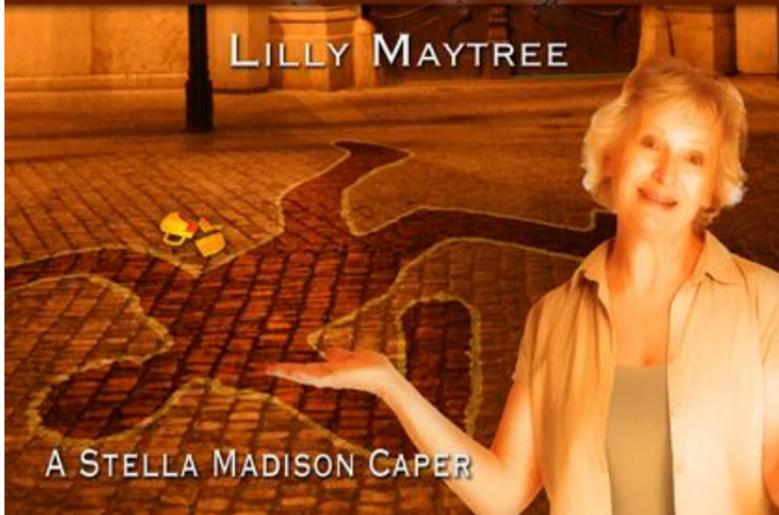


HOME BEFORE
DARK

LILLY MAYTREE

A STELLA MADISON CAPER



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Lilly Maytree

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Dedication

To all those who struggle with life's changes...may you
never be alone.

Praise for Home Before Dark

“Ha, ha! Loved it! I enjoyed this little caper, I could see it all happening. Bravo for her knight in shining armor...I recommend Home Before Dark by Lilly Maytree— a “feel good” read!” - Carol A. Brown, author of The Mystery of Spiritual Sensitivity

“It had a subtle touch of humor, and I could just see Stella going off on her own tangent. I wasn’t expecting the explanation of it at the end, it brought tears to my eyes and I choked up on it, and I read it to my husband. This is the truth...I loved it!” - Shale Kenny, member of Lilly Maytree’s First Readers Club.

“Many have puzzled themselves about the origin of evil. I am content to observe that there is evil, and that there is a way to escape from it...” ~ John Newton

1

When opportunity first knocked on Stella Madison’s door, she thought it was the devil. Had to be. That’s because an unexpected change in circumstances was the last thing a person in her situation would look for. But there it was. Glaring up at her from the letter she had just opened to read with her second cup of morning coffee. “Dear Ms. Madison, we regret to inform you that the building in which you are living...”

But why go into all that. It wasn’t the real problem, anyway. The real problem—not counting the emotional stress and strain of moving at her age (a woman in her sixties!)—was the fact that she hadn’t a penny beyond her monthly expenses to do it with. She lived on a fixed income. And even though she had always kept current with her driver’s license, she didn’t own a vehicle. Hadn’t driven herself anywhere in years. It made her wonder how she would go about even looking for a new place, much less move all of her things into one.

Stella had a lot of things.

To be perfectly honest, she had accumulated about

twice as many things as she originally came with, ten years ago. Any way you looked at it, she was in a pickle, and with only thirty days to get out of it. Thirty days! Could big companies really do that to people? Well, they could. So, obviously, she needed a plan.

After having lived in her own familiar world of comfort and safety for so long, the thought of taking a job was appalling. But desperate times called for desperate measures. She could endure anything for a short time, and this situation was only temporary. All right, so she had vowed never to set foot in that crazy rat-race of a working world, again. Things were upside down out there! Not to mention the natural disasters, where people like her were not only overlooked, but got trampled.

Which is why Stella had made it her priority not to depend on anyone but herself.

And, the thought of having to answer to somebody (probably half her age) after having grown so independent, was about the most distasteful thing she could think of. But she would just have to get a grip on herself and buck up. The trouble was, it had been over ten years since Stella had “worked” at anything.

What on earth could she do?

She had always been good with children...only she didn't have the strength and energy to meet the demands of kids these days. Not to mention it was now illegal to discipline any of them. Working at the local coffee shop was out, too, as she had never been fast enough with numbers and cash machines to keep people happy. Selling something was not an option. The only things she had that would be of the slightest value to anyone else were books. Stella loved books

and had spent the greater portion of her life collecting for a personal library that now numbered in the thousands.

