and I obviously belonged in The Home. It always rains on Barbecue Contest weekend. In the five years I’ve been part of the Hitting the Sauce Whole Hog team, I’ve endured thunder and lightning, floods, and tornado warnings. Two years ago we watched a tornado stride across the Mississippi River from West Memphis to ravage the bluff not fifty yards from where we hunkered down under the big tent that sheltered our barbecue cooker, while we prayed it wouldn’t blow away.

We were scared spitless, but we didn’t consider abandoning our cooker and the hog that sputtered inside. Those that did abandon their cookers were apostates to the religion of barbecue, Memphis style. One team didn’t even enter the next year. Too ashamed, I guess.

So when Nate and I discovered that Bobby Joe McLarty had disappeared, we were horrified. Proper barbecue should be basted—generally using a soft natural bristle paintbrush or a clean string hand mop—at least once an hour. That is in addition to pumping said hog meat full of sauce using horse syringes. Rule one is never abandon the barbecue, the sauce or the tent.

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Marauders lurk in every quarter ready to steal everything, up to and including the porker.

“We shouldn’t have left him here alone all night,” Nate said. He slammed his thermos of coffee down on the folding table where we laid out bottles of sauce and other supplies.

I did a quick count of the bottles. Some weighted down stacks of napkins and paper plates. The count matched what should be there.

Nothing missing that I can see,” I said. Even the plaques commemorating our two previous whole hog wins and the framed health certificate were all still hanging from the clothesline strung across behind the cooker. Other teams have been known to steal the plaques as a joke, and the health certificates to cause problems when time came to judge the entries.

“He’s probably gone to the bathroom. Besides, did you want to spend the night down here on the river in the rain?”

Nate grumbled. Even if he’d been willing to babysit the porker, his wife, Maureen, would have had a conniption. He had enough trouble getting free of her long enough to pull the morning shift. If she’d known his partner was female, she’d have thrown a flat-out hissy fit, even though I’m long past nubile and even longer past hankering after good ole boys like Nate.

“At least the charcoal’s still lit,” I said. I stripped off my sopping poncho and hung it on one of the tent poles.

Nate sniffed. “I swear the fool’s let the coals get too hot. Boss Hog smells like his skin’s charring.” He grabbed the left hand of a pair of heavy asbestos gloves off a hook at the front of the cooker—the serious kind of mitts that reach almost to the elbows and can be safely dipped in molten lava. He carefully unhooked the clamp that fastened the vaulted lid of the cooker and lifted the lid.

And screamed. And dropped the lid.

“Nate! Did you burn yourself? Here, let me see...”

He sat down in the mud. What was coming out of his mouth sounded more like a turkey gobbler than a human being. Oh, Lord, the man was having a heart attack right in front of my eyes!

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“Nate, honey, can you stand up?” I reached down to try to pull him up so I could at least get him into one of our captain’s chairs, but he slapped my hand away and pointed at the cooker.

“Don’t look...” he wheezed out. “Oh, my God.”

Then he passed out in the mud with his head resting against one of the metal struts that held the cooker at waist level. I yanked my poncho off the pole, wadded it up and stuck it under his head as his eyes fluttered open. “Hang in there, Nate. I’m getting help right now.”

I pulled my cell phone out of the pocket of my soggy jeans to dial nine-one-one, but he grabbed my wrist.

“Don’t look-cooker.” He flapped one of his gloves at me.

“Just be calm, Nate. Let me call...”

He threw his head from side to side. “Don’t look!”

Well, of course I was going to look. If Boss Hogg’s piggy skin was charring, I had to cool him down fast. So I hauled myself to my feet, put on the right hand glove and raised the lid.

For a second all I saw was Boss Hog. That was what we called our whole hog entry every year. This one was number six. He looked bigger than usual with longer legs, but he wasn’t charred. His skin had been roasted a nice, even brown.

Even his toes.

Winslow women never faint, so I couldn’t figure out why I was lying in the mud and looking up at the underside of the tent roof. A moment later Nate’s pudgy face swam into view above me, then he began slapping my cheeks and chafing my hands.

