

Murder at  
the Lakeside  
Library

Also available by Holly Danvers  
(Writing as Holly Quinn)

Handcrafted Mysteries

*A Crafter Quilts a Crime*

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Murder at  
the Lakeside  
Library

A LAKESIDE LIBRARY  
MYSTERY



Holly Danvers

**CROOKED  
LANE**  
  
NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Crooked Lane Books, an imprint of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

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Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication data available upon request.

ISBN (hardcover): 978-1-64385-632-2

ISBN (ebook): 978-1-64385-633-9

Cover illustration by Jesse Reisch

Printed in the United States.

[www.crookedlanebooks.com](http://www.crookedlanebooks.com)

Crooked Lane Books  
34 West 27<sup>th</sup> St., 10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10001

First Edition: July 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For those who share a love of the Northwoods and can't wait for the return trip. And to those who've never had the chance to experience Midwest lake livin' at its best, my wish is that this book takes you there, and you never want to leave.



# Chapter One

The road ahead spanned like an endless ribbon leading to nowhere. Despite the bone-chilling blast from the air conditioner, Rain Wilmot's hands, clammy with perspiration, slid down the steering wheel. She glanced in the rearview mirror to reassess the backseat of her Ford Explorer, stuffed to the brim with all her worldly possessions. At thirty-two years old, her belongings didn't amount to much. It was as if the ten years of full-time work trapped inside a cubical amounted to absolutely nothing.

It doesn't matter. *Things* don't matter, Rain reminded herself.

The high-rise condo in Milwaukee that she'd shared with her late husband, Max, was now an additional scar on her wounded heart. The rolling wheels of the tires propelled her forward as if she didn't have a choice. She didn't really. The finality of death certainly thrust decisions on a person. She hadn't expected the condo to sell so quickly, but a high-powered insurance broker insisted he couldn't pass up the

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floor to ceiling windows overlooking the Milwaukee River. She wondered if the new owner would change the pale paint colors in the half-painted nursery.

The warning from her previous boss, Philip, sounded in her head like an alarm bell. “You really ought to wait, Rain. Don’t you think you’re making a hasty decision? Experts say you should wait at least a year before making any life-altering changes.”

*Easy for him to say.*

Just pulling into the parking lot at Harley Davidson sent her reeling. She didn’t need daily reminders at her place of employment of what she’d lost due to twisted chrome and steel.

Rain rolled down the window, needing real air in her lungs, and quickly realized she’d made a terrible error as the humidity filled the car. The smell of musty bonfire embers blew in from a nearby campground. That was a sign that she was getting close. She was almost back to her family’s summer cabin—a cabin that stood on one hundred and fifty feet of prime lake frontage on one of the purest bodies of water in the Midwest—Pine Lake. She’d spent every childhood summer swimming and boating on this lake. But she’d neglected to visit for many years now, for any number of paltry excuses. The general busyness of life, work, and love, had all gotten in the way. Besides, Max had never liked coming up north. He was more of an “ocean person” he’d said on more than one occasion. Well, that certainly wasn’t an issue now.



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The faded blue sign on the side of the road caught Rain's eye and caused her to loosen her grip on the steering wheel. The familiar gold letters that read: *Welcome to Lofty Pines* sent a fresh surge of comfort through her. Only a mile left to go before Rain would round the corner onto Birch Lane and exhale a sigh of relief. She removed her sunglasses and tossed them onto the passenger seat as the dense pines canopied the winding road, shading her view.

Rain's shoulders relaxed and her breath slowed when she spotted the familiar hand-hewn logs with thick white chinking that had stood the test of time. She often thought the rear side of the original cabin resembled a tree house perched high above the lake. The logs had been cut from the very forest that had once covered the clearing. After removing the bark from the towering white pines, her great-grandfather Lorenzo had leveled the timber with his own hands, using an ancient tool from the stone age called an adze. The minor imperfections in the logs were now a glaringly beautiful reminder of his legacy to the house. Of course, upgrades and additions had come with subsequent generations, and now Rain wondered if her great-grandfather would be proud of how much that had changed over the years. The first sight of the family cabin caused her lips to curl into a genuine smile for the first time in a long, long while. She'd made it.

*Home.*

Rain turned the SUV onto the gravel driveway, kicking stones in her wake. The campfire scent was replaced with

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the smell of newly cut grass and the sound of a lawnmower humming in the distance. As she stepped from the car, she rolled her neck and stretched her hands high above her head to remove the kink from the four-hour, non-stop drive, and then gathered her straight black hair into a ponytail. Relief came when she lifted the long strands away from her sweaty neck. She thought about applying suntan lotion, but thanks to her mother's Mediterranean heritage, her olive skin rarely burned. Instead, her skin would turn golden by summer's end. The kind of golden tan girls from her teen years used to envy. She dropped the thought of lotion and popped a fresh piece of mint gum into her mouth before ambling down the overgrown slope to greet the waterfront.

