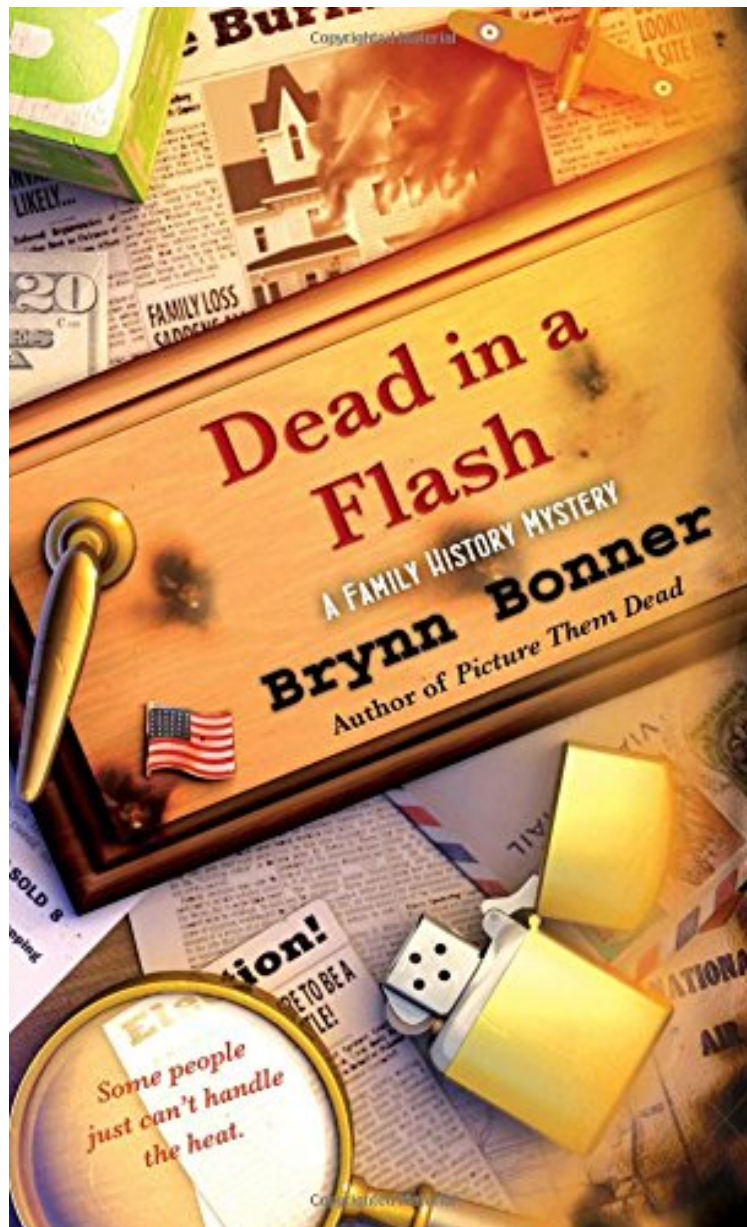


(Read download) Dead in a Flash (A Family History Mystery)

## Dead in a Flash (A Family History Mystery)

*Brynn Bonner*

*\*Download PDF / ePub / DOC / audiobook / ebooks*



[Download](#)

[Read Online](#)

#1099360 in Books 2016-08-30 2016-08-30 Original language: English PDF # 1 6.75 x .90 x 4.131, .0  
Binding: Mass Market Paperback 336 pages | File size: 77.Mb

**Brynn Bonner : Dead in a Flash (A Family History Mystery)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dead in a Flash (A Family History Mystery):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. One of the best parts of this book By JSHThis is the fourth book I've

read in this now well-established series built on a framework of family history/genealogy. The concept itself opens all kinds of doors for secrets and suspense, and Brynn Bonner takes full advantage of her own creative options! This is the most complex plot of all and can be a bit dizzying to unravel in places. But the author's steady hand guides you through to a surprising and thoroughly satisfying conclusion. One of the best parts of this book, I thought, was the further development and deeper interactions of the two strong female characters. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Don't miss the next chapter in Brynn Bonner's Family History Mysteries By Rhonda Book 4 in this North Carolina based series does not disappoint. I suggest you start with Book 1 though so you can watch the characters and their relationships develop. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Goodread, entertaining. By ajs19402 Good follow-up to series.

