

• THE CATE KINKAID FILES • BOOK 3 •

Death Takes a Ride

A Novel



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To a wonderful stepdaughter,
full of fun and adventure,
whose life ended much too soon.
Jane

◆ 1 ◆

A light shone dimly in the front office attached to a larger metal building looming behind it. A sign identified the building as H&B Vintage Auto Restorations, and a neon Closed sign glowed in the window. Two vehicles stood out front, one a drab SUV, the other a vintage Corvette convertible, sleek and low and flame red.

“Never mind,” Cate consoled her old Honda. Even standing still, the Corvette looked as if it might be breaking the speed limit. She patted the Honda’s well-worn dashboard. “You have an inner beauty.”

She spotted shadowy movement inside the front door, but Aunt Rebecca had said to go to a side door. Cate nosed the Honda around the far corner of the warehouse and stopped by a door with an Employees Only sign illuminated by a bare bulb overhead. She hesitated before turning off the engine.

Maybe that sign should read Muggings-R-Us. She couldn’t even see the front parking lot from around here. Bare metal showed through the old paint on this hidden side of the building. Weeds grew in a crack between the metal and the asphalt, and a pile of discarded tires out back looked as if it might harbor anything from murderous thugs to mutant

rats. A bicycle leaned against the tires. Was that something moving beside it?

Nah. Cool it, Cate. You're not working a PI case tonight. Nothing's moving. Just a trick of shadows in the moonlight. Cate dropped the keys in her pocket beside her cell phone, grabbed her purse, and punched the button to lock the door behind her. She shouldn't be inside more than a few minutes, but who knew how fast mutant rats could get inside an unlocked car?

The night air, even as far inland as Eugene was from the Oregon coast, held a tang of sea that reminded her of sunny beaches and booming surf. Hey, she and Mitch should run over to the coast for the day sometime soon.

She pressed a button by the warehouse door, and the harsh response from inside buzzed her ears. The dead bolt lock snicked and the door opened, silhouetting a husky female figure against a maze of shelves.

"Rebecca sent me," Cate said. In spite of her uneasiness with the gritty surroundings, she couldn't help a laugh because the statement sounded so cloak-and-daggerish.

The woman didn't miss a beat. "You got the password?" she growled back.

"How about, um, carburetor? Or spark plug?" Which was about the extent of Cate's knowledge of auto parts. "Or maybe shock absorbers?" She'd just had those replaced on the Honda.

The woman opened the door wider. "That'll work." She smiled and stepped aside to let Cate enter. "C'mon in. I'm Shirley Brackinbush."

Shirley loomed over her, broad shouldered and solid bodied in khaki coveralls, sheepskin-lined vest, and heavy boots. She looked fully capable of toting or tossing the heavy car parts

lining the wide shelves behind her. Maybe wrestling mountain lions in her spare time. Fiercely curled black hair framed a face weathered and ruddy, but her smile beamed a friendly warmth. Cate put her at mid or late fifties, with considerable time in sun and wind.

An oversized creature bounded up and skidded to a halt beside Shirley. Cate took a step backward. The creature's broad head stood higher than Cate's waist, its eyes a surprising pale blue, ears floppy, body covered with a shaggy mottle of bluish-grayish-blackish hair. The tail, long and skinny, looked as if it had been added as a we-need-a-tail-here afterthought. It wore a wide leather collar studded with pointy brass triangles. Dog? Maybe. If you were willing to give the term a broad definition.

"What," she asked warily, "is that?"

The creature didn't growl at Cate, but it looked ready to ask for more than a password. Maybe a bribe? Something like half a beef?

"This is Clancy." Shirley gave the animal an affectionate stroke on his big head. "He can be a little intimidating, but that's just because he doesn't know you yet. Clancy, this is—I guess I don't know who you are either. What happened to Rebecca?"

"I'm Cate Kinkaid. Rebecca is my aunt." Cate kept a wary eye on the oversized animal. "She had to go over to the church early to help with refreshments, so she called and asked me to pick you up for the Fit and Fabulous meeting."

"Right. My old pickup conked out. The trailer park where I live isn't far, so I've just been walking to work. I can't leave until the meeting is over," Shirley added as she motioned toward an office sign sticking out over a door about halfway across the warehouse.