“I’ve called nine-one-one,” he said, and looked over his shoulder at the cooker. “What the hell do we do now? I mean, we can’t just let him go on...”

“Roasting?” I said. “What else can we do? There’s no way to dump the coals safely.”

“But what if he’s still alive?”

Winslow women never toss their cookies, either. I fought to keep from upchucking my Egg McMuffin right there in the mud. It hadn’t occurred to me that the thing in the cooker might still be alive.

I grabbed Nate’s hand and let him pull my not inconsiderable weight upright. “We have to look,” I said. “Open it.”

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“No way. I’m not looking again. I told you not to.”

We were each wearing one of the asbestos gloves, and for a moment I thought we might have to toss a coin, but with a nod of agreement, we each put our gloved hand on the lid and lifted.

Takes a large cooker to handle a whole hog and a tight lid to keep the hickory smoke inside. Ours had been tight enough to keep the odor inside as well, and we hadn’t opened it for more than a second before, but now the stench was unbelievable.

Not to put too fine a point on it, Boss Hog the Sixth had been professionally prepped. No bristles on his skin and no innards. This had not.

If you’ve ever smelled chitterlings...forget I said that. Bobby Joe—who else could it be—did not have the benefit of a good butcher.

“What should we do?” Nate whispered. He pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket with his ungloved hand and pressed it over his nose and mouth. “I’m afraid if we try to move him, he’ll—disjoint.”

I don’t carry handkerchiefs, so I yanked the tail of my Rhodes College sweatshirt up over the lower part of my face. “Leave the lid down and let’s get out of here to wait for the ambulance.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We dropped the front tent flap to confine some of the smell. I did not care if we drowned, so long as we didn’t have to go back. Nate took my hand, and we waited like Hansel and Gretel after they shoved the wicked witch into the oven.

I cannot believe I said that either. Anyway, we probably looked more like Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Around us several other barbecue teams were starting to show up. They glanced at us curiously, and one or two may have said good morning.

I must have heard the sirens without registering the noise, because suddenly we were surrounded by extremely large people. I identified firemen, EMTs, and at least a dozen cops.

I finally understand post-traumatic stress syndrome. I could not move. Then one of the big-foot sized EMTs started to strap a

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blood-pressure cuff on me. I slapped his hand away. “Not me!” I said. “Look in the cooker.”

“Now, ma’am, your friend’s fine. You take it easy and let us help you. We’ll have you out of here in a jiffy. Travis, hand me one of those canvas chairs in there.”

They picked on me because I have gray hair and wrinkles, while Nate is the one with the triple bypass.

“Holy shit!” came from inside the tent.

“Told ya,” I said.

The other EMT—Travis, I assumed—flung the tent flap aside, fell to his knees and threw up behind the tent peg.

“What?” the other EMT asked.

All his buddy could do was point behind him and retch. When my guy abandoned me and started inside, Travis said in a strangled voice, “Don’t.”

Of course he went inside and looked. He didn’t fall to his knees and retch beside his buddy, but his face was the pearly gray of a Gulf Coast mussel.

They wanted to ride Nate and me to the manager’s tent on gurneys, but we’d already gathered a small crowd of early cooks, and had no intention of looking any stupider. Surrounded by a phalanx of Memphis cops, we tromped through the mud on our own. I looked back once to see a young policeman unrolling yellow crime scene tape around our tent.

I realize now that I was running on autopilot and shock, but at the time I worried about my inability to feel anything. I could think, all right, but not feel. How would they get Bobby Joe out of the cooker? Each team keeps industrial size fire extinguishers in our tents in case of fire, but if the cops shot Bobby Joe with flame retardant, wouldn’t they mess up the crime scene and destroy forensic evidence?

Because crime scene it was. Nobody, least of all Bobby Joe, would choose to die that way. As I recall, one of the early Christian martyrs was grilled. He told his torturers to turn him over because he was done on that side. Bobby Joe had not an ounce of martyrdom in his entire body. He did, however, probably have at least a gallon of Stella Artois and a liter of Wild Turkey. What effect would that have on his flammability? I

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closed my eyes and tried to blot out my one look at him. I couldn't, unfortunately, get the odor out of my nose.