Rain recalled how her family had always abandoned the packed car first thing and headed down to the lake before unloading. Seeing the water was proof that making the four-hour journey north had been worth it. She wasn't accustomed to long car rides anymore. In the city, she and Max had spent weekends on their feet. They often walked to nearby eateries, outdoor markets, museums, and professional sporting events. The only car time was the commute she had shared with her husband, driving the twenty-five minutes west to Menomonee Falls and the Harley Davidson corporate office. But that was then, she reminded herself.

The grass was long on the property, and strands of overgrown weeds slapped at her bare ankles—evidence that no one had been around for a few weeks. She'd need to hop on the riding lawnmower soon. But not yet. For now, the lawn

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could wait. Maybe she'd even splurge and hire landscape help for the summer. But she secretly missed plunging her hands deep into the soil, which surprised her. Maybe she was ready for a change after all.

The calm lake expressed the opposite of her inner turmoil. The clear blue sky and a few puffy clouds painted a reflective picture in the placid water. Peace filled her and, in that moment, Rain knew that she'd made the right decision. She knelt to feel the coolness of the clear water and watched as a crawfish scattered from the ripple. The memory of her grandma cooking the mini-looking lobsters over an open fire sent a fresh smile to her lips. Although she had refused to eat them, it had never stopped her granddad from chasing her around the yard trying to get her to return to the firepit to join the others and taste the meat. She loved her grandfather, Luis, fiercely. He always made her feel like a princess, like she was the most special little girl in the entire world. A rare gift.

Rain's smile faded and she wiped the back of her neck with the cool water and then stood again to stretch, arching her back in an attempt to remove any remaining stiffness from her spine. She stepped onto the solid wooden pier that extended seventy-five feet into the open water and noticed the pontoon boat had been delivered and sat waiting, pulled high out of the water onto the boat lift. She couldn't wait to drop the boat into the water, feel the wind in her hair, the splash of the waves, and the warm sun on her skin. The thought of motoring over to the nearby eatery, Portside

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Bar and Grill, reminded her of their tantalizing menu. She wondered if they'd be open dockside for the summer crowd yet. But before she even walked a few feet down the pier, a familiar voice sang out across the water.

“Rain? Is that you?”

Rain turned her head to her right, instantly recognizing someone she hadn't seen in several years. Julia, a long-time neighbor, whose family had also spent lazy summers up north for many generations, greeted her with a wave. Since Julia was only two years older than Rain, the two had hung out quite a bit in their youth and kept up to date on each other's lives through social media. Back in the day, the two were pretty tight.

“Hey, Julia! Are you up for the summer or just a long weekend?” Rain tented her eyes to peer at her neighbor over the sparkling water. She'd forgotten that the reflection often left her blind, and inwardly berated herself for not grabbing her sunglasses from the car.

Rain heard a splash and then the whooshing sound of Julia approaching via the water. Because the thick pines blocked the shoreline between the neighboring properties, Julia must've thought walking through the water was a better option than traipsing barefoot over the prickly, pine-needled ground. As the wind picked up, the scent of fresh pine traveled with her neighbor, transporting Rain back to their childhood.

When Julia arrived, she juted out a hand that Rain grabbed hold of to help her up on the pier. Julia's long, lean

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legs were dripping wet, and she wore a white, gauzy coverup over a hot pink swimsuit. Her flaming pink, shoulder-length hair was covered with a large straw-brimmed hat, and she grasped a book tightly in one hand. The pink hair was the result of losing a bet, and Julia was nothing if not true to her word. Rain had seen her admission on Facebook.

The two leaned in for a quick hug and then Julia held her at arm's length.

"I'm so sorry, Rain." Julia's expression fell, and her voice grew thick with empathy. "Did you get my card?"

"Yes. That was very kind of you." Rain wondered if this was how it was going to be all summer. People looking at her, dripping with sympathy. She almost couldn't take it, and she'd literally just arrived. She knew she should feel grateful for the expression of kindness. But Max's death—well, it was complicated. Rain took a step back and steadied herself on the pier.

"Catchin' up on some reading?" Rain asked, nodding her head toward the book in order to dodge the current topic of conversation.

