

Kill Me If You Can

**A PATRICIA AMBLE MYSTERY
BOOK 2**

Nicole Young



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1

Who said you can never go home again?

What a bunch of hooley.

I was home. Again.

And while perhaps not a single soul that passed me tonight on the frozen highway would recognize me, I still knew where to find home: Number Three Valentine's Lane, a dilapidated log cabin in the middle of a cedar woodland squashed between the creek and the bay.

Yeah. I knew where I was going.

Now I just had to figure out where I came from.

I squinted through swirling snowflakes and squeaking wipers to see the turn ahead. I barely missed the bank of white made by the plow as I maneuvered my Explorer onto the narrow two-track that led a half mile down to the house.

Around the final curve, the porch light blazed a welcome through the storm. The realtor must have left it on for me. She had hated to hear I was driving up in the worst blizzard of the year but obviously had faith enough that I'd arrive safely.

I pulled into the driveway, which already had several



inches of new snow since the plow had last been here, and turned off the engine.

Silence. A balm to my nerves.

My boots crunched in the drifts as I walked around to unload my suitcase and sleeping bag. How many times had I done this in the past? Pull up to the new home, take out the suitcase, bring in the sleeping bag and cot . . .

I did a quick calculation. This would be my fifth renovation project. The last one had just about ended my career. The spooky old Victorian had been home to a body buried in the basement. Finding the corpse had almost been too much for me. But God knew not to give me more than I could handle, and I finished the project unscathed—physically and mentally, at least.

But as for my heart . . .

I slammed the hatch closed. It didn't merit a trip down memory lane.

Better to keep my mind here in the present, down Valentine's Lane, and the project ahead of me.

And if the porch were any indication, I'd have plenty of work come spring. The boards bounced as I walked to the door. The thin layer of ice crackled into spidery veins.

The realtor had warned me not to buy anything sight unseen. But I had seen it—twenty-some years ago. How much could it have changed? It still felt like yesterday that I'd run around in these woods and swum at the sandy beach out front. I knew when I called Northern Realty a few months back and found out this cottage was for sale, the one I'd spent my summers in as a kid,

that God had made it all possible. I knew He meant for me to come here. To come home.

I put my hand on the doorknob and paused, hoping the agent hadn't let me down. When I'd asked her how I'd get in the house tonight, she'd laughed.

"Nobody up here locks their doors. I'll leave the keys on the table for you, if you think you'll need them."

"Up here" was the Silvan Peninsula, a stretch of land that stuck down into Lake Michigan in the state's dislocated top half. On one side of the narrow strip were the unpredictable waters of the big lake, on the other, the calm, sheltered shores of Nocquette Bay. I'd survived the cities and towns of lower Michigan, now I'd discover if I could hack the wintry weather and isolation of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, or the U.P. as the natives called it.

The door swung open into the kitchen and I flicked on the overhead light. The room looked so . . . small. I hadn't realized how a place could shrink in a little over two decades. But, I guess I wasn't a scrawny seven-year-old anymore. Tonight, the red-and-gold-speckled '50s countertops reached my hips instead of my chin. And if I put my hand up, I could almost touch the white asbestos ceiling tiles. Back then, I'd had to climb on a stool piled with books to retrieve my stuck gum.

Still, everything was as I remembered: tacky beyond compare.

I dropped my gear by the door and walked through to the great room. I hit the switch, but nothing happened, the fault of either ancient wiring or burned-out bulbs.

The light from the kitchen spilled onto the fireplace

against the far wall. The massive limestone chimney would probably still be standing long after the rest of the house collapsed around it.

A few pieces of furniture were scattered around the room, left by the previous owners. I sat on a tatty green sofa, and gave a test bounce. The spring beneath me gave a *twang*. My eyes misted. It was the very couch I'd jumped on as a kid.

Boing, boing, boing . . .

"Patricia Louise Amble," my mother had yelled from the kitchen, "get off that sofa!"

