



An Austin Starr Mystery

RAINY DAY WOMEN
KAY KENDALL

A brutal murder, a young woman fighting to prove her husband's innocence—*Desolation Row* hooked me on page one. Kay Kendall is one author who knows how to burrow into your heart.

—Norb Vonnegut, bestselling author of *Mr. President*, *The Trust*, *The Gods of Greenwich* and *Top Producer*.

Rainy Day Women

An Austin Starr Mystery



By Kay Kendall

Author of *Desolation Row: An Austin Starr Mystery*

Rainy Day Women
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To Bruce

The word supportive doesn't begin to give you enough credit.

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Chapter One

I STOOD, CAREFUL not to make any noise, afraid to waken the sleeping ogre. If his constant twitches were any indication, he was only dozing. If he woke up, he'd be a real beast and leave me no peace.

My bare feet inched along the floorboards. I knew where the squeaky spots lurked and avoided them. Dim light from the hallway showed objects to avoid—chairs, tables, other hazards. By dodging and zigzagging, I managed to evade every potential noisemaker.

What did it matter if my escape took ten minutes? Breaking free was what mattered.

I reached the door and turned back to check on the huddled figure. He still breathed heavily. Suddenly his body shuddered.

I froze. The smallest sound could disturb him, yet I would lose my sanity if I failed to escape.

Decades ticked by. No other movements came from the bed. This was my chance.

I took a deep, silent gulp of air and turned to glide down the hall. My release was not yet a done deal, but I could taste freedom.

I walked faster, bolder. I was halfway to ultimate liberation when a board creaked underfoot. I halted and whirled back toward the bedroom.

Tonight I was lucky. All stayed quiet except for my heart,

thudding loud enough to sabotage my escape. I feared he might hear it. But nothing indicated that my breakout wouldn't be a success.

I moved again. First my right foot, then left, then right. My focus was tight. Total. I could win this round. I would. I must.

Exhaustion would kill me if I didn't succeed.

I was so intent on reaching my goal that I failed to notice the tall, silent figure looming in the shadows. Only when he sprang forward did I realize I was done for.

"Ooh!" I gasped.

He wrapped his arms around my neck and pulled me to him. I pressed my face into his broad shoulder to muffle my sounds.

"I did it." I giggled into the fabric of his denim shirt. "Finally, finally, I managed to leave Wyatt's room without waking him up."

"Well done, sweetheart." David's voice was low and warm. "Now let's celebrate. I've got just the reward for you."

I lifted my head and caught a fleeting smile on his handsome face.

"Come see what I have to show you. If you're good—very, very good—you can play with it."

My giggles bubbled up again. David played this game when he felt romantic—which, alas, was too rare these days. The demands of his doctoral research overwhelmed him.

He pushed me across the threshold of our bedroom. "See what pleasures await you in my kingdom." He shut the door soundlessly behind us, and his voice grew deeper, louder.

"Shh." I placed my finger against his lips. "If Wy wakes now, he'll be up for hours. Then all my stealth and conniving will have been pointless. I know I'm a bad mother, but one more night without sleep, and I'll just—"

David sucked my finger into his mouth and made suggestive motions.

"Stop it. What kind of mom am I that—"

"What kind? Wonderful but tired."

"My mother wouldn't agree."

“Forget about her.” He grabbed my finger and sucked it again.

“You’re not taking me seriously.” I laughed in spite of myself.

“But I will take you seriously. Put the emphasis on *take*.” He pulled me across the room and threw me on the bed.

I squealed, pretending fright, while he tugged off my sweatshirt. As he reached to unhook my bra, the peal of the phone shattered the moment.

I started up from the bed, but he grabbed my arm. “Leave it.”

“I can’t. Wyatt will wake up unless one of us answers.”

David released my arm. “I give up. But I’ll get you yet, my pretty.” He twirled a pretend mustache. “And it’ll be soon, one of these, er, weeks.”

I adored David when he was like this. Although he was making jokes, I knew the interruption to our lovemaking had upset him.

The phone had already rung four times. I dived toward it, crashing against the night stand. Rubbing my sore shin, I picked up the receiver.

“This is the Starr residence.” There was only silence. “Hello? Hello?” I strained to hear and made out a sniffling sound trickling down the phone wires.