There were not only bookcases in every room of her small, one bedroom apartment that overlooked the sea (well, it was only tiny sliver of sea, actually, that disappeared entirely when the fog was in), but also shelves that ran throughout the apartment, about a foot below the ceiling. All categorized by the Dewey Decimal System.

Which suddenly gave her an idea.

She could work at the county library. It was within walking distance, and she was as familiar with it as her own kitchen. What's more, it was quiet... which meant a lot to her. She even knew some of the staff. Which—as it turned out—was the only reason she was able to land any kind of a job there at all. Never mind that she had once been a schoolteacher, or that she loved to read. According to Ester Fergessen, who spoke up for her, the Clerk I positions were the only ones that ever came open anymore. Unless someone above that either died or retired. A Clerk I position was a person who restocked shelves. For an extremely minimum wage.

So it was that Stella Madison, with her lively blue eyes and striking white hair that tucked neatly under, began working five and a half hours a day at the Witcomb Ritter Library. Four days a week, three days before the end of the next pay period. It wasn't until after she had been formally hired that she found out Clerk I people were only allowed part-time. Something about benefits. To be honest, Stella would have been hard-pressed to put in a full day at any job. Considering her situation. And the fact that it was imperative that she be home before dark. (Her number

one rule for staying safe was that she always got home before dark. Safety was something a woman alone had to be constantly aware of. There were desperate people who prowled around in the city after dark.)

Her love of books carried her through. Which was a good thing, because according to her calculations, it seemed hardly possible to pay off the cost of this moving thing before her hundredth birthday. A thought that made her wonder if the entire experience wasn't making her rather cynical...an attitude that eventually led to trouble.

The truth is, Stella had problems from the very first day.

Not with any of the procedures. She knew that Dewey Decimal System like the back of her hand. Not with the computers, either: she had been using one of her own for years, now. It made her feel like something of a world traveler to exchange emails with friends on other continents. She was even rather proud of her social abilities. Which is why it came as something of a shock to discover she couldn't "get along" very well with the rest of the staff. By the end of the first week, she was sure they were all morons. Including her friend, Ester.

Stella's first confrontation with a staff member happened on her very first day, in what later came to be known as "the egg incident."

"Is there a problem?" The senior librarian and supervisor of the shift looked away from her computer screen and peered over the rims of her reading glasses. She was a tall imposing woman, well dressed in a forest-colored business suit and black turtle-neck sweater. Her dark hair was twisted up neatly in one of those fashionable clips Stella admired but had never

been able to get the hang of.

“Well, yes, Ms. Thatcher, there is.” Stella stepped into the office and placed a book with a green, nondescript cover on the desk. “While I was re-shelving the six hundreds—the cooking section, that is—I found this copy of *The Egg And I* by Betty MacDonald.”

“And where else should a book about eggs be, if not in the cooking section?”

For a split second Stella’s blue eyes widened with surprise before she assumed the woman had simply been too caught up in what she was doing to hear her right. “You see that’s the point. I happen to own a copy of this book, myself, and it has nothing to do with cooking. It’s about a woman who married a chicken rancher and the miserable years they went through before their divorce. There isn’t a recipe in the whole thing.”

There were a few moments of awkward silence between them before Ms. Thatcher broke off eye-contact and busied herself thumbing through the pages a few moments. “Obviously a computer glitch,” she finally pronounced. “The computers do all the cataloguing these days, and it’s strictly by word association. But I see this was published way back in the forties... hasn’t been checked out since 1989. Still has the signature slip we used before we automated.” She closed the cover with a decisive thump, “Should have been turned over to FL years ago. Thank you, Stella. I’ll take care of it.”

“What is FL?”

“Friends of the Library. A nationwide organization that handles the sale of all our discards.”

“Discards!” Stella gasped (she couldn’t help it).

“But this was a beautifully written book—a bestseller. They even made a movie out of it starring Fred MacMurry and Claudette Colbert!”

“That may be. But it’s a new age, isn’t it, and this is hopelessly out-dated. I assure you our shelves are loaded down with a more than adequate supply of information on divorce. Or even chicken ranches for that matter. With all the latest and up-to-date information from around the world.”