“A company conference?”

“Just Matt Halliday and Kane Blakely. They’re the H and B of H&B. Mr. Halliday runs things here, and Mr. Blakely manages the Salem branch. Clancy belongs to Mr. Blakely, but Mr. Halliday didn’t want a dog in his office.”

At mention of his name, the dog waved his skinny tail like an animated whip. He stretched his nose toward Cate and sniffed up and down her leg. Did he smell Octavia’s cat scent on her? Did he turn into Psycho Dog when he smelled cat?

“So, what you need is to be properly introduced,” Shirley said. “Clancy, this is Cate Kinkaid. She’s a friend. Cate, this is Clancy.”

Cate had never been formally introduced to a dog before. She stuck out her hand, intending to give the dog a careful pat on the head, but he filled the hand with an oversized paw.

“Nice to meet you,” Cate murmured.

Clancy replaced his paw with a friendly slosh of tongue. Cate started to wipe her hand on her jeans but decided that might be some breach of doggie etiquette and put the hand behind her for a more surreptitious swipe.

“I’m sorry this will make us late for the meeting,” Shirley said.

“I don’t think they’ll lock the doors at the church if we don’t get there on time.”

“Yeah, but I need every minute of it.” Shirley inspected her stubby fingernails and weathered hands. “Though I think that woman has her job cut out for her, making anything ‘fabulous’ out of *me*.”

The special presentation at the church on this Tuesday evening featured a well-known inspirational author speaking on “Fifty and Beyond: Fit, Fabulous, and Faith-filled.”

Weekly classes, based on the speaker's workbook, would follow. Shirley had never been in the church before, but the series had been mentioned in the Eugene newspaper, and Shirley had called about it.

"Look around, if you'd like," Shirley invited. "We've got some interesting stuff."

Cate moved to a shelf and fingered an unidentifiable car part with a maze of coils and wires. The metal roof disappeared in shadows high overhead, and the air smelled faintly chemical, maybe vehicle fluids or some special paint for metal. Splatters of soaked-in oil made peculiar figures on the floor. Rorschach inkblot tests for the mechanically minded?

Cate jumped when a male voice spoke out of an intercom speaker mounted on the wall above a computer on a nearby countertop.

"Shirley, could you bring those inventory sheets to the office now, please?"

"I'll be right there." Shirley grabbed a pile of papers next to the combination printer and fax. "Help yourself to some coffee," she said to Cate.

She waved toward a coffeemaker on the counter and took off in long strides toward the office, boots clunking on the concrete floor. Clancy raced after her, but she closed the door to keep him out of the office. He came back to join Cate.

"We have been formally introduced," Cate reminded him, just in case he'd forgotten.

She got a Styrofoam cup from a nearby stack and filled it half full from the coffeepot. Hey, good coffee. She strolled along the shelves labeled with names of various car brands to identify the items in that area. Corvette. Impala. Oldsmobile. They didn't seem to be in any particular order. Movable ladders that rolled on tracks anchored on the top shelf

gave access to the upper shelves. A forklift stood between the shelves, apparently to lift larger items to the upper shelves.

Cate shivered in her light windbreaker. No wonder Shirley wore that heavy vest. The warehouse was cold. Morgue cold. Now where had *that* morbid thought come from? She'd never even been in a morgue. Probably, as Mitch would no doubt say grumpily, PI thinking.

Cate leaned over to study something large and spiky on a bottom shelf. A car part? Or maybe a misplaced medieval weapon? A yell from the office area interrupted her contemplation.

Then a muffled *bang*. Gunshot? Nah. This place restored vintage vehicles. Backfire bangs were probably commonplace. Although a backfire after hours in the office didn't seem likely—

Another *boom*. Cate slammed her Styrofoam cup on a shelf and ran for the office door. Clancy bounded past her when she opened the door, but she stopped short. The door opened into the dimly lit area she'd seen from out front, but it was a sales area more than office. No *bangs* here. Not even any people.

Then she realized that the actual office was sectioned off from this room, with the opening up front. Clancy's toenails screeched as he skidded around the corner.

She followed him. The door to the sectioned-off room stood open.

And something sprawled on the floor just inside it.