A welcome, familiar voice quavered across thousands of miles and into my ear.

“Austin, I’m in so much trouble.”

“Larissa?” My nerves jumped to full alert. “What’s wrong?”

More sniffs. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think I’d fall apart like this. I just need to tell you what’s happened.” Her cries became hiccups, and she stopped speaking.

My mind spun a rolodex of catastrophes, searching for reasons my friend, always upbeat and sunny, had gone into a tailspin.

Calculating the time difference between my Toronto home

and her temporary one in Vancouver, I figured it was seven in the evening out on the western edge of Canada. Only a disaster made her call when long distance rates were astronomical.

“Tell me what’s wrong. You’re scaring me to death.”

I checked on David, saw him point at the clock and make faces at me.

“Hurry up. Come here,” he mouthed.

My heart shredded. How could I meet the needs of both of them, my husband and my friend? I couldn’t.

Little by little, Larissa’s hiccups slowed, then stopped altogether. When I sensed she was about to speak, I turned my back on David and gave her my full attention.

She choked out a sentence. “Shona died.”

“Shona who?”

“A grad student I knew here.”

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know what else to say—people died every day.

Hmm...that wasn’t too sympathetic. But David’s hand stroked my neck, and I wanted to melt into his arms. Still, I couldn’t abandon Larissa. Not yet anyway.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “Shona must have been important if you’re this upset.” Shona’s name wasn’t familiar. I thought I knew all Larissa’s new pals.

“You don’t get it.” Larissa’s voice was shrill in my ear.

Apparently not.

Before I offered a snide reply, Larissa added two details in a whispery voice that had me shivering, even though the night was muggy with humidity.

“Shona was murdered. And I’m the Mounties’ prime suspect.”



Chapter Two

I GULPED A deep breath, forcing my voice to sound gentle. “Murder? You? Impossible.”

Larissa’s sobs filled my ears, breaking my heart into smaller pieces. When she tried to talk, her words were unintelligible.

“Oh, sweetie, calm down and give me details, okay? I can’t help if I don’t know what’s going on. Maybe deep breaths will help.”

I offered this advice as much for my own benefit as for Larissa’s. My body was shaking clear down to my toes. I dropped to the floor with a thump.

As her sobs gradually subsided, I tried to reach through the wires and pull up her spirits. “We can work things out. Together, like always. The Mounties will soon realize their mistake. No one in his right mind would think you could commit murder.” I threw my assurances out into the universe as a prayer.

“No, everything is worse than you can imagine.” She laughed, and the sound verged on hysterics. “But you *can* imagine. You went through all this before. You had to stand by David when he was accused of murder.” Her voice broke. “Now you’ll need to do that for me.” The word *me* ended on a high-pitched wail.

I stood, but my knees buckled. David moved over to me, but I waved him away.

I focused on Larissa’s words. She’d released them in a torrent.

“I’ve been interviewed twice by the Mounties already. Once at work and once at their headquarters. The second time was much worse than the first. And they’re being so mean to me.”

“You’re joking.”

“Do I sound like I’m joking?”

These words were slung in staccato fashion, and her tone grew snide. Yet this was a welcome change. Maybe she could pull herself together. Anger was better than being pitiful.

I struggled to maintain my calm. “I know you’re not joking. Wish you were, though.” Larissa was the only friend I’d made since moving to Canada from Texas. If anything happened to her, I’d be bereft. “Why are *you* a murder suspect?” I paused. “And who is Shona?”

“Good gosh, where should I start?”

“In your last letter, you sounded like you were having a ball out there.”

“I was. It all just went down so fast. My summer job was going along great. Then Shona got killed.”

“*Who* is Shona?”

“Sorry, I forget you don’t know her. She’s a—was—a grad student in the chem lab.”

Larissa’s new job at the University of British Columbia had surprised me. Chemistry and Larissa didn’t make a good compound. I started to say that, but changed my mind, deciding to reassure her.

“That’s better,” I said. “Keep feeding me details—I need all the details. Now, tell me how this Shona died.”

Larissa groaned. “Looked like an accident at first and—”

“Where? In the lab?”

“No, right before our women’s lib meeting started.”