After barbecue weekend, any member of any team who's worked in the tents tosses clothes in the washing machine and scrubs body and hair at least twice the minute he gets home. We still smell like vinegar and brown sugar for days. I always buy a cheap pair of sneakers the week of the contest and toss them in the trash by my back door afterwards.

Nate was led to a neighboring tent that held some of the sound equipment and I to the manager's tent. Once out of the rain I began to shake. Someone stuck a mug of hot coffee in my hands. I hate coffee, but that morning it smelled like chocolate covered strawberries from Dinstuhls. It also peeled the skin off the roof of my mouth.

"Ow! Water!" I howled. A moment later a hand the size of a Boston butt held a paper cup under my nose. I gulped it down. "Thanks."

"Can you tell us what happened, ma'am?" The owner of the hand pulled one of the stacking chairs up in front of me, switched it around and sat on it back to front with his arms folded across the back. He had to be lifter—probably of weights the size of the Fed Ex Forum. He had a shaven head, but like many gigantic men, he had a kind face and a gentle eye.

The better to entice me to spill my guts, no doubt. Why did I keep thinking things like that?

"Ma'am, I'm Detective Haroldson, homicide. I'm sorry for your loss." The universal cop mantra. "I know this is difficult for you. Do you know who the—uh...?"

I nodded, blew on my coffee and essayed another sip. Warm, but not boiling. "His name is Bobby Joe McClarty, a member of our team. He was supposed to be babysitting Boss Hog during the night." My eyes widened. "Where is Boss Hog?"

"If you mean the pig, ma'am, we located him—it—behind the long table with the checkered cloth over it." He tilted his head as though he were wondering whether I intended to replace Bobby Joe with Boss Hog. "Thing is, ma'am—um—it was dressed in the decedent's clothes." I choked on the coffee.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

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I may have registered that Bobby Joe was naked as a jaybird, but it hadn't hit me consciously until that minute.

"Not a bad fit. He was a little guy, am I right? It's kind of hard to tell. I guess he's shrunk somewhat with the fat and all."

I slapped my hand over my mouth. Detective Haroldson moved back fast. I guess when you deal with witnesses and suspects, you learn to avoid projectile vomit.

I, however, didn't vomit. I giggled. In seconds I had morphed into full blown hysterical laughter, tears streaming down my cheeks, snorts, nose running—the whole shebang. I flapped my hands. "I'm sorry," I choked. "It's just Boss Hog with all four of his little trotters stuffed into clothes..." I sobered as fast as I'd come unglued. Detective Haroldson handed me a tissue from an open box on the manager's counter. I blew my nose and wiped my eyes. "Whoever did this is completely, totally, and absolutely nuts."

"Yes, ma'am. When did you last see Mr. McClarty?"

"We all left together about nine last night. Bobby Joe stayed.

He insisted he could handle Boss Hog by himself."

"Is that standard? One person?"

I shrugged. "Teams vary. Basting one hog is no big deal. And Bobby Joe made such a stink, we finally left him." Not so bad a stink as he was making now. "Drunk as a skunk and mean as a snake."

"Was that usual?"

"Pretty much." I looked at the size of Detective Haroldson. "This may be hard for a man your size to understand, but he had what my daddy used to call 'small man syndrome,' as if he had to keep proving his equipment was not proportional to his stature."

"By throwing his weight around?"

"Drinking like a fish, cussing like a sailor, and laying every female he could maneuver into bed." I considered. "He says—sorry, said—that when she's flat on her back, the length of a man's body is not the length that matters." I glanced up at him. "And no, I never had occasion to find out first hand. I'm twenty years too old and a hundred IQ points too smart."

"Who might have hated him enough to do this?"

