



Scavengers

rosalyn wraight

Scavengers
Lesbian Adventure Club: Book 1

Rosalyn Wraight

—DLSIJ Press—

*To MJ,
you are the best*

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ISBN: 978-1-932014-25-9

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Published by DLSIJ Press
<http://dlsijpress.com>
<http://dpbookstore.com>

Chapter 1

I tailed the speed-demon hostess as she steered me through an obstacle course of non-smokers, misbehaving children, and waitresses hell-bent on mastering their balancing act. I followed her all the way to the back of the restaurant: the loathsome, remote place that housed and ostracized the smokers.

“Coffee,” I instructed, sliding into the hunter green booth and retrieving the pack of cigarettes from my back pocket. “And she’ll have an Earl Grey,” I added, nodding in the direction of Claudia, several paces behind.

Nearly side-swiping the waitress, Claudia neared the table. A newspaper hitched a ride under her arm. She sat down and without a word began to read the day’s headlines. Historically, I avoided them, failing to find sense in starting any day with bad news. *Give me caffeine or give me death!* And a flawless calm until the fog clears. Newspapers existed for potato peelings, birdcages, and puppy puddles.

Claudia was different, though: a self-proclaimed woman of the world who believed that information begets control. If she knew, she could take charge. If she knew, she could predict. She did not like uncertainty.

The newspaper gave her those stock market codes and numbers that were gibberish to me. She had convinced herself long ago that her faithful eyes would somehow cause her nest egg to grow, incubated by sheer intent. Even I had to admit that the stocks she inherited from her grandmother, a few years ago, had steadily fattened. She wouldn’t have to worry about her financial horizon, but I doubted that mere vigilance was the real catalyst. If you predicted enough times, you’d be bound to be right sooner or later.

And for someone who didn’t have to worry... This morning, her beetle-brow twisted more tautly than the blue band tethering her long French braid.

“Are you going order?” I asked, sliding a menu in her direction, forcing it under her newspaper.

She nodded in affirmation but failed to look up.

While the waitress delivered our beverages, I glanced over the menu as I prepared my coffee for desperate consumption. With one eye on each activity, I managed to pour cream, pick from the menu, stir, and get the cup to my lips without another infamous disaster. *You look good in coffee. Yes, you wear it well.*

“Any idea what the theme is today?” I begrudgingly asked, interested solely in getting Claudia to talk rather than having to resort to self-conversation.

“Ginny wouldn’t say.”

I couldn’t figure out if my interruption forced her to stop reading or if she came back to the world enough to realize it was seven thirty in the morning and she was having breakfast with her lover. Either way, the paper came to a sudden, crunching close, and her eyes peered into mine. A glint of frustration flickered there.

“No idea, huh? Well, I just hope it isn’t like the last one!” I began, knowing full well that my tone differed little from any other misbehaving child in the restaurant. It was a tone I knew would invariably capture her attention—even if it came to me via reprimand. “A murder mystery weekend! Whose idea was that one anyway? Christ, all I did that weekend was wish I had been the corpse.”

“Come on, Kate,” she retorted, rolling her green eyes. “It wasn’t that bad. I had fun. And come to think of it, so did you.” Her face contorted in analysis of me.

“Well, maybe,” I conceded, raising the menu, hiding my face from the sight of her. As long as I lived, I knew I would never get used to tension between us. Those eyes of hers could castigate or enliven me—slay or heal—discount or devour the entirety of my soul.

“So do you want to talk about last night?” I posed the question and regretted it as soon as it rushed my lips.

Hauntingly, she replied, “I’m not sure what there is to say, Kate. Words don’t seem to cut it anymore, do they?” Her final words arrived as a standard query, but they lacked hope’s crucial question-mark inflection.

An abrupt, tidal sadness washed over me. Its wicked torrent seized me, threatened to pull me under. I felt the need to gasp for breath as if I were drowning, and thankfully, the waitress’ return momentarily buoyed me up.