The charming genealogical gumshoes in the cozy southern Family History Mystery series give new meaning to the old saying keep the home fires burning when their investigation into a long-ago house fire leads to a modern-day murder. Its not just politics as usual when genealogists Sophreena McClure and Esme Sabatier are hired to create scrapbook tributes for a former North Carolina senators intricate family heritage and illustrious career. Sifting through the ashes of his past, they discover his baby brother perished in a suspicious fire that burned down his childhood home. Still saddened by his late parents steadfast conviction against all evidence to the contrary that the fire was cover for a kidnapping, the senator wants this rumor put to rest once and for all. So with only snapshots of the evidence, Soph and Esme are determined to smother all speculation about the decades-old tragedy. The party lines are drawn when a shocking present-day murder turns up new candidates for the crime including some suspects from the senators inner circle. Are the sleuthing scrapbookers trying to pin down a killer as adept at making laws as breaking them?

"Brynn Bonner ingeniously tosses in clues to keep guesses coming. PICTURE THEM DEAD is grippingly mysterious." (--Single Titles on Picture Them Dead)"Brynn Bonner cleverly interweaves looking into past lives with current events, and the result is an enthralling story packed with unknowns." (--Always ing.com)About the Author Brynn Bonner grew up in Alabama and is a long-time resident of North Carolina. Both her literary fiction and mysteries reflect the landscapes and the genuine people of her southern heritage. Bonner currently pens the Family History Mystery series for Pocket Books. Writing as Ellen Harris, Bonner wrote six books for the Mysteries of Sparrow Island series published by Guidepost Books. Her short stories have been featured in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, Now and Then, Crossroads, and other publications.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Dead in a Flash one NOW YOUVE GONE AND DONE it! my business partner, Esme Sabatier, said, lifting a cucumber slice off one eye to glare at me. You know better than to say such a thing. All I said was I cant believe how smoothly this job has gone, I said. Id meant to put more punch into the protest but my voice came out dreamlike and warbly. The spa attendant was wrapping me in warm, wet sheets and I was bonelessly content. And now youve jinxed us, Esme said with an exaggerated sigh. Never say a thing like that until the job is done and the checks cleared. Were a long way from that we still have the scrapbooks to finish and that last interview this afternoon. Any other time, Esmes warning wouldve set off my alarm bells. When Esme gets one of her vibes, it pays to listen. But at this particular moment, I wasnt sure I could remember how to worry. Ive never seen myself as a spa kinda gal. Before today, Id thought of spa denizens as wealthy, pampered women in need of rejuvenation after a particularly arduous shopping spree. I, Sophreena McClure, a self-employed thirty-something, am not pampered, nor am I wealthy, though I make a decent living from my genealogical services company. Plus, I have a little locker room phobia left over from encounters with mean girls in high school gym class. But when a client rewards you for a job well done by giving you a free pass for the full treatment at the towns new luxury spa, you say, Thank you, maam, even if you suspect youd be too self-conscious to redeem the offer. Esme, a fifty-something whod been impervious to mean girls, had no such qualms. Shed dragged me out of bed before daylight, startling me out of a deep sleep by throwing back the covers and tossing a pair of jeans at my head. Shed prodded me to get dressed and thrust a go-cup of coffee into my hand as she herded me out the door. Shed piloted her SUV through the streets of our little town of Morningside, North Carolina, in the rosy glow of dawn so wed be first in line when Mystic Lake Spa opened for business. Our first treatment had been a mud bath, and I was ready to throw in the towel, literally, right then and there. Esme and I are a comical-looking duo even fully clothed. Esme is over six feet of latte-toned woman. She carries herself as if shes royalty and doesnt worry over a little extra cushioning here and there. Im a very short, very white woman with ungovernable auburn hair and have both the looks and the well-earned reputation of a nerd. We stood side by side and dropped our towels to step into a huge tub of goopy mud. I caught a glimpse of the attendant trying to suppress a grin and I wanted to pack it in. If Esme hadnt threatened me with all manner of dire consequences, Id have bolted. After the mud bath, we got full-body massages, which left me so loose-limbed I felt drunk. I found I cared much less about the attendants tittering after that. Then came a mani-pedi, then a facial, and now we were stretched out on adjacent tables wrapped like mummies in steaming hot sheets with more stuff slathered on our faces and cucumber slices on our eyes. Zen-like music played on the speakers and I felt as if my spirit might actually be disengaging from my body. I couldnt remember when Id ever felt this serene. But now Esme, with her work talk, was disturbing my aura or misaligning my chakras or something. It