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“Lordy, who would hate anybody enough to do this? Besides, I don’t know how he died. If you ever expect me to get a decent night’s sleep again, please, please tell me he wasn’t alive when they…”

“Probably not. The ME should know after the autopsy. Indications of blunt force trauma, although it’s hard to tell before the autopsy. He doesn’t seem to have been restrained. We’ll know more when we can get all the coals cool enough to dump. I’m afraid we’re going to have to take your cooker. It’s evidence. You’ll get it back after we’re finished.”

“Oh, no, we won’t! Don’t you dare think of returning that thing to us.”

“Your team may not agree with you, ma’am. That cooker’s worth thousands.”

“I do not give a flying hoot if they agree with me. Blow it up, sink it in the Mississippi. Just don’t try to foist it back on us.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Humoring the little lady. “So who hated him?”

I waved a hand. “The women he seduced and dumped. Husbands and lovers of said women. Other teams that lost to him and had to put up with his strutting around like a banty rooster. Business associates he screwed. Probably his wife, although I never saw any evidence she’d reached her limit. She floats around with a vacant smile and an iced tea glass of bourbon most of the time.”

“Why’d y’all put up with him?”

“The man made the barbecue sauce of the Gods. Period. We’ve won the whole hog contest the last two years using Bobby Joe’s secret recipe.”

“Secret?”

“Detective, are you from Memphis?”

I think he was a little startled at the question, but he said, “Born and raised in Charlotte, but I been with the MPD ten years.”

“You North Carolinians think barbecue sauce is made from vinegar and pepper. That’s not barbecue, that’s hasenpfeffer. Memphis barbecue sauce—and there are generally two types, plus the dry rub—is a witch’s brew passed down through the

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generations, or created or stolen or all of the above. The basting sauce can be a lot like your vinegar sauce. The rub is mostly for ribs. Then comes the finishing sauce. Fortunes are made or lost, restaurants thrive or die on that sauce. People fight over grandma's secret sauce in divorces or estates. It is a very big deal. Bobby Joe gave every member of the team a bottle of his sauce for Christmas every year. For that alone we put up with him. Oh, God, what'll we do next Christmas?"

"You mean it'll die with him?"

"Unless he left a copy of it with his wife or his lawyer. He always said he kept it in his head. Nate—that's Nate Huffman who was with me when we found him—kept begging Bobby Joe to give him a copy or put one in his lockbox, but I don't know whether he ever did."

"We did find some burnt paper under the deceased, but looked too thick to be a recipe."

"Can you reconstruct it?"

He shrugged. "Barely possible for a couple of pieces, but not in a hurry. From a couple of bits we could read, looks like some kind of contract."

"Maybe Bobby Joe reneged on some deal and the buyer got mad and bopped him."

"Could he have sold his sauce?"

I snorted. "He always said there wasn't enough money in the world to buy his recipe."

Haroldson pulled out a yellow pad and a pen. "Can you give me the names of the other members of the team?"

"Detective, I hate to get innocent people in trouble..."

"If they're innocent, they won't be in trouble, but we have to rule them out. He was alive when y'all left and the contest gates closed. After that, everybody had to show an exhibitors' pass at the front gate to get back in."

Or was already inside because they were working one of the contest tents. I supposed it was a good thing to limit the suspects, but not when some of them were my friends. I ran my fingers through my damp hair, probably making it stand straight up. "Nate Huffman you know. His wife, Maureen, works with us when she can take the time off from volunteering at the

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Women's Exchange. Nate's a named partner at Mays, Chandler and Huffman. He's their corporate honcho. Then there's Gary Daniel. I suppose you'd call him an entrepreneur. Makes tons of money, but I have no idea how. If you want to know exactly what Bobby Joe did for a living, he'd be the one to help you. I can't even balance my checkbook. I'm the only middle-aged single woman. I took my husband's spot after he died four years ago. Christine Bigelow is a proctologist..." Detective Haroldson winced. "Then we have various boyfriends, mistresses, and general hangers on that change every year. Here. Take my cell phone. They're all on speed dial under BBQ, but they should be dribbling in soon. Have you tried to notify them?"

He didn't answer me, but took the phone. "Thanks. I'll give it back to you. How about those women you say he screwed? Any specifics?"

"Of course."

"For instance, where were you last night?"