Despite the sudden disappearance of appetite, we both heeded the expectation and ordered breakfast. She chose pigs in a blanket; for what subconscious reason, I refused to consider. I chose eggs Benedict, my reason very conscious: I felt betrayed.

Once we were alone again, we merely stared at each other. Looking

at her had always been like looking into a mirror: myself reflected back, a kinder vision because of the love I found in her face, a perception that proved an impetus to reach outside myself. And now? Now, there analogized the insidious vision of a carnival's hall of mirrors: my view distorted, contrary, and paralyzing.

"If words don't work, Claudia, then what do you suggest?" I asked as calmly as I could, afraid to mix desperation and anger. "What are we supposed to do?"

She yo-yoed her tea bag, manifesting an undivided interest in watching the golden drops ripple the surface of her tea. Then she shook her head, shrugged her shoulders, and minded a deafening speechlessness.

Was there really nothing to say?

If there was, for the life of me, I could not think of it.

Stalling for time, my mind scrambling for answers, I lit a cigarette and blew the smoke into the rays of morning sun slicing through the Venetian blinds. Confusion rose tantamount to reason. Erroneously, I assumed that in the dying of something, in the close of a relationship, there would be a thousand things to say. Angry things. Damnations. Abominations. Goodbyes. Regrets. Something. Anything. Who gets the microwave? Who gets the worn blue comforter, our years together having taken it from royal to an insubstantial sky-blue? Who gets the shame for having failed? Who retains the depleted dreams that prophesied us ancient and still side by side?

In the dying of something, in the closing of a relationship, shouldn't there be a million things to say?

I guessed not.

The impenetrable silence simply stationed itself between us: a stoic sentinel of our floundering, guarding a fortress built between—instead of around—what had always been sacred.

In the dying of something, how was I to feel life?

Wordlessly, we concluded breakfast and retraced our way through the eatery's obstacle course to the exit. With the clock wending its way swiftly to nine, we hurried to the car and headed toward Kris and Ginny's house.

There was a part of me that wanted nothing more than to go home, to slip back into a Saturday morning coma, with a sheet over my head and tag on the big toe. The thought of socializing with my friends, her friends—ours?—well, suffice it to say, sadness made me uncivilized.

Perhaps she sensed this. "You're not going to make this day unbearable for everyone, are you?" her question came, barely wrapping gauze around her threat.

Somewhere inside I thought to apologize for my attitude that deepened the abyss between us. I really didn't want it to be this way. I really didn't.

I didn't know what else to do. An apology would change nothing. Instead, snidely, I responded, "No, I'm sure *they'll* see to that."

We were off to the Lesbian Adventure Club. For well over two years now, Claudia and I had participated in this caper. *Dykes Who Dare*, I called it, but only because it riled her, made her beam with exasperation. She'd run her fingers through her long hair, raise her skirt above her knee, and look to me, her eyes direly scanning for sincerity. "I really don't look like a dyke, do I?"

Maybe one day she'd fathom that the word had evolved since she had come out some twenty-years prior. When our teasing lacked a sharp edge, I hoped she would never understand; there existed something so luscious in her self-defense.

The theme of the adventure club rotated monthly between couples. Each became responsible for concocting and executing their own idea. Our wintry excursion consisted of inner-tubing on Suicide Hill, halfway up Windsor Peak. We also orchestrated a weekend of camping—really roughing it, out in the middle of nowhere, but the weather transformed it into the last two suites at a posh hotel. Hardly an adventure. Unless one considers a dozen lesbians and only two beds, a dangerous expedition. All right, so we sprawled sleeping bags on the floor. You can't blame a girl for stretching the truth just a little.

Despite what I had just petulantly indicated to Claudia, I eagerly awaited the get-togethers of the club, the camaraderie, even the anticipation that came from not knowing what would be expected of us. I took delight in the challenge, the stretching beyond and outside myself.