was making my muscles kink up into their usual pretzel shapes again. We've got to stay on our toes, she said, though she didn't sound like she could have gotten to a sitting position, much less to her toes. If we deliver on this one, it could mean a lot of business coming our way. Yes, I said, well, we're working for a senator. We've already got feathers in our caps just by landing this job. Mm-hmm, Esme said. Big old peacock feathers. All the more reason we've got to come through with the goods without any glitches. You're right. And granted, today's interview may be a little touchy, I allowed, but it's not as if we'll be asking about anything that isn't already public record. It'll be fine. Snagging this job really had been a coup. It had been a different twist from the normal family history searches that are our bread and butter. In this instance we'd been not only tracing family history, but documenting a long public service career as well. Along with the heritage scrapbooks we'd designed, we did separate books that highlighted Senator Stanton Sawyers decades-long career as a senator from the great state of North Carolina. These were going to be displayed at a birthday shindig held in his honor here at the new hotel and spa on Saturday. The elegant luncheon, carefully planned down to the last painstaking detail by the senator's family, would draw not only a who's who of North Carolina bigwigs, but dignitaries from all over the country. It had all gone surprisingly well considering we were dealing with a politician species not known for harmonious collaboration. Senator Sawyer, or Senator Stan as he was known to his admirers, was now in the ease of retirement. As he approached his eightieth birthday, he was in a retrospective mood and had been forthcoming, even about things he regarded as missteps in his career and foibles in his personal life. But today we were slated to talk about a family tragedy and both the senator and his sister, Lenora Morganthe one who'd actually hired us found it a difficult and sensitive subject and had put it off until the very end. Still, I didn't expect any real problems. I'm a professional genealogist and I've had plenty of experience with delicate family matters. You know, Esme, I feel like sort of a slacker on this one, I said. What do you mean? Esme said, and I didn't need to lift my own cucumber slice to know she was glaring at me again. I've worked my tail off. My back forms the letter C from being hunkered over the worktable sorting photos and putting together those scrapbooks. I feel like one of the Village People. She started flailing her arms and singing Y.M.C.A. while the attendant was trying to wrap her up. The patient attendant reminded her, in a voice ever so soothing, that she was supposed to be searching for serenity, not getting her 80s groove on. I'm not saying we didn't work hard, I said. But the senator's family has been in Quinn County since roughly around the time the earth cooled. So much has been written about them over the generations, it seems there isn't anything left to discover. We didn't have to do much digging. Uh-huh, Esme said. But you know there is such a thing as too much information. There was a ton of stuff to plow through and narrowing it down to the highlights was no easy task. I thought of the many boxes of Sawyer family archives stacked around our workroom. You're right, I agreed. The senator has lived a long and well-documented life, a charmed life, really. Look how many times he was re-elected. That's true, Esme said, but he's had his share of challenges. Losing his baby brother in that house fire was a major childhood trauma for him and Lenora, and you know they hate to talk about it. And then there's Lily Rose's illness. That's a heartache for him, too. Can you imagine being married for fifty-six years? And they've seldom been apart in all that time. There's no doubt he wants her by his side when he blows out his birthday candles. Is she going to be able to come? It's wait-and-see, I said. Her disease is degenerative, some sort of ataxia. You've seen how it is. She has good and bad days and never knows which it'll be until it gets here. But I tell you, her mind is still sharp and she has a phenomenal memory. She was able to answer all our questions with precision and clarity and she seemed to enjoy it, though she tired easily. It must be awful to be trapped in a body that won't obey your commands, I said, then realized I might experience that myself when I tried to get up off this table at the end of our session. Mm, Esme said. Senator Stan got a good genetic draw, I guess. He's spry for a newly minted octogenarian. He's a hoot, isn't he? Lord have mercy, how that man loves to tell stories. Yes, I said, he's a mesmerizing yarn spinner. I'm going to miss him and the entire family when this job is done. It's such a pleasure to spend time with them, it hardly seems like work. I told you not to say stuff like that, Esme scolded. Take it back. I laughed as the attendant layered on another warm wrap. I should've listened to Esme. \*\*\* The senator's retinue had taken over the entire top floor of the hotel. The structure was only seven stories not exactly a skyscraper but it was the tallest building in Morningside, and from its perch high on Crescent Hill it commanded a breathtaking view of Mystic Lake and the town below. Some of Morningside's citizens had been enraged by the prospect of the hotel and spa locating here, chief among them the residents of Crescent Hill, the most affluent section of town. To them the words commercial development were the most vile in the English language. But after a long wrangle, the Village Council turned a deaf ear to their complaints and opted for the tourism dollars. Now that it was a fait accompli, I suspected a considerable portion of the spa's business came from the people who'd worked hardest to keep it out. As Esme and I stepped off the elevator later that afternoon feeling totally rejuvenated, we were drawn to the top-floor viewing window directly across the hallway from the bank of elevators. Four gigantic full-length windows overlooked the tennis courts, the pool, the boat launch, and the exercise trail, all located on the lake side of the hotel. The exercise trail featured a series of workout stations located along a meandering path. It ran through a copse of pine and deciduous trees and wound back around to the lake's edge, which sloped gradually down at the boating and kayak center, then rose sharply to a bluff overlooking the lake. All this had been carved out of land previously deemed unsuitable for residential building. Looking at it now made me realize what millions of dollars can accomplish even Mother Earth had been bought off and forced into compliance. Lenora opened