She stopped to blow her nose, and I was left hanging. What was *with* this women’s lib? When did Larissa get involved? She’d always said we didn’t need it—she and I had already evolved into strong super women. Of course she laughed after saying stuff like that, but still.

Her sniffles stopped. “Sorry,” she said. “My nose runs nonstop when I’m crying.”

“Never mind. What’s women’s lib got to do with this?”

Larissa ignored my question and my short-tempered attitude. “The police say someone poisoned her.” She hiccupped. “And so, here I am, grieving over Shona’s death, and they suspect me for her murder. See what I mean?”

“Yes, but—”

“You’ve been down this road before. You know what I should do, Austin, what I should say, how I should act. I didn’t kill anyone. You’ve got to help me. You were able to prove David’s innocence.”

Larissa’s torrent of words, plus her demands, flooded my brain. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t speak.

“Naturally, I don’t expect you to do that for me, but you’re the best person to give me moral support. I really need you. To talk to, I mean. But if you wanted to, really wanted to come out here to Vancouver, then I wouldn’t say no. Not that you have to. I mean, you have your family and all, but I could sure use some support.”

“You got it, you know that. But dang, we can’t talk long enough long distance. Where are you calling from? Who’s paying for this call?”

Again she ignored my question. Instead, she whimpered. Every woeful sound tightened the muscles in my neck.

“Can’t your father—”

“Papa flew out two days ago. Now Aunt Raisa is putting him up too. Thank heaven she didn’t kick me out when the police zeroed in on me. He’s here for as long as it takes.”

“That’s a relief. He’ll straighten everything out. But you still haven’t told me why *you’re* a suspect. No one could look at you and think you’d kill anyone. It’s preposterous.”

Larissa gave one of her famous snorts, always so bizarre when made by such an exquisite creature. I loved the sound, especially now. It showed she was calming down, reining in her

emotions at least a little.

She gulped air before she continued. “But listen, I did get some good news today. Shona’s murder isn’t the only one the cops need to solve because—”

“How’s that good news?” That didn’t make sense.

“Another UBC student was killed about the same time as Shona,” she said.

“When was that? You still haven’t told me.”

“Did so. Happened six days ago. I told you that already.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her, but she hadn’t noted the time of Shona’s murder. “Six days? Why didn’t you call right away if this is so urgent?”

“I told you. I just found out I’m a suspect.”

Hope glimmered for an instant. Maybe Larissa’s situation wasn’t as dire as her sobs indicated. I glanced at David, lying on the bed with his eyes shut. He opened one eye, patted the bed, whispered, “Come on. Still time for a quick snuggle.”

Larissa was saying, “Vancouver doesn’t have many suspicious deaths, so—”

“Any connection between the two murders?” I couldn’t help myself; I had to interrupt.

“Not likely. Some guy got killed at the nude beach down the cliff below campus.”

“Nude beach? The University of British Columbia sanctions this place?” I tried for a spot of levity, and when she laughed, my jaw unclenched.

“Heck, no. Wreck Beach is on Crown land, so the university officials have no say. Someone told me the second murder would slow down investigation of Shona’s. This helps me because, well—my lawyer said the police here don’t often handle two high-profile murders at once, not in the fancier parts of town and—”

“I bet the two murders are related. I b—”

“My lawyer says the Mounties say absolutely not. They’re wildly different. Anyway, that buys me some time.” Larissa’s

voice ended on a shrill note.

Lawyer? She already had a lawyer. Why did she already have one if she only now discovered she was a suspect? I slouched against the wall.

“Listen, I know it won’t be easy for you to get away. There’s Wyatt and David. Your graduate work.” She cleared her throat. “But can you please, please come out to Vancouver? How soon do you think you can leave?”

“But surely your father can—”

“Papa’s agreed to buy your ticket.” She whimpered. “Please say you’ll come, Austin.”

The pressure inside me zoomed so high that I felt I would pop like a two-penny balloon.

“I want to help, Larissa. You understand that, don’t you?” I wouldn’t leave her in the lurch if I could help it. She meant too much to me.

“Yes, I know,” Larissa squealed. “No way I’d ask if I weren’t so scared. And I’m sure it would be only for a couple of days. You’ll get me settled, and then I’ll be fine.”