Around the world. Stella felt something like a balloon that was slowly losing its air, and stared for a few moments at the tips of her sensible leather slip-ons that were peeking out from under her gray wool slacks. What about all the worlds that no longer existed anymore? How did one go about traveling to them? Suppose a person wanted to “time travel” to experience a different age altogether? See what it was like back then. Maybe even pick up some useful bit of information that is no longer common knowledge these days. And how else was one supposed to become intimately acquainted with great minds if librarians could lop off the connection to the very works where they lived? Why that—Stella shuddered—was practically murder!

No wonder the young minds of today weren’t interested in such things anymore. These lovely things were no longer a part of their life experience. Not by their own choice, as some would have us believe, but by the choice of some (some senior librarian!) who had made the choice for them. Now the children of the future must evolve out of the narrow-minded channels of a single generation instead of having the freedom to tap into the wisdom of the ages, right from their own neighborhoods.

“Outrageous!” Stella’s indignation at the very thought of children being denied this ecstasy boiled over while she backed out of the office. As if Ms. Thatcher had suddenly revealed herself as a snake. “I’m going to—to formally complain to the authorities!”

Slamming the door on the way out was an accident.

The next confrontation occurred three days after that and was referred to (in the subsequent deposition) as “the coffee altercation.” If it could be said that an incident was something one did, while an altercation was something one did to someone else, Stella should have realized by the very nature of these events that things were escalating.

Only she didn’t.

2

It happened when she decided to approach Whitcomb Ritter Library's resident author. The term was casual, in the sense that everyone knew he didn't actually live at the facility: he could merely be found working there five days a week. Always in the same corner of the glass-enclosed study area where people could plug in their own laptop computers. If there was anyone who would object to this new policy that the majority of books in public libraries should be five years old or less, it would surely be somebody who wrote books.

It was commonly known that Colonel Oliver P. Henry was working on some sort of military history that—according to Stella—automatically made him a man of principle. He was a large man, broad enough about the middle to have to wear his shirts out rather than tucked in. He had wavy gray hair and a tan that one was apt to see on the younger athletic types rather than retirees. As if he must spend a lot of time at the beach.

He always took up the entire end of the same table, with his papers and things spread all over. That day he was wearing khaki pants and a multi-colored Hawaiian shirt that reminded Stella of the waiters down at the *Luau Palace*, where she ate occasionally on Sunday afternoons.

"Colonel Henry?" She whispered tentatively,

though they were the only two people in the room. "May I bother you for a moment?"

"Yes, what is it," he whispered back and clicked the save button before glancing up at her, clearly trying to calculate if he was supposed to know her or not.

"We've never met," she replied to the questioning gaze. "My name is Stella Madison, and I was just wondering if—as a fellow book lover—you were aware of this new library policy to discard all the vintage books."

Once, again, it was as if she had interrupted someone's private world, and the Colonel had to blink twice before any semblance of thought replaced his blank stare. "Matter of logistics, I'd say. The place would have to be ten times the size if it didn't have some kind of rotation system. Other than the basics."

"What I'm trying to tell you, Colonel, is that there are no more basics."

Another brief silence as he thought about this. "They wouldn't dump the classics."

"They do maintain a small collection of those—I've just come from looking them up. But they have to meet very strict guidelines to be included. They have to be... what was the phrase Ms. Thatcher used... oh, yes—to be politically correct."

"My dear woman," the words were more exasperation than compliment, "nothing in this world changes more frequently than politics. But I hardly see what all this—"

"My point exactly." Stella moved closer and looked so intently into his green eyes that he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Don't you agree, Colonel Henry, that if we start changing our basics as quickly as we change our politics, society will soon be going in

circles instead of moving forward?"

"Do you..." he drummed impatient fingers on the table, "have some sort of a petition you would like me to sign? Is that it?"

"Well, if you think it would help. What exactly should it say?"

"How should I know what it should say? I have a hard enough time deciding what I should say about things I do know something about. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"What would you say..." Stella persisted. "If I told you there isn't a single copy of *Huckleberry Finn* in this entire library?"

"Considering the way people feel about racial slurs these days..." He returned his attention to the screen, then, as if the conversation were over. "I'd say it was good riddance."