Each Saturday that we presented ourselves portrayed a mile-marker to me. It meant we were together once more. Another month had passed, each of us still clinging to the other. Initially, the need for this arose not so much from worrying about our future, but rather, it came from watching the group itself: how it shifted, partners switched as if it were a freshman dance, and how some of the women simply drifted away from the nucleus. I did not want that for myself; I did not want that for us. We were different; we had pledged to be different, faithful, to remain together no matter what tried to drive a wedge between us.

Those ideas began in utter innocence: a way of reaffirming the bond between us. Now our monthly appearances amounted to a sigh and a symbolic wipe of sweat from our brows. We were still together—but neither of us could quite fathom how.

Claudia finally eased the car next to the curb, our destination reached. She turned off the ignition and just sat there, staring blankly, straight ahead. I failed to find a reason for her hesitation, so I distractedly noted the cars on the street. I counted heads: who had arrived, who had failed

to show. Then my attention returned to the utter silence and stillness between us. As if in suspended animation, we paused our mission, the world—perhaps, breath itself.

Then her hand slowly made its way to my thigh. She squeezed my leg so intently that I could almost sense the transference of energy, of emotion. I watched her hand, studied it, so unsure of its meaning.

And then my hand clutched hers, tentatively.

The silence thickened.

I expected words from her. Some clarification. Some indication. Something from the worldly woman who believed that information begets control. But she said nothing. She simply held on. I held on—suddenly in need of our touch.

And then she looked at me. For the first time in a long time, she really looked at me, pupils riveting soul to soul.

Tears spiraled in my throat, as if their presence had just received permission, or validation, or maybe, an invitation itself.

She smiled. As simple as that. No words, no bridges or bandages. Just a smile.

And then she looked away and reached for the door handle.

I swallowed hard.

I followed her.

* * * * *

Flitting their way up the sidewalk, my eyes consumed the old Victorian house. I swallowed the whole of it inside me, into my soul. Something sacred abided here; something warm and welcoming replenished me. From the flowerbeds awaiting July sun, to the huge front porch with its white, tottery swing, all the way up to the antique lightning rod on the roof's peak. The house blended into its surroundings as if it had always been this sturdy and beautiful, as if it could no longer remember the painstaking years Ginny and Kris spent renovating. I wondered if it felt any fondness toward me, recalling how I had helped scrape and paint and *oo* and *ah*. In its monstrous grandeur, it always allowed me passage, and just as consistently, it neglected to neither hail me nor boast a grateful kinship. Nonetheless, I smiled whenever I passed into its hospitable bosom.

Before Claudia's finger completely depressed the doorbell, the immense front door creaked open. Ginny suddenly emerged from the gape, leaving half her sentence still inside the Victorian.

"—were ever going to get here."

"Sorry," Claudia responded, more out of reflex than sincerity.

Ginny's inquisitive eyes scanned the both of us. I knew she was

determining the depth of the tension between us. Almost protectively, I grabbed Claudia's arm, stared cockily, defiantly at Ginny, and said, "Come on. Let's get this show on the road."

We entered the house. The door closed behind us, as if hoarding. We passed through the dining room. Incredible rays of sun gave the room a sense of the surreal; I imagined that this was what entering the afterlife would be like. We grazed the sun-soaking leaves of the Ficus tree and headed to the study.

Before our feet had even managed to take us wholly into the room...

"A murderer is among us. Run for cover, girls!" came an unidentified, shrieking voice.

In unison, every woman in the room hit the deck and teetered between hysterical laughter and melodramatic screams. Muse, the small gray cat on the back of the sofa, arched her back and scrunched her ears.

Needless to say, I was not amused—at least not until I sat on Alison's stomach as she writhed on the floor, pretending to be gasping for her last breath of life. "Need some help?" I asked as I teasingly wrapped my hands around her neck.

"Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" she yelped.

"Kill you? How could I do kill you while you are in the midst of overkill? Now knock it off, Ms. Tenner."

Her banter stopped as quickly as it had begun. She sat straight up, nearly toppling me from her stomach. She kissed me on the forehead. Like a mother kisses. Or an aunt.

"How's my favorite murderess?" she asked me as she reached for and clutched Claudia's hand. "How are you guys?"

"Fine," Claudia quickly answered.