the door to her suite and gave us an uncharacteristically tense smile as she ushered us in. The senator was pacing, waving his lanky hands in the air. Jackals, hyenas, he thundered, paying no attention to our arrival. Mr. Jefferson remarked on the subject of a fourth estate that our liberty depends on freedom of the press and that cannot be limited without being lost. Well, I can only but wonder how far from his lofty ideals the profession has fallen. These so-called reporters aim for cheap and momentary titillation. They skew the facts or make up things from whole cloth. Told you you'd jinx us, Esme said out of the side of her mouth. Would you care to explain to me how this came about? Senator Stan said, stopping in front of a wan-faced Lincoln Cooper, the young ghostwriter who was helping the senator with the long-awaited autobiography he'd finally agreed to write. We'd worked closely with Lincoln over the past few months and I felt for him at that moment. He looked miserable. Oh, Stanton, for heavens sake, leave the boy alone, Lenora scolded. Well, someone's responsible for this. If not him, who? You two? Senator Stan narrowed his eyes at Esme and me. Esme, for once in her life, was tongue-tied. But I drew myself up to my full five foot nothing and answered in the strongest voice I could muster. Senator, I can assure you that whatever has happened and whatever the press is on about, Esme and I are not the source. We hold the confidentiality of our clients as a trust. Of course you do, Lenora said, leading the senator to the sofa. Now, let's all sit down like ladies and gentlemen and see if we can't sort this out and decide what, if anything, can be done. Yes, yes, Senator Stan said with another wave of his hand, you must forgive me. I endure this calumny for myself, I signed up for this sort of scrutiny when I went into public life, but for my parents' memories to be so maligned yet again is beyond the pale. Will they never be allowed to rest in peace? He sat down and put his head in his hands, and Lenora rubbed his shoulder. Esme and I sat on the sofa opposite and Lincoln Cooper took a side chair, perching on the edge as if he might need to make a quick escape. Esme and I stole a glance at each other as we waited for someone to clue us in, but the senator just continued to shake his head. I take it you two haven't seen the news today, Lenora said. There was a story in a local magazine yesterday about Stanton's birthday celebration, or at least we were led to believe that's what it would be about. It ended up being the worst kind of tabloid trash about our house burning all those years ago and all that tragic event wrought. I nodded, but I still hadn't figured out why the senator was in such an uproar. The fire and their brothers' death was a matter of public record and had been written about many times. It's a well-known family tragedy, the senator said as if reading my mind. And it is true that baby John's death haunted our mother and father as this reporter, Chad Deese, has named in his eyes has written. But he slanted the story so they come off looking like lunatics. It's disrespectful to folks who deserve reverence. I want him sanctioned. I want a retraction. That won't happen, Senator, Lincoln said. And other news sources have already picked up the story. He closed the cover on his iPad and peered over his glasses at the senator like a rabbit might eye a fox. All in the same tenor? Lenora asked. Fraid so, Lincoln answered. This cannot stand! the senator roared, getting to his feet again. I'll make a statement. I'll file suit. You'll do nothing of the sort, Lenora said. You know full well that will only make matters worse. Let's try to get on with life and let this fizzle out on its own. It always does, you know. Something juicier will come along tomorrow. Sophreena and Esme are here to do our interview and I'm sure Lincoln has work to do. She looked in Lincoln's direction and he nodded vigorously and scurried from the room. The senator fumed and paced for a few more moments, and Lenora gave us a patient smile. Finally, anger spent, he sat and drew his hand through his silver hair, a stray lock falling back over his forehead. I am reticent to talk of this incident in our lives, he said, patting Lenora's knee. Though it's distant in time, it is forever engraved on our hearts and on our psyches. Truth be told, I was planning to give you two the essential facts this afternoon and let it go at that, but now I feel we should have a thorough recounting so you can fully understand why this is so upsetting and help us put it in the proper context in our family history. Esme and I both took out notepads but the senator held up a hand. I'd like to tell this my own way, without the question-and-answer format, if you please. It's difficult. Of course, I said, though I hoped he wasn't saying he was unwilling to answer questions after he'd made his recitation. This sounded like just the kind of story that would demand some follow-up. The year was nineteen forty-seven, he began. It was a different world in those simpler days. We grew up in a little farming community in Quinn County where everyone knew everyone and neighbors helped one another in a pinch even if there was personal enmity. You might denounce a fellow as a sorry excuse for a man one day, and help him get his mule out of the ditch the next. It was a code of conduct in our culture. That's important to keep in mind. One hot summer day my father and I went into our little town of Coventry to buy farm supplies. My father was an attorney, but he fancied himself a gentleman farmer and we kept considerable acreage under cultivation. We had a farm manager, Luther Hamilton, who ran the farm in all the practical ways, but our father liked to keep a hand in. It was an idyllic life. I loved following Luther around and learning how the place operated, and he was tolerant of my tagging along. And in the small-world way of things, it's Luther's son, Cyrus Hamilton, who owns this very beautiful hotel in which we sit. The American dream in two generations. But I digress. On that August day my father and I, as was our habit, went to a greasy-spoon burger joint we liked and had a hamburger and a Coca-Cola while the men loaded our supplies into the truck. I remember feeling perfectly happy. I loved spending time with my father. He was a learned man and very witty. I was a boy of twelve and felt honored and validated that my father treated me like a man and talked to me as he might have spoken to a peer. That is my last precious memory of life before. You see, for Lenora and me life will forever be cleaved into before and after that day. As we drove home that afternoon, we had the windows down to get some relief from the

