

“Cause for Elimination” - Excerpt

“Ma’am? I’m Detective Butler. I understand you asked to speak to a homicide detective?”

He walked across the dirt floor of the barn to stand in front of her. The woman gazed up from under a mop of auburn curls, revealing the most amazing gray-green eyes he’d ever seen. All of a sudden missing out on his barista didn’t seem like such a big deal. Her feet didn’t quite meet the ground from her seat atop the wooden chest, so she had to jump down to stand. All five feet four inches of her slender build reached his chin.

She offered her hand. “Emily Conners,” she stammered. “Sorry, this is my first...um, I’m not sure what the protocol is in this sort of circumstance.” Trying to ease the tension, he shook her hand. She was trembling. *Why wasn’t she wearing a jacket?*

“Ms. Conners, my condolences. This must have been quite a shock, finding your friend’s body.”

Emily pulled her hand out of his grasp with a weary sigh. She recognized the tall, arrogant type from the moment she saw him. He even draped himself in the same type of designer suit that her ex-husband favored. True, it looked a lot better on the detective than it ever did on Nick, but clearly the two of them were cut from the same literal and figurative cloth.

“You can save your smarmy charms for someone else. I’m not crazy. There’s no way that horse kicked Pamela to death.”

“No one is saying you’re crazy, Ms. Conners,” he explained in a tone which implied exactly the opposite. “I understand how difficult this must be for you, but as you must be aware, horses can be unpredictable. Isn’t it possible your friend—”

“Her name was Pamela Yates. I’m—was, I guess—her assistant.”

“Excuse me, ma’am, of course. Isn’t it possible Miss Yates startled the horse, and the animal kicked out as a natural response, injuring her and causing her death?”

Injured? Pamela’s brains were on the wall. On three of them, as a matter of fact.

“Have you actually *seen* her body, detective?”

“No, ma’am, I thought it would be best if we talked first.”

The man’s soothing voice made her want to scream. Instead, she fought to maintain a reasonable tone in her own. The last thing she needed was to antagonize him, erasing all hope of keeping Feneatha off the endangered species list.

“Why don’t we do this,” she said, keeping the *you patronizing, pompous ass* comment to herself. “Why don’t we take a look at the... at her...at the stall.” *If it doesn’t put too much a dent in your morning, detective, sir.*

Emily clenched her fist so hard her fingernails bit into her palm. “If after seeing her you decide it was an accident, I’ll move aside and let animal control do their job.”

“Fair enough,” the detective agreed and followed her down the barn aisle to an open stall.

“I swapped the mare to another stall so she wouldn’t keep stepping in...on...” Her hands fluttered, dreading the scene that awaited them.

Pamela lay sprawled on her back a few feet inside the enclosed space. Afraid to speak for fear the bile rising in her throat would come spewing out, she gestured at the

wall. Bits of brain, bone, hair and blood speckled the polished wood planks. Poor Pamela must have been standing almost exactly where Emily stood now when something hit her face so hard it left nothing recognizable behind.

An icy chill that had nothing to do with the weather caused her to tremble. The detective took off his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. She'd given up her own jacket to cover the pulpy remains of Pamela's head in a sentimental gesture she'd almost come to regret. Dammit, she really liked that jacket. This time, when the cop gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze, she didn't pull away.

"Sometimes I didn't even like her, you know?" she whispered as unwanted tears rolled down her cheeks. "But no one deserves..."

Unable to finish, she huddled tight against the detective's chest.