"Well, to be truthful, Alison, I'd really like know something." I brazenly began. "I want to know how I got set up to be the murderer in your little weekend scheme."

"You want to know?" Laura interrupted as she marched her way toward us. "I want to know why you killed me, Kate! I thought we were friends!"

Suddenly, the room convulsed with the laughter of ten rambunctious women, still wallowing in the theme of last month's adventure. I stood up quickly and hugged Laura. While it had been a fun weekend, it also posed a question that I did not quite appreciate. Why had the whole affair made me feel guilty for a work of fiction, a script that someone else had written?

Kris tried to yell above the commotion: something about Danish and coffee, something about tea, something about fruit, something about needing volunteers.

Order quickly took the lead. Coffee cups were filled, goodies were claimed, seats were taken, and all eyes turned to Ginny and Kris as they stood in front of the fireplace. This was their weekend, their doing.

“First of all,” Kris began, “I doubt there is any way to outdo Alison and Lisa’s Murder Mystery Weekend. But we gave it a shot, our best shot. I don’t think you’ll be too disappointed.”

I looked around the room.

Holly perched on the couch with Laura sitting pretzel-legged on the floor in front of her. Her forearms rested on Laura’s shoulder. I always figured those two would be together forever—the way it was supposed to be. Holly was an artist; Laura embraced the challenge of being a detective on the local police force.

Susan posed in the recliner. Her tanned legs crossed themselves in fine ladylike fashion. Her partner, Maggie, balanced half-assed on the arm of the chair, licking peach nectar off her fingers. The two hadn’t been together that long. They seemed more distant than any other couple in the group. I always guessed that Susan found discomfort in being out, in being visible in the world. As a teacher, she feared repercussions for her lifestyle choices, ones she imagined separating her from her passion for teaching children. And Maggie? She desperately tried to be content within the nearly cloistered walls that Susan had erected. She had given up organizing the marches and the community events. She didn’t seem resentful; it was obvious how much she loved and needed Susan. Maybe it was just a comfort level that she had difficulty reaching. Maybe it was trying to let go of something from a clenched fist. I wasn’t quite sure.

Alison and Lisa sat near each other on the Oriental rug. I considered Alison a friend, not a close one, but I had known her for several years. Contrarily, I knew very little of Lisa, except that she seemed to view life as something to skip through, where anything negative was sidestepped at all cost. Together they created the undercurrent of the group. They joked and laughed and chided—they did whatever was necessary to keep things superficial. Their antics, however, served solely to erect glass bars around them—a protection that was easy to see through. It was pure diversion, but from what? Mystery surrounded them. One could never quite get a handle on what they felt—about each other, about anyone else.

I sat on the couch and had to turn completely around to catch a glimpse of Claudia. She wandered absentmindedly by the table that held the coffee and Danish. She perused the pastries, pretending to be unsure of her choice. Only I knew that the woman had just consumed an enormous breakfast and that her activities meant to divert. Suddenly, I felt very alone.

Up front by the fireplace, Ginny and Kris stood, waiting to make their

declaration of the weekend's agenda. They were both in their late fifties and seemed like the matriarchs of the group. They had been together for twenty-four years, a near-miracle in this community. I could remember many a phone call, many a night when I ran to them, seeking their wisdom, their shoulders, their nurturing. They were gauges by which many couples measured their relationships. Claudia and I were one of them, and we were not doing very well.

"All right," Ginny began. She rubbed her hands together. "Here's the deal. We've written down eight clues that will help you complete a scavenger hunt. It's not as simple as getting a list of things to collect, though. You first have to figure out what the item is, and then you have to find it or photograph it, depending on what the clues asks you to do."

There were groans and contorted faces throughout the group.

"You know," Maggie interjected, "these things with clues all the time aren't really fair—not with a detective among us."

Laura did the only thing appropriate. She stuck her tongue out at Maggie.

"Don't give her that much credit," Holly assured. "Sometimes she still can't tell her ass from a hole in the ground."