sweltering heat. We were badly in need of rain, and one could smell baked earth in the still air. I leaned my elbow on the window ledge in imitation of my father and squinted out across the stand of tobacco growing in our nearest neighbors fields. In the distance I saw a plume of smoke and asked my father what he thought that might be. A look of panic came over his face and he started muttering Oh, dear God, over and over. My father was not one to blaspheme and his doing so made my blood run cold. We approached a bend in the road and as I got myself acclimated, I realized the smoke was coming from our house. He turned down our gravel road and pushed the truck to its limit. The road was in a sorry state and we jostled along with me bouncing until my head hit the cabs roofthis in the days before seat belts. I wanted to tell my father to slow down, but instead urged him to hurry. I tried to convince myself it was just our mother burning trash or that Suzette, the woman who came sometimes to help Mother with the household chores, had taken it into her head to make homemade soap at the wash pot as she sometimes did. But I knew that was far too much smoke for either of those possibilities. When, at last, the house came into sight, it was an abomination to behold. It was in full flame and the structure was starting to break apart. We flew into the yard and my father was out of the truck before it had completely stopped moving. I caught sight of Mother and Lenora at the edge of the yard with two of the neighbor men and saw some field hands wrestling with a hose, trying to get it to reach the house from the outdoor spigot, though it was useless. Mother was in hysterics and pulling against the men, who were holding her back, and Lenora was on the ground crying and coughing, holding desperately to Mothers dress tail. He turned to Lenora and gestured to her to continue the story. Mother had already run back into the house twice, trying to get to Johnny, she said, blinking back tears. It was too late to hold any hope hed survived, yet she was straining to go back again even as the house began to fall. When she caught sight of Daddy, she screamed that Johnny was still inside, and he ran toward the conflagration. But at that moment it collapsed. It was sheer horror, the senator said. For all of us. Was there no fire department? I asked. Lenora sniffed. It was a volunteer department. We had a fire chief and one ancient pumper truck. But the notification was by phone tree and some of the volunteers didnt even have phones, so someone had to actually go out and find the men. Needless to say, the response time was not what one would call swift, Senator Stan said. They finally arrived over an hour later and put out the last glowing embers. All the damage had already been done by then, but alas, there was more, less tangible, damage to come. Lenora heaved a sigh. You see, despite all the evidence to the contrary, neither of our parents could accept that Johnny died in that fire. They simply couldnt accept it. Mother latched onto the idea that hed been kidnapped and the fire was set to cover the crime. And in some sort of folie deux Father came to believe it, too. Each was haunted by the conviction that Johnny was still alive out there somewhere. They searched for him until the end of their days. It was a shadow over their lives and over ours. Indeed. The senator nodded. But it didnt turn them into different people. This article makes them look like obsessive nuts, which they werent. They were simply parents whod lost a beloved child and their heartbreak was so immense, it wouldve surely killed them if theyd let in the grief, so they built a different reality for themselves. Ive mentioned that our code of conduct was to help those in need, and our parents were surely in need. There were folks back then, most well-intentioned who encouraged them in their denial, like alchemists trying to spin sorrow into hope. And sadly there were others who spurred them who might not have had such pure motives. He spat the words, his face hardening into a stony glare. We learned to live with this, Lenora