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at the
Spinel Reef
Resort

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Spinel Reef Resort





Arrivals

Buck hauled the last of Mia's luggage onto his boat. "Sure that's all you're bringing?"

The matching aluminum cases filled the stern of the motorboat, piled on every horizontal surface. The two captain's chairs barely crested above the sea of shiny luggage.

"I didn't think I'd need much for a beach trip," Mia replied seriously, completely undaunted by his teasing. "Caribbean clothing is much lighter than a cold weather wardrobe."

"Lighter, huh?" Buck stowed the last case neatly away below. "I'd hate to keep up with your bags when you travel anywhere cold."

"They generally get to me eventually." She lovingly stroked the smoothly varnished gold of the

wood. "Your boat is gorgeous, Buck. How long have you had her?"

Buck thumped the gleaming instrument panel proudly. "1957 Chris Craft 32 Vintage Express Cruiser. I spent the past year rebuilding her from the ground up."

"She was certainly worth the effort." Mia admired the sleek lines of the boat. "They don't build them this beautifully anymore."

"It gave me something to do." Buck swiped at his close cropped silver hair with one hand, clenching the wheel with tightly white knuckles. "I tell you, Mia, after Sarah died, I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. We'd always planned everything together. All our retirement plans were us, together. Not me on my own."

"Sarah was very special, Buck." Mia squinted out at the ocean, her eyes tearing up behind her oversized round sunglasses. "It's hard to keep going sometimes, I know. But it's what she would have wanted."

He gestured at the wide blue sea with a broad sweep of his muscular, tanned hand. "Setting me up running dive operations and the reef restoration really gave me a purpose. Something to do every morning, a reason to get up. And this little lady, well, she's filled my evenings." He patted the gleaming wood and shot a quick glance at her. "Anyway, thanks." He awkwardly cleared his throat and blinked rapidly, retreating behind his sunglasses.

"It was what Leo and Sarah would have wanted." Her warm pink lips curved into a sudden smile.

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"It's not like having an ex Navy Seal running the dive center is exactly bad for business, Mr. Master Chief."

He barked a laugh and swiped at his silver hair again.

"And I had to have someone I could trust with the reef restoration. I can't wait to hear all about it."

"When we dive, you won't believe the progress made since you were here last year. I can't believe how those tiny coral fragments have taken off, and I help measure the things. And the fish, all the colors of the rainbow. New species appear all the time. It's amazing to see it developing," he told her.

"I can't wait to see." Mia and her husband, Leo, had often gone on dive trips with Buck, Leo's childhood friend, and Sarah, Buck's wife. Whenever they'd taken on a hotel with interesting dive possibilities, they'd invited the other couple to join them on the adventures and brainstorm ideas. The reef restoration at the Spinel Reef Resort was a cherished project of Mia's. Growing a coral garden, where one had been destroyed a century ago by unwise dredging, was a dream come true. She couldn't wait to dive and see the changes.

She gazed out at the turquoise water surrounding her, smiling with pleasure. The boat trip to the hotel's island was always exciting, especially when she could see nothing but blue sea and sky as far as the horizon in all directions. She relaxed into the steady roar of the engine and feel of the wind on her face, feeling stress leaving her body.

"Mia?" Buck broke into her reverie. "Mia, Mark was telling me you'd been a little busy lately and really

needed a break. And something about finding dead bodies? What's that?" His brow furrowed into marked tanned creases.

She focused on him, crossing her legs and carefully positioning them to an elegant angle, neatly propped up on her largest suitcase. Mark, her stepson and the Spinel Resorts CEO, must have told Buck to check up on her. She was glad she had such an attentive son, but could have done without his constant, nagging concern. "Buck, it's nothing to worry about. There were a few murders at hotels while I stayed there. They were all cleared up and the police arrested the murderers. So there's absolutely nothing to worry about. It's all in the past." She carefully didn't mention that she'd helped clear the murders up—and risked her life doing so.

"Mark said he thought you needed a good long break—you'd been overdoing it." Speaking a little awkwardly and determinedly focusing on the sea ahead, he added, "Lots of gossip between hotels, you know."

"Don't I know it," Mia sighed. "A nice break from murder and mayhem sounds nice, Buck. I'm completely on vacation for this trip—I know you all have everything under control at this hotel, unlike Arizona." She shuddered a little at the memory, "That was a complete mess." She'd spent the past few months getting the Spinel Desert Sunrise Resort up to Spinel standards. "Really, I could do with a relaxing break. Dive trips to the reef, long walks on the beach, lovely Caribbean cuisine and the spa all sound wonderful right now."