Laura's eyes widened, her jaw dropped, and she swiftly turned to Holly. "But I can always tell your—oh, never mind." She whipped around and lunged on top of Holly. Her fingers grabbed at her abdomen, and she tickled relentlessly.

"Why is it that we all have to turn into school girls at these things?" Kris reprimanded, trying hard to squelch her own laughter. "Now listen up!"

"We will divide by couples." Ginny explained. "You will have until nine o'clock tomorrow morning to complete the tasks. We'll all meet at Drixel's Terrace for brunch. The winners, of course, will pick up the tab." She smiled diabolically.

The groans arose again.

"But don't let that be an excuse not to win. Some of you—and we won't mention any names—" Ginny said, giving us the mandated clearing of her throat. "Some of you have a lot of face-saving to do!"

"Like you were instructed in the invitation," Kris reminded, "you will need a flashlight and a digital camera with two memory cards. And unlike traditional scavenger hunts, you may have to spend some money, but be creative and you may not have to. There are points earned for each completion, plus extra points—three hundred, two hundred, and one hundred—for the first three teams to complete."

While she let the information sink in, she handed an envelope to each couple. Then she continued, "When you have a clue figured out and

completed, you need to bring your item here. Ginny and I will verify it, record your time and score, and hold it for you—whatever *it* happens to be. Then we'll give you the next clue. If you get really, really, really stuck, give us a call. *Maybe* we will help. Oh, and this first one is for one hundred points."

"Now get out of here!" Ginny ordered.

As people readied themselves to leave, I wandered over to Claudia who was still studying the poor Danish. "Want one for the road?" I asked.

"No. I'm not really hungry," she replied.

I didn't think there existed such a state as being together in aloneness, but suddenly, it felt as if that was precisely where we were.

"Go!" Ginny ordered again, and off we went.

Chapter 2

Like children hurrying without giving the appearance of running, each couple made their way to the cars on the tree-lined street. Eight door slams later, a smile crossed my face as I eased into the front seat. I was excited.

Claudia started the car, revved the engine in a gentle, prodding way, and asked, “Okay, where am I off to?”

“Oh, you just think these two old broads would just tell us where to go, simple as that? Two professors—psychology and comm arts?” I rolled my eyes. “Trust me: They will mess with us.”

“Yeah, you’re right. So look at the clue then.”

I opened the sealed envelope with an assertive, confident rip. We were unsealing our fate.

“‘Here it is where we shall State,’” I read. “‘The food of Zeus’ little nymph’! Ah shit, Greek mythology! Ah shit, Claudia! Do you know this stuff? I think I slept through it in school.”

“Let me see the paper,” she said.

She irked me: I was a scatterbrained, overreacting child—and she would need to be my Ritalin.

She held the sheet of paper under the rearview mirror, and we both stared at it.

here it is where we shall State:
the food for zeus’ little nymph—the big fat cow;
sacred to aphrodite—bird’s foot ‘round her head;
the lures of monarch lagoon, but not the tackle

pay the toll to pass the gate:
a right, a left, another left, right—so close now;
right over there—by that strange little rental shed;
take it correctly or a foot in each shackle

“Okay, smarty pants, what the hell does that mean?” I demanded.

Surprisingly, she said nothing. She set the paper down between the front seats, smoothed the hair on top her head, and then stretched her back like a cat. After another moment, she finally said, “Well, this is stupid, all of us sitting here like idiots who haven’t a clue. Let’s just speed away and let them all think that we’ve figured it out.”

With that little plan in motion, she backed the car up a few feet, pulled into the driveway across the street, and then reversed. With a conservative screech of the tires, she headed us down the street, away from the old Victorian, away from the other six sets of eyes that pored over the exasperating piece of paper.

Ginny and Kris, I imagined, were standing in the front window, checking their watches, laughing at their little experiments. *Screw them!* We were going to win this thing!

Claudia drove without a word until we were in the heart of downtown. Mainstreet, America, buzzed with Saturday morning ritual. She pulled the car into a parking spot. “Run into Timmer’s Book & Bean and get us some fuel,” she instructed. “I’ll try to decipher this thing.”