said, her voice quiet. In the early years, from time to time, a person would show up with a toddler or a young boy claiming he was Johnny, and our parents would be filled with hope, despite their efforts to remain skeptical. Then wed all live in limbo until the claimants were investigated and found to be charlatans. It was taxing. And it didnt help matters that the case was horribly bungled, leaving the door open for these people to take advantage. Just then Lincoln opened the door and stuck his head inside as if afraid to enter. Sorry to interrupt, he said, but Mrs. Dodd has arrived and wonders if you and Lenora are free for dinner. Yes, yes, of course, the senator said, please tell her well be right along a half hour at most. And Lincoln, Im sorry for having shouted at you earlier. This whole thing has put me in ill temper. Are you sure theres nothing we can do? Im sure, Senator, Lincoln said. Nothings been said that was patently untrue. You know better than me about libel laws. I do know, the senator said with a sigh. Then he turned back to Esme and me, and something about the look on his face made me tense. When all this brouhaha over my birthday is done with, Id like to engage you two to prepare a report for me to sort out all the facts surrounding that fire and lay the rumors to rest once and for all. Lincoln took a step into the room. Uh, Senator, I could do that for you, he said. Im not sure No, no, the senator said. Youre needed elsewhere. We have to get this confounded book finished. Its been three years now and two extensions. The publisher is losing patience. And besides, these two have a reputation for digging into the past and getting answers. Sophreena and Esme, will you take on this investigation for me and Lenora? Senator, this is a little out of our wheelhouse, I said. Were not private investigators or public relations people. We dont have press contacts. Even if we researched this for you, wed have no way of getting the story out. I have people for that, Senator Stan said. You just look at the evidence and document the findings. Were not asking you to solve a mystery. There is no mystery. Let me be clear, neither Lenora nor I have a shred of doubt that Johnny died in that fire. We were both there, after all. Its just that we dont want our parents remembered only for how they reacted to this tragedy. And theres a more practical reason wed like your help at this particular time, Lenora said, turning back to the senator. Yes, our parents had a proviso in their will, he said. They set aside a sum of money in a trust that was to go to Johnny in the event he was ever found. Its not a jaw-dropping

amount, but its enough to bring false claimants out of the woodwork, and since Chad Deese mentioned this fact in his despicable scribblings, the timing could not be worse. But surely those claims could be dealt with easily enough with a DNA test, I said. Yes, our entire family got tested as soon as it was accepted in the courts. Lenora and I and our parents are all on file. But while DNA testing would eliminate claimants in short order and the onus of proof is on the claimant, it is a terrible intrusion into our family life, and every new claim will likely attract more bad press. The money reverts to Lenora and me on baby Johnnys birthday this year, which is one month hence. We plan to use the funds to establish a foundation in his name to provide educational opportunities for low-income families. Our good friend Dinah Leigh Dodd has offered to match our seed funds, and my grandson Damon will direct the foundation. I want no hint of scandal or legal entanglements to become attached to this endeavor. This is to be a credit to our parents and our dear baby brother, not more fodder for the rumor mill. But, Senator, I protested, thats even more reason why a lawyer or an investigator would be a much better choice. Trust, Lenora said softly. Thats the key. We trust you two to handle this. Would you be willing to take it on, as a personal favor to us? Esme and I looked at each other and while she didnt say it aloud, I got the message clear enough. I told you youd jinxed us.