I was speechless, rare for me. We stayed silent for a moment, and my thoughts pulled me back and forth. Should I go, support Larissa in person? Should I stay with my family? I twisted the phone cord so tightly around my hand that my fingers were in danger of falling off.

I heard David leave the room. Now I could speak freely. “Let me talk to David first. I can’t answer yet. Let’s talk again tomorrow night, okay?”

“I’m all right with that.” She pronounced each syllable precisely and slowly, giving her speech a formal, distant air. I felt guilty at disappointing her. “I assumed you couldn’t give me an answer right away. I know you’ll do your best.”

I shook my head, an effort to clear my thoughts. “In the meantime, you still need to tell me more about Shona’s death. Like where exactly she was killed and—”

A dial tone hummed in my ear.

“Damn it.” I kicked the table, forgetting I was barefoot. “Ouch.”

I heard footsteps behind me, and then David loomed up beside me. “What’s going on?”

I looked at his dear face and blinked back tears. “Larissa must’ve run out of coins to feed the payphone. That happened the last time we talked too.”

Except then we’d only been shooting the breeze, and now my best friend might be accused of murder.



Chapter Three

DAVID AND I stared at each other. I stood with my back against the wall, my hand covering my mouth, my eyes popping wide.

He broke the silence.

“Larissa’s a murder suspect, and she wants you to fly out to Vancouver?” He turned away to straighten a stack of books on the nightstand. “Naturally you said you couldn’t possibly do that.” He shifted back around and waved a book at me. “Right?”

I swallowed. “Not exactly.”

“Austin, you’re my wife. I need you here. You know how much pressure I’m under.”

“Believe me, I know.”

“Besides, *nobody* is gonna believe Larissa killed anyone.”

I raised a brow. David should know better than anyone that the authorities would consider anyone a murderer.

But I understood why he didn’t want me to go. My own graduate studies placed third behind the needs of my guys. Having no time for myself depressed me, but David didn’t want to hear about that. Especially not now.

He slammed the book on the table, and several other books fell to the floor.

“Shh. You’ll wake up Wy.”

We stood still, waiting to hear our son’s cry. When none came, my shoulders relaxed.

“Should we talk about this now or wait until the morning?” I

forced my voice to sound conciliatory.

David marched across the room and wrapped me in his arms. “Sorry, babe. Not fair to take my nerves out on you. Let’s sleep now and talk it out tomorrow. I’ll feel more human then.”

We shared a kiss and got into bed. He spooned against my back and relaxed into sleep faster than I expected him to.

Not me, though. Peaceful slumber was impossible. I flipped and flopped, got up for a glass of milk, tried to read. And made such a ruckus that David plopped a pillow over his head.

He didn’t complain. He knew how much Larissa’s phone call had upset me.

I didn’t have to imagine how she felt. I recalled the horror of David’s time in jail and how it affected us. Now, a whole year later, we still struggled with the shadows cast back then. Sometimes I wondered if we’d ever emerge.

Imagining my normally confident friend standing in—no, engulfed by—similar shadows, I wanted to cry. To beat my head against the wall.

Her father would help her, of course. His devotion was total, a joy to witness. His own life had prepared him for facing the worst that hard-fought military battles and evil Soviet minions could fling his way. Dr. Klimenko, who doubled as my Russian history professor, could handle ferocious foes. Yet could he deal with the subtlety of the Canadian justice system?

I pictured him smashing his leather-clad fist on a magistrate’s desk and yelling *po-russki*, in Russian, at a hapless Canadian bureaucrat. None of that would help Larissa’s cause.

What she needed was someone calm and consoling to support her. To buck her up when events overwhelmed, assuring her she’d get through whatever was thrown her way.

What she needed was a good, stalwart friend.

What she needed was me.

A vision of my clogged schedule appeared in my mind’s eye. Today was Monday, and every day in the coming week held a long to-do list. I had a household to run and research to do.

And Wyatt, what about him? I couldn't possibly leave him with David. With the deadline for defending his dissertation hanging over him, David was too busy to cope with an infant. I gnawed on my thumbnail, knowing I shouldn't even be thinking about leaving. To consider for even one second flying across the country to comfort Larissa was nuts.

Still, the idea wouldn't leave my mind.