I grabbed some of the money we kept stashed in the ashtray that she forbade me to use. As I opened the door to make the run, she furthered her instruction, “Earl Grey, no sugar.”

“Oh really? I was going to get you a double froth latte, extra fat.”

“I thought they only made those for you,” she retorted, her own froth thick with sarcasm.

“They do, but, hey, I’m not selfish.” I smiled at her and began my mission.

When I returned several minutes later, she had set up shop at one of the outside tables. Most of them were unused, as early May mornings were not quite warm enough to suit most. She had a pen and was scrawling notes and underlining words.

“Are you just checking their syntax or do you have any ideas there?”

She uncapped her tea, took a cautious sip, and suggested that we take it line by line.

“‘Here it is where we shall State.’ I think that’s just an intro. ‘The food for Zeus’ little nymph—the big fat cow.’ That’s much harder,” she assessed. “Wasn’t the almighty god of thunder the original nymphomaniac?”

“Very funny, but yeah, he definitely had his share of women—mortal and otherwise. The big stud in the sky.”

“Okay, well, name some.”

“Calisto!” I yelled as though I had just spied bingo on a card. “She was turned into a bear. Oh, and Eurynome! With her he fathered the Muses—no—no, the Graces.”

“Any of them big and fat?”

“They probably all were. They went for voluptuous in those days, not emaciated.”

“Okay, well that helps. Let’s try the next line then. What is sacred to Aphrodite, and why would she have a bird’s foot around her head?”

“Around her head ... um ... probably a crown. She was the goddess of love and beauty ... nature ... flowers. Birds on the flowers? Argh!”

“Well, keep going then. Next line: lures ... monarch lagoon ... not tackle. So lures that aren’t fishing tackle.”

“Yes! You’ve got it!” I proclaimed. “Monarch Lagoon is a fishing hole at Mill Lake State Park, but that would mean fishing lures, not the exclusion of.”

“Maybe not. What’s the lure of Monarch Lagoon, Kate?”

“Well, nature, maybe, since we’ve got Aphrodite in the mix... But I still can’t figure the cow/woman.”

“Hey! ‘State’ is capitalized,” she announced triumphantly. “The only letter that’s capitalized.”

“So state is a proper noun ... State Park. But a cow?”

“Look.” She pointed to the paper. “Two bold letters in the line about Zeus. An O and an I, from food and little. Food little. Little food.”

“The State is starving us by taking all the fish!”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s it.” She rolled her eyes. “Think again, my little nymph.”

“Well, it seems to be certain that it’s Mill Lake, doesn’t it? Even more so if you have to pay a toll to get through the gate. You’ve got to have a state park sticker or a day-pass to get in. How about we head that way?” I suggested, lacking any better idea. “Maybe it will all make sense when we get there. No, wait! An I and an O plus Zeus! Io, the nymph is Io! His wife found out he was cheating with Io. He turned her into a heifer! A heifer! A cow!”

“Boy, he was a nice guy, huh? So is it Mill Lake or not?”

“Yeah, let’s try— Oh shit, don’t look, Claudia, but Alison and Lisa just drove by.” I said, lowering my head, trying to mould myself into the wrought-iron chair. “Cheaters!”

“And how does driving by constitute cheating?”

She laughed. She genuinely laughed, and in it, something carried itself to the core of me. Something that seemed vaguely familiar. Something that made me want to cry in remembrance. Instead, willful to maintain the lightening mood between us, I replied, “You write big. They were probably able to read every one of your notes as they drove by.”

“Did it cross your little mind that maybe they already figured it out and are heading back to Kris and Ginny’s?”

“Oh shit! No, it didn’t! Get in the car. Get in the car now!” I yelled. “And I’ll drive, since you seem to think that speed limits are laws.”

Against her better judgment, she slipped herself and all our stuff into the passenger side.

I revved the engine, far from conservatively, and declared, “Hang on, Earl!”