He nodded sharply. "That's what you'll get, then."

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A loud noise broke into the sound of the engine and waves whipped up, misting her in froth as a helicopter flew low overhead. Mia patted her hair down, resettling it into its accustomed waves.

Buck nodded at it and whistled. "Nice, a Sikorsky S-76. That must be Skip what's his name. You know, the Blare whiz kid. Evie was pulling out the red carpet for him."

"Skip Wilson?" Mia asked. "I would have thought he'd rent his own island, not stay at a hotel." Skip Wilson, she knew, had taken the social media world by storm. His video sharing app bestowed instant fame or condemned users to instant obscurity. She hadn't used it yet, but her daughter was always uploading something and chattering about likes. Mia had seen the headlines about Skip Wilson in the news, however. Her mouth twisted in a tight mow, "Especially not one of our hotels. They're a bit family oriented and quiet for his crowd."

Buck shrugged. "Maybe he likes being around people. He does do social media, after all, so he must like being around people."

"Well, he's certainly not going to have the kind of parties he's used to on my island," Mia said tartly. "He'd better plan on a relatively quiet vacation."

Buck shrugged again, completely confident in being able to handle anything that happened on the island. "Maybe that's what he wants this week."

As they approached the island, a long gray dock stretched out to meet them, bobbing on the water with a neat hut perched at the end. Buck pointed out to it as

they passed. "The reef and the new dock. Looks like a dive party is out there now." A bright red dive flag bobbed proud of the waves, warning of those below the surface. Buoys warned against boats approaching the young reef. Buck swung his Chris Craft around sharply, cut the motor, smartly easing the boat into her slip in the little marina.

Mia always loved her first sight of the island, shining bright under the deep blue sky. Low white buildings ringed with breezy porches complemented the long expanse of gleaming white beach, broken only by the rich greens of palm trees against the sky.

Buck stepped onto the dock and held out his hand. "Here you are, milady." He grinned at her. "I'll send someone down for that mountain of luggage. Once was enough." He rubbed his muscular tan arm with a mock grimace, then squinted out at the horizon. "Looks like the ferry's arriving. We always beat 'em, though. Can't keep up with my girl here." He patted his boat.

The large boat, ringed with eager guests around the railings, pulled up to the end of the dock. Mia noticed several children physically restrained by loving hands from leaping over the side, buzzing with eagerness. A man, smartly dressed in creased white shorts and a turquoise blue polo shirt emblazoned with the hotel logo, tied the dock line off, then began helping people disembark with a welcoming smile and steady arm. Mia grinned as he said for the tenth time to a tourist struggling to unload their large suitcase and completely blocking the gangway to the dock, "No, no, sir, we will send a bell boy for the baggage. Please, sir,

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we'll handle it." She wondered how many heavy suitcases had slipped from tourists' hands into the ocean as they navigated from the bobbing boat to the dock. Much better to collect the bags and deliver them safely to guest's rooms. Several young men with full carts lined the dock's end, accompanied by a flock of departing guests shepherding their luggage.

Mia and Buck allowed themselves to fall a little behind the straggling group heading to the hotel. They kept to the side of the dock so departing guests, sunburnt and chattering about return plans, could board the ferry. It would be easier for Mia to greet her friends on the resort team after the other guests were checked in.

A line of uniformed employees trotted out to the helicopter pad to greet the VIP arrival with appropriate fanfare, if not an actual red carpet. A beefy young man with a burgeoning paunch and muscular arms held them back from the helipad, obviously checking those approaching before letting them anywhere near the arrivals. He must be the security guard, Mia decided, as a young man, thin shoulders hunched against any sudden onslaught, disembarked. Skip Wilson was a lot thinner and less confident looking than she'd seen in his press conferences. His tattered Nirvana t-shirt and faded jeans were not prepossessing. Light brown hair was blown straight up by the wind like a dandelion, revealing an incipient bald spot, and his shoulders curved protectively around the laptop bag he carried with both hands. Maybe he did just need a quiet vacation, Mia thought. Skip Wilson didn't look like he was in any kind of shape for wild parties.