"Obviously..." Stella was beginning to feel somewhat impatient herself. "You have never personally read it. *Huckleberry Finn* is a plea for us to be less bigoted in this world—not the other way around."

"Whatever it is a plea for, it doesn't concern me."

"Spoken like every other pompous, self-centered citizen who thinks the world owes you something and not that other way round!" Stella smacked the facing lid of his briefcase closed, and turned smartly to leave.

How was she supposed to know he had a hot cup of coffee sitting in there?

She might have been let go for that. An employee had no business insulting patrons, much less getting physical. But—as everyone knew—it was against library policy to bring food or drinks inside. Beyond a minor yelp and leap to his feet to save the papers beneath, there wasn't much the Colonel could do about

it. Especially after Stella went so far as to smuggle a stack of paper towels in from the ladies' room to help him clean up. If not for the fact that the walls were glass and they had a fairly large crowd that day, no one would have even noticed.

At any rate, she took over immediately. In fact, while the Colonel was at something of a loss to decide whether he should betray himself further by dumping the brand-name cup and wet napkins into the nearest waste-basket just outside the door, she whisked them away herself, along with an armload of splattered newspapers he had been going over. She took those over to a corner table where she quickly but discretely began wiping them off, then shaking them closed by each long wooden holder. The picture of efficiency until the last one. And as the Colonel was still recovering his balance from the unpleasant incident, he couldn't help staring at her through the glass.

The last two pages of that edition were stuck together with a sticky wetness that called for more than a brisk swipe. Stella pulled them gently apart and gasped at the picture of a youthful face smiling up at her. The headline read, "Matt Johnson Comes Home Today." Under that, it said, "Passengers on flight 342 waited respectfully as the casket bearing the remains of the young hero were accompanied by a uniformed escort toward waiting family members on the tarmac of the county airport. Johnson was a..." Stella put a hand over her heart and closed her eyes for a few seconds of utter remorse. How much longer would it all go on? She couldn't bear to read anymore. Instead, she dabbed gently at the remaining drops, and carried the papers slowly to the media center, where she replaced them reverently back into the newspaper

rack. Completely forgetting to apologize to the Colonel. Something she didn't realize until she was home sitting in her pajamas that night.

Linked with that brief pang of regret she always felt when confronted with such losses (Stella was an avid watcher of the nightly news), the coffee altercation became an even more disappointing experience. One that left her rather blue for the rest of the week. Not so much at the Colonel's lack of sympathy for future generations, but at her own embarrassing response to it. One could blame it on age or the financial strain she was under, but even Stella thought she had higher standards than that.

When, on the following Friday, she received another unexpected letter in the mail, stating that her building owners were going to pay each tenant a small moving reimbursement (maybe even enough to hire a moving van!), her troubles should have been partly relieved.

Except she hadn't found a half-decent place to move into, yet. Even though her circle of apartment-hunting around her own familiar neighborhood had widened to nearly a mile. They were all so expensive! Normally, that would have been enough to send her into a whole new fervor of anxiety. Only by then...

Something had mysteriously changed inside her.

Not only was she certain a place would show up if she kept looking, moving was not the most important thing on her mind any more. How could it be, when she was personally standing on the brink of what was a disastrous change in society and no one else seemed to care? Had everyone been brainwashed?

It wasn't until the following Tuesday that the rare opportunity revealed itself.

3

Never in her life had Stella considered herself an immoral person. Things like lying, cheating, and stealing were hardly in her vocabulary, much less, a part of her normal behavior. Which is why it came as an absolute shock to be accused of a crime. Crimes were things a degenerate few stayed awake nights plotting, or at least the result of an explosion of heated passions. Stella hadn't any forethought at all when she committed hers: it had simply been a reaction. Rather like an unexpected belch in public, or the need to blow one's nose.

In the beginning, she didn't feel as if she were doing anything wrong. She felt like she was helping people. Which should have been warning enough if only she had been in her right mind. In her right mind, Stella knew better than anyone that "two wrongs never make right." Besides that, these new sins started out so small.

They started when she was assigned to work on the discards. They were stored in a room behind Ms. Thatcher's office and Stella was to remove each from the library data system and hand-stamp the word DISCARD inside each cover. Stacks and stacks of books. Nearly a thousand of them! It practically broke Stella's heart. Not simply because they would no longer be available to the general public, but because