With that, she held her cup of tea in midair. The next leg of our mission kicked up its heel.

Soon, any semblance of city disappeared, and Rural, America, had its way with us. The roads became narrower. Trees became closer. The farm fields were dotted with tractors tilling the soil, making ready for the induction of seed.

“Cows,” I remarked, pointing to a grazing herd to the left of us.

“Quick, go ask them if they know Zeus.”

Eventually, the meandering road led us to an enormous wooden sign that read: *Mill Lake State Park*. I turned in the drive to find a large deserted parking lot. At the far end of the lot was a small toll booth-looking structure with the silhouette of someone inside. I slowly approached, lowering the window as I went. A large sign hung onto the side of the structure with a long list of Don’ts. Not “Do come in.” Not “Do have a good time.” Just don’ts. I hated don’ts. “Don’t camp without a permit. Don’t fish without a permit. Don’t leave the trails. Don’t interact with the wildlife. Don’t disturb the flora. Don’t bring firewood from more than 25 miles away.” *What?*

I paid the woman six dollars for a piece of paper that was to be wedged between the dashboard and the windshield. If the tag was not visible, we were told, we would get a stiff fine.

I drove slowly forward and told Claudia to call out the directions contained in the clue. After the correct combination of turns, a small blue shed sat before us. *Fishing Equipment Rental*: this sign read.

“I do believe we got it!” I declared.

“And what exactly is *it*?” she countered. “Are we supposed to bring back the whole place? Take a picture of it? What?”

“Well, how about we see what our competition does,” I said, pointing to Susan and Maggie who meandered the shoreline of Monarch Lagoon.

We watched them for several minutes as I stealthily tried to park the car. It was obvious they knew no more than we did. They were aimless.

“Look at the clue again, Claudia. What are we missing?”

“State ... cow. Do we have a state cow?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. Maybe we have a state nymph, too.” Then a light seemed to go on in my head with a brightness that blinded. “We do have a state flower, though. Grab the map from the glovebox, and see what it says.”

She slid her long legs toward the footboard and splayed the glovebox. She foraged until her persistent hands liberated the map. As she worked to unfold the Rubik's cube-like thing, I looked up to see whether Maggie and Susan appeared to be in the midst of an epiphany, but movement in the rearview mirror caught my attention instead. I glanced to see Laura and Holly parking and then swiftly exiting their vehicle. In unison with the slamming of doors, feet pounded the ground in a mad dash.

"Shit, Claudia! Laura and Holly know the answer. Follow them! Follow them like we know, too!"

Before I had even finished my directive, both of our doors flew open and we were in hot pursuit. Laura and Holly ran toward the lagoon, startling Maggie and Susan, who seemed to have the same idea: pretend to know.

Suddenly Laura stopped in her tracks, turned around, and stretched her arms wide. "We were here first," she roared. "Holly, go get it. I'll keep these goons at bay."

"Not fair," I screeched back at her. "We have every right to—" I shot Claudia a pleading look. *A right to do what, Claudia?*

As if a mind-reader, Laura yelled, "A right to do what, Kate? Tell me what you have a right to do, and maybe then I'll let you pass."

"We have a right to do whatever you're doing," Claudia defended. *Oh, that was brilliant.*

With a quick left and then a quicker right, I faked out Laura's moves, ran past her, and headed to where Holly had stopped. Before her was a neatly fenced-in area that held hundreds and hundreds of small purple flowers. Several butterflies, still groggy from the morning chill, flitted clumsily from flower to flower.

"Oh, aren't they beautiful? Just beautiful!" Holly gushed, holding a palm to each cheek.

"Yes, they are!" I exaggerated, trying to keep her enthralled and off task. "Beautiful! Very beautiful, Holly. What are they called again?"

Instead of responding, she pointed to a small white wooden sign stuck into the earth. *Bird's-Foot Violet*: that sign read.

"The state flower," Claudia added, rather defeatedly, suddenly aware of what the quick glance at the state map had proffered. "One more minute and I would have had it!"