He said the words so calmly. I know from crime shows I should immediately ask for a lawyer, but I hadn't killed the man. If I'd been hooked up to a lie detector, my response would have been off the scale, but that's the way I react to fear. "Nate dropped me home before ten. He picked me up at five-thirty this morning. In between I was completely alone except for three cats and two dogs and trying to catch up on my sleep. I'm a widow, detective."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now I think I should shut up. Can I go home? Somebody will have to drive me."

"Yes, ma'am. We'll need to speak to you again."

"I know that. I've reached my limit now."

"Nooooo!" The shriek practically rent the tent. A moment later the flap flew back and AnnMarie McClarty fell into my arms and nearly knocked us both onto our butts in the mud. "Oh, God, he's dead! I can't stand it!" She began to keel and grabbed me around the neck. "Those bastards cooked him!" Then she cranked up the real hysterics.

"Mrs. Winslow, Officer James will take you home now."

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“No!” AnnMarie sobbed and grabbed my hand. For a little bitty thing, the woman was strong. “You have to stay with me.” She raised a tearstained face with eyes so big she looked like one of those sad urchin paintings from the 60’s that I loathe.

I peered up at Detective Haroldson, who shrugged. So I sat.

To hear her tell it, Bobby Joe was one hundred per cent faithful, the perfect husband and father, a great provider who never fussed about the bills even when she bought a new pair of Jimmy Choo boots that cost more than a thousand dollars. A thousand dollars? Good Lord.

“We were going to be rich, I mean rich, rich,” she said. “He showed me this great house in Memphis Magazine with a pool and everything. We were going to go look at it next week.” She sobbed. “Monday, right after the contest. Oh, God, now we’ll never be rich.” She dropped her face into her hands and began to sob, but it sounded more as if she was grieving the mansion and the pool more than Bobby Joe.

“Bobby Joe always made a good living, honey,” I said. I knelt in the mud and took her hands.

“No, you don’t understand. This was different. He was so happy. We were going to have everything we ever wanted.”

“How?” I glanced up at Detective Haroldson. He gave me a slight nod, so I kept on.

“He wouldn’t tell me, wanted it to be a surprise on Monday. But I know it had something to do with the contest. He was meeting somebody important. Somebody killed him to keep us poor.”

“Ma’am,” Detective Haroldson asked her, “I know we haven’t had time to notify you officially. How come you came down here?”

She sniffed, ran her fingers along her cheeks to wipe off the tears without smearing her layers of mascara and said, “I brought the team a bunch of Krispy Kreme Donuts for breakfast. Chocolate with sprinkles, Bobby Joe loves—oh—loved those.” The tears began to leak again. She turned to me. “Harriet, I dropped the whole box straight into the mud when one of those policemen told me—told me...”

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“It’s all right, sweetie,” I said. The cops probably regretted losing those doughnuts, but I didn’t. She refused to let go of my hand, which gave me an excuse to stay.

“Ma’am, can you think of any enemies your husband had?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Any man as smart a money-manager as Bobby Joe makes enemies.”

Detective Haroldson and I locked eyes. There are enemies and enemies. Whoever killed Bobby Joe was Olympic caliber.

“Can you give me an example?” he asked.

“Oh, I know who killed him all right. That bitch with the Pigatha Pitchits.”

“Ma’am?”

“Another team,” I told him. “They do ribs.”

“Huh. Miss Posey Parkwell’s been trying to do Bobby Joe, but he told her a couple of days ago he didn’t want any part of her. Not when he had me.”

I rolled my eyes and mouthed over her head at the detective, “Girlfriend.”

“I see. Can you think of anyone else?”

“Everybody loved Bobby Joe.”

This was a direct contradiction of what she’d said earlier.

She stood and took a deep breath. “I got to go tell my children that their sweet daddy is never coming home.”

“If you could...”

“You want to speak to me, you make an appointment through my lawyer. I got a funeral to plan.” And off she stalked in her pink polka dotted rain boots and her pink windbreaker. He didn’t try to stop her. I don’t guess that he could once she’d asked for a lawyer. All I know about that stuff came from Law and Order reruns.