I smiled at the memory and leaned back.

Mom died young and beautiful. While I only remember the smiles and fun, there were apparently dark times that she kept from me. I was later told that when my father left her, Mom changed. Gone were the carefree days of youth. She was single and had a child to support. She was alone and afraid. And without a church upbringing, she had no Jesus. No one on whom to lay her burdens.

Before the summer of my eighth year, she was dead, entangled with the metal of her Ford pickup at the bottom of Mead Quarry. A cry for help that was never heard until it was too late.

I wiped at a tear that trickled down one cheek. I used to be angry when I thought how Mom abandoned me. I considered suicide to be an act of pure selfishness. Then time passed, and suddenly the tables were turned, and I found myself recovering from another self-inflicted death, but this one under completely different circumstances.

Either way, whether from being a martyr to oneself or to others, suicide made a cruel tonic for those left behind.

Now that I was thirty-three, six years older than my mother had been when she'd killed herself, I had a little more understanding of the trials of life. How they can beat you down and poison you. How they can make you weary and fill you with despair. The little twists and turns I encountered on my narrow road often threatened to plunge me into my own abyss of hopelessness. It gave me compassion for my mother. It made me yearn to travel back in time and tell her of my one salvation, my one hope.

I stood up and headed back to the kitchen. The past had drifted up and captured me again. But wasn't that what I was here for? To discover my past? To discover my mother? Her loves, her hates, her favorite color, her shoe size?

Only after the death of my grandmother, who'd raised me from the age of eight, could I even entertain the thought of looking into the past. As long as Grandmother had been alive, she'd discouraged probing questions. It must have been like a knife in her heart the night she'd gotten the call that my mother was dead. Even years later, she couldn't talk about Mom except with vague descriptions and scattered details that left an incomplete picture of the woman who'd birthed me.

I might be off to a late start, but I wanted to know my mother. I wanted to know everything about her. Her life held the key to crates of unanswered questions that cluttered my mind and kept me locked in limbo. How

could I love someone else, commit to someone else, if I didn't know diddly about myself or my heritage?

I grabbed my gear and climbed the staircase to the second-story balcony. From here I could look down into the great room. Tomorrow, I'd be able to gaze out the high picture windows and see across the bay to the silo-like tower, a factory incinerator from a bygone era, on the other side. But tonight, the blackness was broken only by an occasional swirl of snow against the glass.

I set down my things and leaned against the rail. I almost gave a contented sigh, but I knew better than to celebrate my inner happiness. At any minute, all chaos could break loose in my life.

Though I held my pensive pose, I was still thanking God in my mind. I couldn't believe I was actually here. As a kid, I'd promised myself that when I grew up, I'd buy this cottage and live in it, and bake pies for the Fourth of July celebration down in Port Silvan, and make lemonade for all the children who would come to swim on Saturdays.

I'd never baked a pie, but I could probably figure out the lemonade. Would I be breaking my promise if I drank it alone?

A yawn, punctuated by a squeak in my throat, sent my thoughts in the direction of bed. Ghosts of the snowflakes I'd battled on the road the past eight hours danced before my eyes. Time for some sleep.

I dragged my stuff into my old bedroom and set it by the door. I flicked on the light and stood in numb surprise. It looked like I wouldn't need my cot after all. The room was furnished with a twin bed, a table, and a

chair. A puffy patchwork quilt was turned back to reveal crisp white sheets and a plush pillow.

Who would have taken time to make up a bed for me? As nice as the realtor was, I couldn't imagine that she'd done it.

A piece of paper was angled on the pillow. Perhaps it was a note from my fairy godmother. I stepped across a braided rug and reached for the page.

My hand jerked back as if slapped. It wasn't a note, it was a photograph. Of my mother. Her high school graduation picture lay torn in two pieces on the pillowcase.

Written in thick black script across her smiling face were the words "DON'T ASK WHY."