"Oh, this?" Julia lifted her hand. "It's just a mystery novel I picked up about a week ago and haven't had a minute to finish, until now," she chuckled. Julia then turned and pointed in the direction of her pier where a cherry red speedboat was anchored by a rope and bobbed idly in the water. "We just stepped off the boat so Nick could cut the grass before the day got away from us. I thought I'd sneak out to the bench at the end of my pier to read for a few

minutes. Which reminds me, when is Willow arriving? Is she right behind you?” Julia craned her neck to view the driveway up toward the hill, and then her eyes returned to Rain, waiting.

“No, Mom’s not coming up yet. Just me for a while, I guess.” Rain lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug. “Maybe she’ll visit for a weekend here or there, possibly over Labor Day weekend, but honestly, I’m not sure. A lot going on this year.” She squeezed her bottom lip with her fingers at an attempt to keep it vague and to hold herself back from oversharing. She then redirected the conversation, hoping to abate more inquiry, and besides she was curious. “So, your students won the contest, huh?” Rain gestured to Julia’s hot pink hair whose face instantly flushed red to match.

“Yeah, pretty much. This is how teachers motivate teenagers in the classroom nowadays. I promised pink for the entire summer, with updated photos on Instagram to prove I’ll keep my word. Not sure I’ll be able to go to any social events without being a real standout. It’s quite a commitment to keep the promise,” Julia added with an eye roll, tugging at the bottom of her shoulder-length hair. “One of my students actually colored it for me. Hashtag beauty school dropout.” She grimaced.

“Nah, it’s not so bad.” Rain cocked her head, taking Julia in again with fresh eyes. “You look great. It suits you,” she added with a smile, and meant it. Julia always had a sunny disposition and now her hair only seemed to match her outgoing personality.

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“So, Willow’s not coming up this year, huh? Labor Day? Wow, that’s the end of summer. That’s a real problem.”

Rain shifted her weight, curled her lip again with her fingers, and waited.

“Well, your mother always opens the cabin library to the public by Memorial Day.” Julia gestured a hand in the direction of the cabin, a look of confusion washing over her face. “She never mentioned she wouldn’t be coming up this summer. That’s really odd . . . our own library director a no show. Now that’s definitely weird.”

Rain didn’t want to get into the ongoing tension within her family, so she remained tight-lipped, but of course she knew about the library Julia was referencing. Her mother’s grandfather, Lorenzo, had turned the original cabin structure into a makeshift library when his son, Luis, had built the first of the cabin additions and renovations. There wasn’t a library in town, and Lorenzo had always been a strong advocate for literacy. Luis, Rain’s maternal grandfather, had even authored a few books in his early days.

The original cabin, built with hand-hewn logs, was considered the only “public library” in Lofty Pines. Of course, that definition of library was used loosely, as it was attached to private property and had direct access to their living quarters. For some reason, it had completely slipped Rain’s mind that the library would be open to the public. Had her mother mentioned this in their last phone conversation? As always, she’d been multitasking and packing boxes while her mother was ticking off cabin instructions in her ear.

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Julia must've sensed her hesitation, so she plowed forward.

"Oh Rain, I do hope you're planning on opening up the library. The entire community depends on it." Julia's confusion morphed into a frown. "Willow never said a peep. Normally, your mother handles everything, and Marge was supposed to stop by to drop off a few new books this evening. She'd mentioned that when I ran into her at the greenhouse yesterday." Julia said more to herself than to Rain. "Whatever would everyone read up here this summer without your library open? There isn't a bookstore for fifty miles!" Julia said, her voice beginning to show signs of panic as if reality was starting to sink in.

"Ah, I see your point. That's true . . . it sure is a long drive to go and purchase a book, and the internet up here is spotty at best." Rain had planned on a lot of extra reading by the lake herself and had even packed a few novels she herself was itching to dig into. She hadn't had much time to sit and read—until now. Truth be known, it was one of the activities she was most looking forward to.

Julia must've sensed Rain softening as she pushed ahead. "Well, since you haven't been around in a few years, I guess your mother just wanted to fill the time and have some company while she was up here alone. She seemed to really enjoy the visitors to the library." Julia placed her book atop her hat to keep a gust of wind from blowing the hat into the lake. "She reopened the library to the public a few years ago, and it's been pretty busy during the summer months. A real hot spot to be honest."



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That was news to Rain. She'd always thought her parents came up north to the cabin and spent time in the Northwoods together. Her mother spending time up here alone was something she wasn't aware of. But then again, she hadn't known about a lot of things. If she dared admit it, she'd been living in her own world, with her own problems, dealing with her own "stuff." Besides, her parents were still trying to shelter her from their issues despite her age. Since she was an only child, her parents had always been the very definition of helicopter parents and kept hidden their relationship woes, although Rain wasn't inept at sensing them.