"Ah, but we have it now," I told her, but as I prepared to belly flop over the fence, the mounting energy within me came to a jolting halt as Claudia grabbed hold of my shirt.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled at her, but as I did so, I saw the seemingly slow-motion lunge of Maggie over the fence. She landed in the midst of the flowers, plucked a handful, and let out a triumphant "Got it!"

I moved anew to clear the fence, and yet again, I was held in place. “Why the hell are you stopping me?” I screamed. “Don’t you want to win this thing?”

“You can’t pick them! It’s against the law. You can’t pick them,” she bellowed like a cow/woman. “Didn’t you read the sign when we came in?”

“Oh, screw that! Maggie’s got one!” As I said that, I meant to look at Maggie to bolster my case, but instead, all I saw was a blur as she and Susan hauled ass back to the parking lot.

I twisted my body to force myself from Claudia’s grip, but she held me with a vengeance. Laura and Holly seemed to have forgotten the task at hand, and rather, they stood there watching the battle of wills.

“‘Take it correctly or a foot in each shackle,’ you goof! You can’t pick them! It’s against the law. Pick it and go to jail!” she wailed with self-righteousness.

“Well, what in blazes does ‘take it correctly’ mean?” I demanded, still trying to wriggle free.

“It means this,” Holly said, aiming her camera at the plot of violets and the two agitated butterflies.

I glared at them in a way that seemed literally to burn my eyes. They laughed and immediately began a quick sprint to the parking lot. Then my scowl turned. Claudia let go of me, smiled sheepishly, and tried to smooth out the bunch in my shirt where her fist had attached itself. Coldly, I asked, “Do you have the goddamn camera?”

“It’s in the car. I’ll go get it,” she uttered, and before I could arrange the crude mix of words in my mouth, she ran full force.

Her absence was short, but it gave me enough time to plant myself on the earth and breathe deeply a few times. She snapped the necessary picture, and then as if willing to take her life in her hands, she turned the camera on me. She snapped a picture of my crumpled, defeated being. She reached out her hand to me, smiled, and said, “Come on, my little shrinking violet.”

We sped back to the city. One might guess that Claudia would have exercised enough restraint to forego pointing out speed limit signs, but the lover of rules did so anyway.

By the time we reached Kris and Ginny’s, Laura was strutting around like some freaking egomaniac peacock, Holly was stroking Muse, and Maggie and Susan were arguing that they had won even though they had killed a plant and broken the law. Eventually, Susan put the poor, little plant in the front yard and took a picture of it.

“Time of death,” our cheeky detective pronounced, “eleven fifty-three AM.”

I was still grouching as Kris and Ginny approached us. Claudia removed the memory card from the camera and offered it in an outstretched hand.

“Good job, ladies,” Kris said. She took the little blue card from Claudia and then jotted down our time on the clipboard.

“Yeah, and thanks for not killing anything ... or each other,” Ginny noted as her eyes went back and forth between the two of us and then stopped on me.

I took advantage of her focus. “Okay, ruthless one,” I said, grabbing Ginny by the front of her shirt. “What the hell does the cow/woman have to do with this?”

“Ah, you weren’t paying attention in my class, huh?” she challenged. “Zeus turned her into a heifer, which was admittedly cruel, but he also did one loving thing for her. Do you remember now?”

My stare assured her that I did not know.

“Okay, then, I’ll refresh your memory” she said, happy to drill it into me once more. “Zeus put her in a never-ending field of violets—a delicacy to cows. So although he banished her, she still knew that he loved her. Sometimes you have to look at what isn’t so obvious when you feel as though you’ve been banished.”

She waited for a response from me, but Kris seized the opportunity to push her way between us, envelope in hand. “Here’s your next clue, guys. Another one hundred points. Now go,” she said, handing the envelope to Claudia. “You’d do better to keep moving.”

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Rosalyn Wraight is also the author of *Woman Justice*, a lesbian erotic mystery featuring Detective Laura McCallister. Her work also appears in *Shards*, an ebook anthology to benefit breast cancer research. Both titles are available from DLSIJ Press.

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