“You know this Posey person?” Detective Haroldson asked me.

“If he did dump her, I hadn’t heard. But everybody knew they’d been having an affair since they got together at last year’s festival. I don’t know if he was screwing anybody else on the side. I guess AnnMarie found out about her and pitched a fit.”

“Think she could have been mad enough to do this?” He nodded toward AnnMarie’s retreating pink back.

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“Shoot him or bonk him over the head with last year’s whole hog trophy, maybe. But she’s a little bitty thing. How could she get him in that cooker and why on earth would she? Not to mention dressing Boss Hog up. That’s a sick somebody.”

“Or a really angry one.”

Outside the tent, I heard the wheels of the gurney slurp in the mud as they rolled Bobby Joe’s body to the ambulance. A moment later they rolled the cooker up the hill after him. I didn’t see the pig. I checked my watch. We’d arrived less than an hour earlier. Seemed like a lifetime, but the other teams were only now cranking up, and the gates wouldn’t be open for another two hours. Would they actually open at all?

Apparently, they would, after the manager called both city and county mayors to protest keeping the contest gates closed. Haroldson didn’t sound pleased, but there wasn’t much he could do.

“Now that y’all have the cooker,” I said, “Can I go clean up the mess in the tent? What have you done with Boss Hog?”

“Took him to the morgue as evidence,” Haroldson said. “The other member of your team left.”

“Nate just left me?”

“His wife called and he ran. He said he called the others. He said to tell you they’d be back tomorrow to clean up, but they didn’t want to run into reporters today.”

As I tramped back to the tent I fumed. As the only postmenopausal single woman, I was too often relegated to the ‘get coffee’ role. Normally I didn’t mind, but today it would have been nice if they’d checked on my welfare. I might be on my way to jail. I reached for my cell phone to call Nate and realized Detective Haroldson still had it. I’d pick it up after I straightened up the tent and packed our stuff—what the police hadn’t taken with them already.

Took me thirty minutes of answering questions from other teams along the way before I ducked under the crime scene tape and into our tent. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still gray and the ground soggy.

The CSIs had made a mess, but not a terrible one. Avoiding looking at the area where Boss Hog must have lain, I set the

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folding table on its feet, picked the red and white checked tablecloth out of the mud, shook it and folded it. I could hose it off at home. Without the cooker and its contents in the way, I could reach the back wall of the tent to take down the picture frames and wind up the clothesline they hung on.

“Please, Lord, tell me they didn’t roast him alive.”

I whirled at the sound of the voice. Posey Parkwell stood in the doorway holding a large platter of cooked ribs. She slipped in and set the ribs on the table. Water ran down her cheeks, but whether rain or tears I couldn’t tell.

“Posey, the last thing we want is ribs,” I said.

“I know, but I had to have an excuse to come over here. It’s on the way to the judge’s tent.”

“Please take them with you.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “How can you think of ribs at a time like this?”

“My point exactly. Have you spoken to Detective Haroldson? I know he wants to talk to you.”

“Me?” She took a step backwards and put her hands up in front of her. “I loved Bobby Joe.”

“You must have been furious when he dumped you,” I said.

“Who told you he dumped me? That dumb bunny wife of his? She’s the one he was planning to dump. We were going to get married and move to the Caribbean and live like kings.”

“After alimony?”

“No alimony in the Cayman’s. No income tax either. Plus the cash. He was getting a lot of cash.”

“Where was he getting cash?”

She shook like a happy poodle. “He sold the sauce. That’s how much he loved me. He was getting millions.”

“Who to?”

She shook her head. “He showed me a signed letter of intent and a contract, but wouldn’t tell me who the buyer was. Said it was bad luck.” She glanced around. “The police must have found the papers. He had them with him last night when I—uh—visited.”

“What time?”

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“Around eleven. He shoed me out so he could meet his buyer.”

“Posey, you have to tell the police.”