"Oh, um . . . I don't know . . ." Rain stuttered finally.

"Oh, Rain, please? You have to open the library for the summer! There'll be a lot of sad faces otherwise." Julia made a puppy dog face looking for sympathy and then grinned. She'd always had a way of convincing Rain to do just about anything when they were kids. How quickly she'd forgotten. "Your cabin is the only place Lofty Pines Lakers like to hang out." Julia put praying hands together and held them in front of her dramatically.

Lakers . . . Rain hadn't heard that term in years. It was the term folks used for the summer crowd who filled the lakeside cottages and had direct lake access to Pine Lake. The sound of the term sent a knowing smile to her lips which was just enough encouragement for Julia to continue pleading her case.

"You don't know how many nights we sat on your family's deck and talked books and life. The library really brought

the community together in a way none of us thought possible. We've really gotten to *know* each other on a deeper scale through the sharing of these books," Julia's words were filled with emotion as she gestured a hand in the direction of the cabin. "The Lakers had some of their best discussions right there. Yep, we sure did!"

Rain turned her head to follow Julia's lead and noticed the wraparound deck now held numerous wooden rocking chairs that overlooked the panoramic view of the lake. When she was a child, only a few Adirondack chairs, a small wooden table, and an outdoor grill, were kept on the wide deck. Now, the place looked like some sort of beach resort, with the additional chairs and stings of outdoor globe lights overhead. When had all this happened? Rain's eyes narrowed to take it all in.

Julia continued, "I hope you don't mind. I had Nick take the chairs out of storage. Your mother gave me a spare key so if I ever made it up here before her, I'd set up the deck. She always encouraged patrons to take a book off the shelf and hang out on the deck to read a chapter or two, to see if it was a book they'd like to continue reading. She'd often bring out lemonade or snacks too. She said she'd met a lot of interesting people that way. Yeah, Willow really got a kick out of it, I think."

Rain breathed deeply, trying to take in this information and halt the screaming thoughts that suddenly cursed through her mind. She had come to the Northwoods to escape reality and relax, not to have people traipsing through

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her house and her life. Although she loved to read, and had a deep appreciation for the library, sharing anything about her personal life right now was the very thing she'd come here to avoid. She swallowed hard and rubbed the back of her neck with her hand. The last thing she wanted right now was company. And here Julia was basically telling her she'd have patrons hanging out on the deck daily. People to constantly entertain. She could feel the tension rising in her shoulders. Was it too late to back out of the driveway and head back to Milwaukee?

Julia interrupted her thoughts by adding, "Like I said, Marge mentioned she was going to stop by with a few new books she ordered. Your mother put her in charge of ordering them after the fundraiser we held last summer. Now that I think of it, I guess she put Marge in charge of buying the books because she didn't think she was going to make it up here. Marge has become the library's treasurer, and I've helped your mother do most of the cataloging. I guess, I'm now the official reference librarian." Julia's brows came together in a frown. "It's the perfect little library," Julia was pleading now. Practically begging. "It'll be good for you," she encouraged, extending a hand to touch Rain's arm gently. "It's good for you to be around people right now. You know, isolating yourself is never helpful." Julia must've sensed Rain's discomfort because she added, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to push."

*Why was it everyone seemed to think they had the perfect solution to my grief?*

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Rain wasn't happy with her mother, not one bit, for not sharing this information with her ahead of time. Although, her mother knew her well, and had probably realized that if she'd told her ahead of time that she'd have the added responsibility of the library, Rain probably wouldn't have made the trip. She desperately wanted to decline, but guilt pulled her in the opposite direction.

"What do I have to do to get the library ready? I mean, what time does it usually open in the morning?" Rain asked with trepidation. "And what hours of operation is typical—like all day?"

"I'm sure we can work through all of this. Everything is negotiable and up for discussion. Marge was planning on coming this evening to discuss the hours. And a few Laker volunteers were going to join us afterward, to see how they can be of service. That's why I'm so surprised your mother isn't here. She sent out reminders a while ago saying we'd have a quick meeting to set it all up," Julia said eagerly. "I'll go change out of my swimsuit and run to the store for a few snacks. Maybe a bottle of wine? We must have food if we're going to have a meeting. Don't worry, I'll help," Julia added with new excitement to her words. "I'll help you with absolutely *everything!*"

Rain watched as Julia plopped back into the water before she even had a chance to decline.