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Lethal Lit

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ISBN 978-1-338-74292-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the U.S.A.

22 23 24 25 26

23

First printing 2022

Photos © Shutterstock.com

Book design by Jessica Meltzer

Edited by Samantha Swank



Lethal Lit™

A TIG TORRES MYSTERY

MURDER *of*
CROWS

An original novel by K. Ancrum

Scholastic Inc.

Chapter 1

It doesn't matter where you are on earth, one thing will always be true: Buses never come on time. I'd been sitting at the bus stop for over twenty minutes—way past the time the next bus should have come—and there was still no sign of it.

While no one could ever consider me, Tig Torres, a stickler for punctuality, there is a definite limit to everyone's patience, and I was rapidly reaching mine. School was a fifteen-minute bus ride away, but it had been a whole month and a half since I'd seen Wyn and Max. Max had mostly stayed in to recover from his attack by the Lit Killer, and Wyn's parents had dragged her off for summer vacation. Meanwhile, I had spent some time back in New York, trying to shake off the events of the previous spring. But even summer in the city couldn't make me forget what had happened.

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Max, Wyn, and I had been texting and messaging one another, but we had yet to meet up in person. I couldn't wait to see them. It had been a weird and lonely summer.

I shifted my backpack from one shoulder to the other and stood on my toes, trying my best to see down the road.

"It's going to be a while longer," a voice behind me said. "Radio says there's a bit of an accident on the other side of town."

I turned to find an old man standing close to me. Uncomfortably close. He was barely an inch taller than me and wrapped in the itchiest-looking split pea soup-colored wool suit. His brown loafers were polished to a high shine, and his hair was slicked back in waves like a banker in a 1930s black-and-white film. He had a bulbous nose that had a bushy white mustache frothing out beneath it. His eyebrows were nearly invisible beneath the furrow of his brow, and teetering delicately on his nose, with no wires holding them behind his ears, were a pair of gold spectacles. He had a book in his hand with some paper sticking out.

He also looked entirely too old not to be taking advantage of the nearby bus stop bench.

"Geez, buddy! Where did you come from?" I said, stepping away from him discreetly. "If you want to sit down you can; I'm not using the bench."

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Hopefully, he would take the hint.

“No, thank you, young lady,” he said to my severe disappointment. “A man my age rests in one place too long, he never knows whether he’s going to get back up again.” He smiled cheerfully, his eyes crinkling at the sides.

We settled into silence for a moment, and I used looking down the street again as a way to put more precious inches between us. But the old man was undeterred.

“You seem to be someone used to waiting for buses,” the man continued. “That doesn’t quite sound like someone from around here.”

“Buses are never on time no matter where you’re from,” I said dryly.

He let out a bark of a laugh. “Well spoken and very true. But I do think I may still be right. I beg your pardon if I’m prying, but I’m looking for someone in particular, and you do seem familiar.”

I glanced at him again out of the corner of my eye but didn’t move my head to face him. It was a trick I’d learned on the New York City trains. The more eye contact and attention you gave a complete stranger, the more they would continue to talk. If you didn’t want to get involved, you just looked away and kept it that way. Before I moved to Hollow Falls, I could sit stock-still on the subway while a drunk man screamed two

inches from my face. This wasn't much of a challenge in comparison.

"Mm-hmm," I said.

"Well!" the old man said with confidence. "I'm a mystery solver, so I'd better confront the challenge directly."

The phrase "mystery solver" piqued my interest, and I turned to meet his gaze.

The old man tucked his hands behind his back, like he was Sherlock Freakin' Holmes, and walked around me in a circle, looking me up and down.

"Let's see," he began. "I might be rusty, but I think your haircut is a bit too modern for Hollow Falls. I've seen the likes of it on television, but new fashions take an extra three years to get here, and you're here right now. And you have to be from somewhere that produces certain styles quicker than others because the color of your sweater hasn't had a home in youth fashion since 1988, so, like the hair, it must be fresh!" He nodded sharply in self-congratulation.

"As you know," he explained conspiratorially, "all things are cyclical—fashion included, my dear. Let's carry on. Your style makes it likely you've come from a big city. But not the West Coast, as you're dressed a bit more minimalist than they tend to.

"And you're headed north, and there isn't much retail north.

Murder of Crows

There are houses; it's residential. You've got a rather large bag with you, but it's not quite late enough in the day for a sleepover, so I doubt you're heading for a residence. Perhaps the school? You're the right age to be an attendant of Hollow Falls High. I'm an alumna myself. But why the school when classes don't begin for nearly a week? And it's not quite three o'clock, which is far after school closes anyhow. Perhaps a club or activity that reconvenes early—the school paper would be my guess. Not the athletic type, are you?" He chuckled.

It was uncanny, but he was right. About all of it. It was very weird how many things he was able to pick out from my appearance to differentiate me from any other random teen in the town. I had been in the press recently, but stories about the Lit Killer hadn't included a picture of any of the students involved since we're all minors. Random townspeople shouldn't be able to get this close to figuring out who I was. Well. He *might* be able to recognize my voice from the podcast, but what was the point of him putting on this performance if he was a regular listener?

I took one step in the direction of school, having made the decision to bail on the bus and walk and wanting to use his moment of distraction for an escape.

"You must be Tig Torres!" he exclaimed, his eyes bursting open. "The bright young thing who got involved in the Lit

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Killer case! And your city? New York, of course. You can't have moved here more than a year ago! Welcome to Hollow Falls. I've been looking all over for you."

I took an automatic step backward, in the direction of the school.

He opened his arms wide and bowed. "I am Mr. Green, and I have come to deliver to you . . . a package!"

Like a horrifically timed omen, the bus burst over the horizon and beeped loudly at Mr. Green to move back from the edge of the sidewalk. My opportunity to make a quick escape dissolved before my eyes. Now I'd be trapped on the same vehicle with him, potentially for the whole ride.

The old man shuffled as quickly as he could away from the curb, just in time for the bus to roll directly next to the space he had just vacated. The doors slammed open, and the bus driver glared at both of us. She definitely looked like she'd been held up on the other side of town: short of patience and sweaty with frustration.

"You coming or what?" she snapped.

"Oh, no, thank you, my dear. But this young lady has been waiting for some time, so I'm sure she's eager," he said politely, and turned back to me.

Mr. Green pushed a book and letter into my hands. "This little mystery is for you. There's a lot about this place waiting

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to be discovered and somehow . . . I feel like you'll be the one to get to the very bottom of it," he said with a wink.

Then Mr. Green waved at the bus driver and began hobbling slowly back down the sidewalk. I took the bus stairs in one giant leap, dug out one of those irritating fare tokens, and shoved it in the till, then packed myself in with the rest of the passengers who had been picked up on the delayed route.

As we rolled down the street, I watched Mr. Green duck into a large Victorian house at the end of the block. He'd barely had to leave his house to find me . . . I shivered and looked over my shoulder. I really hoped that I wasn't being watched.

The book in my hands was titled *Hollow Falls: A History* by Alan Mortimer Wyatt. The letter tucked inside had my full name written on it in spindly handwriting, curly like wedding calligraphy. Curious.

I glanced around the bus quickly. A woman a few seats up was peering nosily at me, and the old lady in the opposite aisle across from me was a gossip neighbor of Abuela's. I frowned at the first woman until she turned away, and then tucked the book under my arm and out of view.

Clearly, this would have to wait until I got off the bus.