Took some persuading, but she finally left to find Detective Haroldson. When I turned around to go back to work, I saw that she had forgotten the platter or ribs. I wanted to toss them in the trash, but she'd come back to get them and fuss if I dumped them, so I left them and continued packing.

Who would Bobby Joe have sold the sauce to? I went over the list of previous bidders in my head. The only person in our team with that kind of money and desire was Gary Gabriel. He'd been upping the ante every year. Wanted to bottle and sell the sauce in grocery stores and start a chain of barbecue restaurants. Bobby Joe laughed at him. Gary loathed him, especially after Mrs. Gary—Linette—had a fling with him and he divorced her. Gary had an exhibitors' pass. He could get into the barbecue grounds after they closed. Nobody took names. He now lived alone, so he probably had no more alibi than I did.

If the police could read the signatures on that contract, they might identify Bobby Joe's killer. Thick paper rarely burns completely, but if Bobby Joe were on top of it, it probably disintegrated. Maybe the killer tossed the papers in the cooker, then decided to toss Bobby Joe in for good measure. Gary was a big man. He could handle a man Bobby Joe's size. Neither Posey nor AnnMarie could. Not alone. Surely they hadn't done it together.

I finished wrapping our plaques and reached for this year's health certificate, but the frame was greasy. It slipped out of my hands and fell into the mud. The frame was okay, but the glass cracked. Drat!

I picked up the health certificate carefully to avoid getting it muddy and realized there was a thin envelope slipped behind it. It hadn't been there when I'd hung the certificate on Thursday.

Bobby Joe had been the only one of us alone in the tent for any length of time. I was dying to open the envelope, but that was a job for the detective. Bobby Joe told Posey he had a signed letter of agreement as well as a contract. A letter could be a single sheet of paper.

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Had he decided to renege on the sale? Up the ante? Why else would a successful buyer kill him? Was this letter his insurance?

Even if the buyer burned up the contract, any letter of agreement would also be signed by both buyer and seller. Detective Haroldson needed to see the envelope right this minute.

I had stuffed the envelope into the back pocket of my jeans and turned to pick up my poncho when the tent flap opened and Gary Gabriel slipped in.

“That bastard!” Gary Gabriel said as he shook water off his poncho. “Wouldn’t you know he’d figure out a way to screw us out of the win?” He ran his hand over brush cut steel gray hair and shook the drops off it. “We’d have retired the whole hog trophy this year.”

“I thought you were staying at home,” I said.

“I decided to come down to help you,” he said with a smile. He glanced at the broken frame I was holding. “You get the health certificate?” His voice sounded tight, although he was trying to sound casual. Uh-oh. I did not like this at all.

“Uh-huh. I’m about finished,” I said and slipped on my poncho to cover the half of the envelope that stuck out of my jeans. “I need to go to the bathroom. I’ll finish packing up when I get back.”

“What else did you find?” he asked.

I gave him my most innocent smile. “What else could there be?”

“Give it to me,” he said quietly and held out his hand.

“Everything in this tent belongs to the team.”

“I don’t think this does,” I said.

That’s when he pointed the little gun he’d concealed right at my midsection. I froze, gulped, and tried to sound calm. “The contract didn’t burn up completely.” I had no idea whether it had or not, but I wasn’t about to tell him that. “Actually, Bobby Joe’s body protected most of it.”

He took a step forward. “What contract?”

“The one between you and Bobby Joe. He always said there wasn’t enough money in the world to sell his secret.” Gary didn’t know I hadn’t opened the envelope, so I took a chance. “You

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burned the contract with your signature, but you didn't find the letter of agreement. You must have figured out where it might be and come back to look. Was he trying to hold you up for more money?"

"Oh, hell, Harriet. Why'd you have to be so neat?"

So I'd been right about the letter, but it only furnished a motive if the sale fell through.

"The bastard wanted a lot more money up front in cash, plus a franchise fee for every restaurant we opened. Said once we signed his contract, he'd tell me the final ingredient. What was I supposed to do, Harriet?" He sounded downright whiny. "My investors had already put up a bundle, and they're not the kind of guys who lose gracefully. The SOB had the contract ready and waiting." He grimaced. "Only it wasn't the same contract I'd offered him."