"Mia!" a warm voice called out and Evie Ferguson, the hotel manager, rushed to her with a broad grin. "I'm so glad you're here!" She hugged Mia enthusiastically, her round cheeks just brushing Mia's. "It's been forever since your last stay." She nodded at the helicopter and ferry crowd, "It's a bit crazy at the moment, but I can't wait to catch up." Her eyes darted back as a private boat swung into the marina. She smoothed her crown of intricately woven braids that increased her apparent height by at least three inches. "There's another arrival. Always guests come all at once."

"Never a dull moment at a hotel," Mia smiled at her friend, tiny lines crinkling around her bright blue eyes. "I'm here for a nice long vacation, so I'll see you when you have a chance to chat."

"I can't wait to catch you up with all we've been doing," Evie enthused with a smile, doe brown eyes bright. "And I'd love your advice on a few things."

Buck told Evie firmly, "Vacation, remember. Mia's here for a break."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course," Evie looked a little flustered, straightening her loose floral dress around her plump figure. "You'll have a completely relaxing vacation, Mia. Don't you worry about a thing. Not a single thing. We'll take care of you right." She nodded firmly, lips slightly pursed. Then, her eyes flickered over at the crowd around the helicopter. "I'd better go check the VIP in. From what I've heard, he just loves the extra attention." She rolled her eyes expressively. Giving Mia a cheerful wink, she added, "Don't worry, your cottage is on the other side from Mr. Wilson's. I've heard all about those

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parties of his." She hugged Mia one more time and hurried to join the celebrity entourage.

A voice called, "Buck!" and the concierge, Sandra Rolle, waved her hand, motioning him over. An athletic, tanned group surrounded her, festooned in the latest dive gear, obviously itching to meet their renowned dive master.

"See you later, Mia," he told her and strode over to the group. She watched as he pointed to the dive dock, then started walking down with the dive group, enthusiastically gesturing at the clear blue water. A woman peered over the side and squealed excitedly; the guests clustering around her find. Buck stood over them, beaming as proudly as if he'd called the fish over himself.

The island was a good fit for Buck, Mia decided with a smile. She looked at the large crowd waiting to check in, then chose an inviting rocking chair overlooking the beach and dock. New arrivals surveyed the beach and hotel enthusiastically, calling out interesting finds and exclaiming at the beauty of the island. A departing guest, floppy straw hat clutched in one hand while the other waved frantically, ran down the marina dock, barely making it onto the ferry as it departed, ably assisted by a deck hand swinging her onto the deck with a white toothed grin. He closed the railing chain with an air of finality.

A caravan of luggage carts trundled back into the hotel, shepherded by smiling young men in crisp uniforms. Guests hurried to point out their bags and room numbers, and the fleet separated to the various rooms. She saw her own shiny aluminum stack—taking

up an entire cart on its own—presumably en route to her cottage. She wondered which one Evie had chosen for her this trip.

From what Mia remembered, the majority of Spinel Reef Resort's guests reshuffled about once a week. Most people stayed one week, arriving on Saturday and departing the next Saturday. There were several all-inclusive packages the hotel offered, and most guests took advantage of the multiple dive options. There were, of course, always a few guests who stayed only through a long weekend, unable to leave their normal routine for any longer. Since the Bahamas was a relatively easy getaway from the eastern United States, the hotel was usually booked solid, even if the only time it actually felt full was during the flurry of Saturday departures and arrivals. A few retired snowbird guests stayed for most of the winter as well, glad to get away from their icy homes for a few months without dealing with the problems of owning a house in a foreign country.

She spotted a self-important older man in well worn dive gear, carrying an officious clipboard, pushing his way through the newcomers like an aging salmon swimming upstream. A gawky young man trailed behind him, lugging a heavy bag. Spinel Reef offered a residency program to scientists or graduate students every season. The current incumbents, Dr. Sebastian Barbeau and his grad student, were documenting the reef restoration project, with a focus on the timing of the different species' arrivals. She looked forward to discussing his studies with him.

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A tall glass, frosted with condensation, was adroitly placed at her elbow. Looking up, she saw the smiling face of George, the headwaiter. "George!" She quickly stood up and hugged him in greeting.

"It's been a while since you were with us, Ms. Mia," he beamed in welcome. "I brought you a glass of switcha, to get you started."

"Thanks, George," she sipped the tart refreshing drink, made from key limes. "That is perfection. I missed the island."

"Glad you're back with us," he hurried off to fill the new guests' drink orders, still beaming cheerfully as he fielded orders with easy efficiency.