Hence the flipping and flopping instead of sleeping.

When David was jailed for murder and I'd tried to find the real killer, I hadn't been a mother. And I'd learned the hard way that getting involved in a murder case brought unexpected dangers.

I sat up in bed, careful not to wake David, and was staring out the window when my thoughts took a sharp turn toward the light. I was viewing a trip to Vancouver the wrong way. I needn't play sleuth again. I only needed to go support a friend.

The two sides of my brain immediately roared into an argument with each other.

See, said one, the danger won't be great. Any comparison between what I'd done for David and what I'd do for Larissa wouldn't hold up. I could safely take Wyatt to visit Auntie Larissa.

You're crazy, the other side said. You may fool yourself, but you don't fool me.

The war inside my brain made my head ache.

The last time I noticed the bedside clock it said three thirty. I must have slept because three hours later, the danged thing rang and woke me up. I trudged down the hall to check on Wy. Hallelujah, he still slept. I lumbered into the kitchen, rubbing tired eyes.

I was making coffee when David walked in and strode to where I stood at the stove. "What're you muttering about? You had a restless night, didn't you?" He slapped my bottom, then ruffled my already-tousled hair. "Did you worry about Larissa all night?"

I wrinkled my nose and ducked my head, shielding my face so he couldn't read it. He was too astute.

"I've been trying to figure out a way to help her. Just moments ago, I had a breakthrough and—"

"Bet I know what it is."

"Sure, Mr. Smarty Pants. Tell me." I reached up to smooth his beard and then burrowed into his chest.

"You still want to fly out to Vancouver, even though you know I'm against it." He drew back from me. "Furthermore, you're going to ask me to babysit while you're gone."

Oh, he thought he was so clever.

"Am not. I wouldn't do that to you."

"No?" His eyebrows lifted.

"No." I backed up and looked him straight in the eye—easy to do since he was only an inch taller than me. "My plan is"—I hitched a breath—"I'll take Wyatt with me."

David stared at me. His mouth opened and shut without making a sound.

"Cat got your tongue?" I beamed. Victory. "See—you didn't know what my bright idea was." This was a game we played, each trying to prove we could read the other's mind. I'd won this round.

A muscle jumped in his cheek. "Look, don't be cute about this. It's not funny. How can you dismiss what happened last year?" He put his hands on his hips. "No way will my wife and son fly out and get tangled up in another murder case. You could run into some homicidal psychopath, and I think—"

What? He had switched arguments on me.

I spread my hands wide and smiled at him, attempting a beguiling look—or at least a pleading one. "This won't be like last time. I won't be in harm's way. I'll be there for moral support only. Wyatt will be safe. And so will I."

"Why can't you provide support over the telephone?"

I cocked my head, wrinkled my nose, shut my eyes. Hoped I demonstrated my pain. Yes, I was trying to work the situation.

“Look, here’s my logic,” I said, lowering my tone and slowing my words, hoping I sounded reasonable. “Phone calls aren’t good enough. You should’ve heard her last night. Larissa’s beyond upset. She needs me.”

“I need you. Wyatt needs you. We’re your family.” He kicked the table leg.

Now we’d gotten to the nub of the issue. My rationale had to be clear and persuasive. “First, *you* don’t need me right now. You’re busy with your dissertation. If Wyatt and I leave, you’ll be able to focus and get tons of work done.”

I ticked off one finger and then another.

“Second, Wyatt will still have me. Third, my trip won’t cost anything. Larissa said we can stay at her aunt’s house, so no hotel costs. Then we’ll be back in a jiffy, gone only long enough for you to miss us. And besides”—I ticked off a fourth finger—“Larissa is family too.”

Would he leap to agree? When he didn’t—and really, I’d doubted he would—I played my top card. “Okay, here’s my backup plan. But be warned: bringing Wy with me will work out better than my other idea, but you can choose.”

“Choose from what?” David frowned.

“I’ll ask Mother to fly up and babysit while you study.”

“Damn it, Austin,” David yelled. “You know that I—” He stopped abruptly and burst out laughing. “You’re really determined if you’re willing to ask your mother.”

“Darned right.”

“What makes you believe she’d agree? Since we’ve been in Toronto, she hasn’t deigned to visit, even though your dad wants to.”