"That's when you decided to kill him?" I backed up until the back of my thighs were against the table.

"Hell, no. I'm no killer, Harriet." This from a man who was holding a gun on me. Gary didn't sound angry or frightened. He sounded exhausted. I guess murder can do that to you. "I couldn't justify the extra money to my partners, dammit. I was still willing to stick to our original agreement, but not highway robbery."

"What happened?" I tried to sound sympathetic rather than terrified.

I seem to have succeeded, because he sounded calmer when he said, "He'd just finished basting Boss Hog. I yanked the contract I'd been forced to sign away from him and tossed it in the cooker and told him I was going to kill him unless he signed the original contract and gave me the secret ingredient. He knew I meant it. He told me he'd hidden our signed letter of agreement, so I didn't dare kill him. Then he fell out laughing after he told me the secret ingredient. He made me so mad..."

"Gary, you have to tell the police—it's probably voluntary manslaughter. You could get probation."

He laughed. "You know what the secret ingredient is that we've won all those trophies with? Absinthe. Not that fake stuff, but real Absinthe. Hell, you couldn't even buy that stuff legally

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in the states until a couple of years ago. He smuggled it in. I sure as shooting couldn't bottle the sauce and sell it or even use it in the restaurants without running into all sorts of problems with liquor licenses. I don't even remember picking up the fire extinguisher, but all of a sudden he was lying on the ground and I was holding it in my hand. He was dead as a doornail. No blood, just a big round dent in his weasely little skull."

"Maybe you just knocked him out." Oh, Lord, that would be worse.

"I know dead, and he was dead."

"But why on earth did you do—that—to him?"

"First off, I thought I'd slide him under the tablecloth to hide him. I guess I went a little crazy at that point because it seemed like poetic justice to let him see what barbecue was all about."

"But you put his clothes on Boss Hog."

"Well, Harriet, I knew that if his clothes caught fire, the tent might catch, the whole place could go up, and then where would we be? And I couldn't get him in without getting the hog out. You know, his polo shirt and shorts darned near fit that hog. Now, how about you give me that envelope? It's the only thing that links me to him."

Except me, that is. And I had a suspicion Gary had a plan to get rid of that obstacle as well.

"You can't shoot me, Gary. The place is still crawling with cops."

"I'm not gonna kill you, Harriet. Good Lord, I'm not a murderer! You and me's gonna walk out of here arm in arm like good friends so I can take you home. I'll leave you tied up to give me time to get away."

Like that would happen.

"Thank you, Gary." What a gentleman.

"But I'll the shoot the shit out of you if you make a fuss or try to attract attention."

"I understand." I took my final step backward and put my hand behind me as though I was dizzy from fear. My palm landed smack on top of that big platter of hot ribs.

I held the health certificate frame out to give it to him, then I dropped it. He took his eyes off me for a second.

Long Pig

I grabbed the top slab of ribs in both hands and bashed Gary square across the face with it.

“Ow!” he yelped. “My nose!”

He raised his hands to his face. The minute he wasn’t aiming at me, I smacked his gun hand up and the gun went off.

I swear I never saw so many blue uniforms crowd into one little tent!

“He did it!” I shouted. “He killed Bobby Joe!”

Later, after he’d been sent off to the prison ward at The Med to be treated for burns and a possibly broken nose, cussing me a blue streak and swearing Bobby Joe’s death was an accident, Detective Haroldson sat me down and fussed at me.

“I certainly never intended to be trapped in a tent with a killer. It’s not my fault,” I said.

“He would have killed you.”

“Well, of course he would, if I’d been fool enough to leave with him. I’ve seen enough cop shows to know you never leave the scene with the killer. If I hadn’t smacked him with those ribs I was planning to kick his feet out from under him in the mud. Or scream. Or something.” I licked my fingers, which were still coated with barbecue sauce. My stomach gave a rumble that could probably be heard in Jonesboro.

“Detective,” I said, “I never thought I’d say this, but I am flat starved. Could I interest you in joining me in a big platter of ribs?”