"Ms. Mia!" Sandra Rolle, the concierge, hurried over and gave her a hug. "So good to see you! You're all set up at the Yellow Bells Cottage; here's your key." She looked back at her beleaguered assistant manning the long line at the desk and hugged Mia one more time. "Gotta go!" Her crisp white skirt swished as she returned to her guests. Sandra's bold orange and turquoise headscarf coordinated perfectly with her uniform polo shirt and the white classic tennis shoes were just right for long days on her feet. Some days, Mia mused, it would be nice to just wrap a headscarf around her hair and get going. No more bad hair days. Not that she ever allowed her hair to have those. She patted her smooth ash blonde locks, elegantly in place.

Sipping her cold glass of switcha with pleasure, she was in no hurry to leave the stunning beach view. The crowd had started clustering into groups, some eager to get their swimsuits on and splash in the waves, some

content to drink tall, frosty concoctions and admire the scenery. Now that she had her key, she could escape to her cottage haven any time she wanted, but she enjoyed watching the hectic scurrying of the new arrivals. It was nice being at a resort that she didn't need to fix.

A middle aged woman juggling several heavy bags trudged up the path from the marina. She looked hot and tired, her sweaty blond hair showing dark roots in furrowed rows of scraped back hair trapped in a stringy ponytail.

Mia called out, "One of the hospitality team would be happy to take that to your room for you." She caught one of the young men's eyes and motioned to him. He whisked the bags onto his cart and stood politely waiting for directions.

The woman smiled at her. "Thanks. Two carryons is my handling limit. The duffle with my husband's dive stuff put it over the top." She scowled. "And," she made a face, "he ditched me to go check out that dive dock you're supposed to have." She shook her head disgustedly, "Some second honeymoon this is." Stretching out sore muscles, she pointed to a distant figure far out on the beach, her thin mouth pursed like she'd sucked a lemon. "Just look at him."

"I'm sure he's just excited," Mia commiserated. "Why don't you check in and relax for a bit?" She added, "Sometimes it takes a day for vacation mode to kick in."

The woman barked a laugh and wiped beads of sweat off her brow. "As if he ever relaxes." She grimaced and shook her head. "I'm going to enjoy myself, anyway. Spa treatments, here I come."

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"That's the spirit," Mia agreed. "Relax, then you can have some fun together."

The woman left for the lobby, motioning to the bell boy to follow.

Sipping her drink, Mia enjoyed the gentle breeze from the porch fans hanging from the white rafters. It was a lovely late afternoon, sun slowly lengthening the violet shadows. A few guests started up a game of beach volleyball. None of them were very good, but they had fun just getting the ball over the net. They spent more time running to keep it out of the sea than with it in the air. Cries of "Ball" and happy laughter melded with the steady sound of ocean waves against the shore.

Couples walked hand in hand down the white sands, leaning close and embracing, their feet in the ocean. A large pasty white man in brightly flowered swimming trunks lumbered into the waves, grinning in delight as he bobbed, suddenly weightless in the clear turquoise water. Children laughed as they wiggled their toes in the warm sand and started epic sand castles.

A bird called once, the harsh sound cutting across the gentle rhythm of the waves. Palm trees rattled their fronds, and the sweet fragrance of frangipani mixed with the salt of the sea. Mia breathed deeply, feeling her body ease into relaxation.

After a while, she rose and started toward the Yellow Bells cottage, enjoying the meandering paths winding under the coconut palms. Deep purple shadows patterned the path with palm fronds. Small lizards scuttled across the smooth concrete and birds sang overhead. A jeweled hummingbird swooped across her

path with an audible whistle of speed, beelining for a large red hibiscus flower.

Yellow Bells Cottage was a charming white frame building at the very end of the line of cottages. True to its name, it was framed by two large yellow bells bushes, covered in fragrant sunshine yellow flowers, brightly dancing in the breeze. Mia climbed the stairs, breathing in the lovely smell.

The cottage was built on low stilts, raised up a little above storm tide level. Her diminutive front porch, complete with rocking chairs and rope hammock piled with yellow cushions, looked out on the vast sweep of ocean. Clever planting and generous spacing made each cottage feel completely isolated, alone in the tropical jungle. Not another soul could be seen, just sea and sky and the deep green of palm trees. Mia stretched her hands out on the white porch railing and breathed in the salt air in a huge draught, enjoying her vacation already.