“Won’t know until I try.” I turned on the full wattage of my smile. “Shall I ask her?”

He stroked his beard and chewed on his lip. Then he pulled me to him and wrapped his arms around me.

“I’ve suspected your mother, in her heart of hearts, was glad when I went to jail. Regardless of my innocence, I bet she wanted

me to stay behind bars. Then maybe you'd leave Canada, return to Texas, and forget your unsuitable, draft-resisting husband."

I pulled away and flounced to the other side of the kitchen. "Isn't that a little unfair?"

"No. I wasn't the future your mother mapped out for you. She'd give anything to get you back in Texas and remarried to some oil millionaire."

"Maybe, but remember this. She also drummed into me stuff about whither-thou-goest and making marriage and family the be-all and end-all of a woman's life." I pointed out the window at our neighbors hurrying off to work. "So I'm right here. I followed her grand scheme, just took a little detour north. If she's not happy, she needs to blame herself."

"Your logic is right on, but your mom won't see that." His mouth twisted into a big grin. "Nix this idea. Your mother would only add to my stress."

He shut his eyes for an instant, shook his head, and turned away. He poured a cup of coffee before he said, "Look, here's my biggest objection. You will not be able to stop yourself from nosing around, playing sleuth again in Vancouver. It's your nature. No matter how many times you promise, you'll forget, just like that." He snapped his fingers.

He walked closer and stopped two feet away from me. "You know I'm right."

His gaze bored into me, and I found it difficult not to look away. Still, I forced myself to hold my eyes steady and kept my voice assured. "I promise I will not play detective, not this time. Cross my heart and hope to die." I mimed crossing my heart.

David didn't laugh. He scowled. "Not funny, sweetheart. You nearly died from giving me support last year. You'll forget about your promise. I know you will."

"But I promise, I do promise. *This* time is different. I wasn't a mother before. That's made me more, uh, serious, I suppose. More cautious. I won't be cavalier with my actions this time. I did learn my lesson, truly I did."

He shrugged and clomped to the kitchen table, lowered himself onto a chair and shook his head. I felt a flicker of remorse, watching his struggle. He picked up his cup of coffee. But instead of drinking it, he stared into its blackness.

The wall clock clicked.

Clicked.

Clicked.

I needed to let David come to his own decision. I was impatient—wanting to hurry him along—but I didn't tap my foot or fidget. Well, not if you didn't count the two toes on my right foot that I surreptitiously crossed for luck.

The screech of a chair against the floor made me jump. David stood. "Okay, you win. Go and take Wyatt with you. But I am not happy about this."

My stomach tightened. I diagnosed a slight case of guilt. "So why are you giving in?"

"I don't have time to argue, and I know you won't give up. Besides, our boy needs his mother."

As if to confirm David's words, Wyatt's good-morning cries came from down the hall.

"I'll be right back." I rushed out to get our three-month-old before his wails turned to a full-force gale.

And before his father could change his mind.



Chapter Four

LATER THAT NIGHT I huddled on the living room sofa and waited for the phone to ring. My watch said eleven o'clock. Meaning it was eight in Vancouver. Out there, long distance rates were about to drop, so Larissa was bound to call soon.

"Aren't you coming to bed?" David growled from the hall. "Here's our chance. Wyatt's been asleep for ages. Why are you still up?"

"Be in shortly," I answered. "Probably Larissa will—"

The phone rang and cut me short. "Here she is. Won't be long, I promise."

I should quit making promises. I sounded guilty ahead of time, ahead of my sin of breaking my solemn promise not to play sleuth in Vancouver. David was bound to sense the shift.

He grunted and slouched down the hall toward our bedroom. He'd spoken few words to me since he'd agreed to my trip.

I picked up the receiver and without further ado made my announcement. "Larissa, I'm coming."

Her answering squeal pierced my eardrum. "I knew David would come through. Thank him for me, will you?"

"Sure thing. But there's a snag. The only way I can come is to bring Wyatt." I paused. How should I put this? "Well, I, uh—you sure it's okay to stay at your aunt's house? Do you think I can find a reliable babysitter for a few hours a day?" There, I got it all out.



I hope you have enjoyed this free preview of

Rainy Day Women by Kay Kendall

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