The dollhouse of a cottage was charming inside as well, with white painted rafters and a slow ceiling fan stirring the air. Tall shutters framed each window, ready to shut out rain or the summer sun. Thoughtfully placed chairs dotted the room, covered by cheerful yellow flowered chintz. There was a tiny kitchen, more of an expanded wet bar, really, and a separate bedroom, with that sublime ocean view and a tall four poster bed. She pushed back the shutters, opening the entire wall of the bedroom to the gorgeous blue sea.

Mia's luggage was stacked neatly next to the closet. Methodically, she unpacked everything, storing her bags in the closet as she emptied each. She shook out

hanging clothes, separating out what needed ironing—mostly the linens—and placed her other clothes into the bureau. Her extensive trip wardrobe was largely turquoises and blues with the occasional dash of rose pink, in planned coordination with the resort's color scheme. She enjoyed dressing to fit locations and occasions as much as she had back when she was a girl playing dress up in her mother's finery.

She always brought everything she might possibly want with her on trips since so much of the time, she didn't know when she would be back home in Atlanta. Mia kept bags for specific climates neatly labeled and packed in her condominium that her kids could send on to her if she needed to go straight to another hotel with a different climate. She didn't want to end up in Alaska with only her Caribbean wardrobe!

Mia and her husband, Leo Spinel, had travelled the world for the family business, setting up new hotels, updating older ones and generally checking that every last detail was perfect at the Spinel Resorts. Now that she was a widow, she continued the adventures on her own.

Mark and Alec, her stepsons and respectively, CEO and COO of Spinel Resorts, and her daughter Nicole, moving rapidly up through the company's accounting department, actively encouraged Mia to travel, not stay home and brood. Not that she was the brooding type. Mia preferred to keep busy and enjoy life to the fullest.

Of course, Mia thought with a smile, if she was busy traveling, she wasn't busy finding nice people for

her children to date, and generally doing her very best to improve their lives. They did so like her to travel—and she always sent back wonderful presents.

She neatly placed the rest of her luxurious silk lingerie in soft shades of pastels into a drawer and closed it, walked out onto the porch and admired the view again. She had to admit to herself, this time her children had been right—not that she'd ever admit it to them.

Transforming the Desert Sunrise Resort into a hotel for the family to be proud of had been much more difficult than she'd anticipated, and the onsite murder hadn't helped to improve the image. It had taken longer than she expected, but by the time she left, glowing reviews of the resort were already appearing prominently, and the murder was merely intriguing history, not a deterrent to visitors.

Luckily, the Spinel Reef Resort was impeccably run, they'd assured her the balance sheets were well into the black and there wasn't a thing for her to do but vacation.

She fully intended to enjoy these next few weeks basking in this island paradise.



Mindful Meditations

Mia left the shutters open that night, falling asleep to the soothing sound of ocean waves under the moonlight, and waking to chirping birds welcoming the first rays of dawn. For a minute she lay in the comfortable bed, nestled below smooth white sheets, enjoying the dappled light dancing through the picture window. Finally, she stretched deeply and slowly sat up. She felt refreshed after a sound night's sleep. Now, she was ready to explore the island.

Mia quickly dressed in white linen trousers and a turquoise blouse, embroidered with brilliantly colored flowers around the neckline. With deliberation, she left her phone and her delicately jeweled watch on her bedside table, determined to not even think about work

today. She was here for vacation only, Evie and Buck were taking care of the hotel. She carefully placed a pair of azure blue spinel earrings in her ears, smoothed a delicate pink lipstick over her lips and went out to start her day.

It was still early in the morning for sleeping vacationers. She couldn't hear any sounds from other guests, just the gentle breeze and soft slapping of the waves. The air felt quiet and calm, as if she was the only one awake on the island. Since she was still early for breakfast, she decided to leisurely make her way down the beach toward the main hotel. It was just a short way to the beach, down a softly trodden path fringed with grasses.

Carrying her turquoise bead adorned sandals in one hand, she rolled up her pants legs a few turns at the start of the sand, enjoying the feeling of sand sliding beneath her feet. She dug her rose pink painted toes deep into the sand, smiling at the impressions they made as the surf splashed over them. There was something about playing barefoot in the sand at the beach that took her back to childhood.

The waves gently embraced the shore, returning to the sea with a soft musical fizz as they left the sand. Mia breathed the salty air in deeply, relaxing into the soft rhythm of the ocean. The sun slowly rose, bathing the shining beach in gentle golds.

Each step on an ocean beach was a voyage in time. People had walked like this for millennia, easing their minds and bodies in the endless cycle of the sea. All she could hear was the gently splash of the waves in

Chapter Two

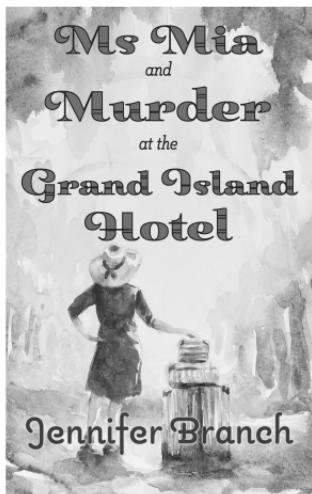
turquoise water. She walked meditatively, lost in the ancient call of the ocean.

The body on the beach was a shock.

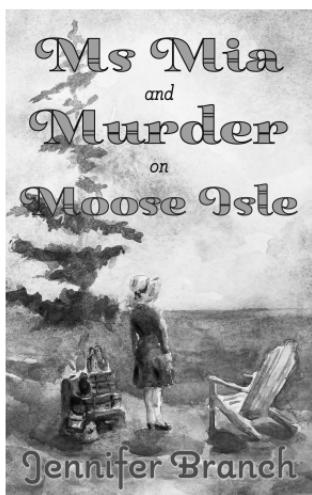


Ms. Mia Murder Mysteries

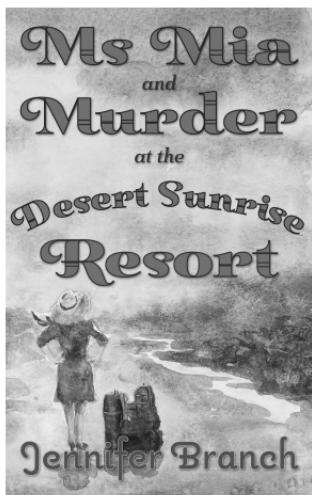
Lighthearted and Fun Mysteries with Satisfying Conclusions.



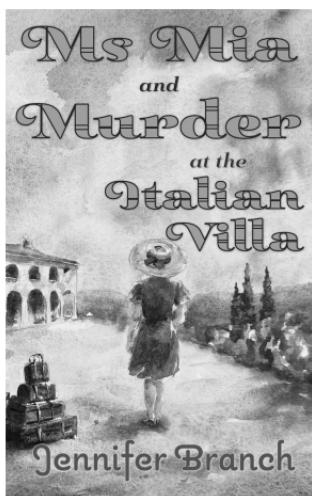
A luxurious private island paradise, with palm trees and white sand beaches, sets the stage for this classic cozy mystery.



A Gilded Age mansion on a secluded Maine island, perched on rocky cliffs overlooking the ocean, sets the scene for a classic murder mystery.



A stolen treasure, a luxury Southwest resort and a glamorous amateur sleuth—join Ms. Mia in a lighthearted murder mystery with a satisfying conclusion.



An Italian villa vacation turns deadly—Ms. Mia unmasks a cunning poisoner in this lighthearted cozy murder mystery.

Ms. Mia joins her childhood friend for a sunny family getaway at a luxurious Veneto villa. But when a family member is poisoned, the idyllic retreat spirals into a maze of secrets and suspicion. Armed with wit, charm, and a glass of prosecco, Ms. Mia dives into the investigation to catch a killer before they strike again—because murder never takes a holiday!

About the Author



Jennifer Branch weaves cozy mysteries with the vibrant flair of her watercolor paintings, inspired by her renown for capturing the Georgia coast. From her Northwest Georgia studio, she pens the Ms. Mia Murder Mysteries series, starring the charming champagne-sipping sleuth Ms. Mia, who solves murders in glamorous resorts. Her debut mystery, *Ms. Mia and Murder at the Grand Island Hotel*, sweeps readers to a Georgia Sea Islands paradise, followed by *Ms. Mia and Murder at Moose Isle Inn*, set on a Maine island.

As a modern impressionist painter, Jennifer infuses her stories with vivid settings, inspired by her artist's eye. When not writing or painting, she roams Georgia's salt marshes, coastal shores, and beyond with her husband, Roger, sons, Edwin and Owen, and dogs, Scout and Sam, finding inspiration in her travels. Visit Branchstudio.com to join her for more Ms. Mia adventures, books, and art!