

RECAP
Book #1: The Unlikely Murder Club Series

SPOILERS! SPOILERS! SPOILERS!

The story centers on Agatha Shadewell, a sixty-five-year-old woman with cleithrophobia (fear of being trapped), who is released from the Liberty Women's Correctional Facility after serving three years of a five-year sentence. She is placed in the custody of Martin Kopp, the retired FBI Special Agent who had tracked her for decades. Agatha is assigned a fake identity, "Sarah Connor," and an ankle monitor with a three-mile radius. He takes her to a dilapidated house he owns in the rural town of Unlikely, Upstate New York, intending for her to live there while they work together to fix it up. Agatha is a Robin Hood-type criminal who helps people by taking down the criminals and returning the ill-gotten gains to the victims. And if she keeps some of it for herself... well, a gal's gotta eat, right? Now, Agatha is broke, having had her assets seized by the FBI. She initially plans to escape her new confinement but also finds an unexpected appeal in the idea of settling down.

On her first night out, Agatha sleepwalks due to stress and discovers **Emmett Q. Pestermann** dying in the woods near an old cemetery. She performs first aid and calls 9-1-1 but is subsequently arrested by Officer Martin's son, Detective Cecil Kopp, and Officer **Jada St. Clair** because she is covered in Pestermann's blood. At the police station, Cecil initially jokes about arresting her for murder but then clarifies that it appears Pestermann died of natural causes (a heart attack) and was a local phone scammer. Agatha learns that the nearby town of Grimthorpe is a hub for call centers, which also attract scammers, and that its strong Wi-Fi signal reaches Unlikely. She is released with clothes scrounged from the lost and found, and warned by Cecil not to leave town.

Later that day, while driving, Agatha's ankle monitor beeps at the edge of her perimeter, making her feel trapped. She then finds a dog, whom she later names **Chance**, tied to a guardrail. When she tries to rescue him, her ankle monitor shrieks loudly. Jada St. Clair arrives, summoned by the monitor's GPS, and Agatha convinces the young officer to let her keep Chance, agreeing to take him to the vet and ensure he avoids cages, which trigger her own cleithrophobia. Jada warns Agatha about a "zero tolerance" policy for crossing her three-mile radius.

Agatha takes Chance to the Grimthorpe Veterinary Clinic, run by **Dr. Naomi Augustus** (Cecil's ex-wife and Martin's former daughter-in-law) and her daughter **Echo**. Chance isn't micro-chipped, but is otherwise healthy. Agatha confesses she cannot pay the vet bill. Naomi arranges for Agatha to take a job running the woodworking workshop at the Unlikely senior center, a role Martin had suggested.

The next day, Echo uses her superior computer skills to hack into the police system. She discovers that Pestermann's death was not a heart attack but a murder by pentobarbital, a sedative used for animals, two vials of which are missing from the vet clinic. This leads to Naomi Augustus's arrest and accusation of murder. Echo overhears her father, Detective Cecil Kopp, and grandfather, Martin, discussing the case; Cecil is reassigned because of the conflict of interest. Echo learns from eavesdropping that Pestermann kept handwritten records of his scams.

Echo visits Agatha in the evening, begging the ex-con to help clear her mother's name. Agatha initially resists, unwilling to risk returning to prison, but ultimately agrees.

Echo informs them that Pestermann had a second, secret storage locker where he hid his accounting books. Agatha breaks in, photographs the ledger, and returns it to its hiding place. During this break-in, Agatha has a panic attack, realizing that her emergency “go-bag” and escape route at Newark Airport are likely compromised after three years. Using the information from the ledger, Echo creates a spreadsheet that cross-references Pestermann’s victims, individuals with access to pentobarbital, and those caught on a trail camera in the woods near the cemetery on the night of the murder. This narrows down the suspects. **JJ Urquhart**, a true crime author, is identified as Pestermann’s biggest victim (scammed over \$2000) and was in the woods that night. Naomi Augustus is also on the list, having been scammed by Pestermann.

Martin, feeling bored in retirement and believing Naomi is innocent, also joins the unofficial investigation, rationalizing it as a way to keep Agatha and Echo out of trouble.

Agatha, pretending to be interested in him writing her life story, interviews JJ Urquhart. JJ admits he intentionally let Pestermann scam him for book research and claims Pestermann had murdered his own partner years prior. He also reveals he accidentally recorded the murder on his dictation device and wants to join their “murder club”. Agatha notices a yellow plastic rope at his house, identical to the one used to tie Chance to the guardrail.

Martin and Agatha later investigate other suspects: **Evan Bayer**, a pharmacist, and **Bob McIntosh**, an apple farmer. They discover that Bayer and McIntosh are running an unlicensed medical cannabis operation in the woods for people in need. Martin, given his retired status and the moral dilemma, decides not to report them, clearing them as murder suspects.

Meanwhile, **Ernie Augustus**, Naomi’s father and a retired veterinarian, confesses to taking a vial of pentobarbital from the clinic to euthanize a neighbor’s sick dog, which later recovered and didn’t need the drug, which he presents to Cecil. This specific vial is accounted for, but one syringe of pentobarbital remains missing from the clinic’s inventory. Echo’s doorbell camera later reveals JJ Urquhart suspiciously watching Martin’s house. (Naomi’s house, where Echo lives, is directly across the street from Martin’s.) Martin’s FBI file on Agatha, which he kept locked in his study, is discovered to be missing after a break-in accidentally recorded by JJ’s sound-activated dictation device, which was in Martin’s jacket pocket.

Agatha deduces that JJ Urquhart is the actual killer. She realizes he researches criminals, then murders them to be the first to publish a true crime book, seeing himself as a hero: the “killer of killers”. JJ can’t stand to see his books rendered outdated if the subject goes on to commit more crimes, so he kills them and then publishes. He murdered Pestermann and framed Naomi because she rejected his romantic advances. He stole Agatha’s FBI file, intending to kill her next so he could write her life story, planning to frame Martin.

Urquhart contacts Agatha, having stolen Chance and tracked her truck. By threatening Chance, he forces her to cut off her ankle monitor and meet him at the spot where she found the dog. At the roadside, Urquhart confesses his motives, detailing his plan to frame Martin for Agatha’s murder. Agatha stalls, fights back by throwing dirt in his face, and cuts Chance free with a carpet knife she had hidden. She expects to die, and just hopes Chance finds his way to Echo, who will take care of the little dog.

But Chance bites Urquhart, and in the struggle, Urquhart accidentally injects himself with a small amount of pentobarbital, becoming disoriented. Martin, Cecil, Detective Mueller (the Grimthorpe detective filling in for Cecil), and Jada St. Clair arrive. Urquhart is arrested.

Naomi is subsequently released from jail, with Martin and Cecil leveraging their contacts to expedite the process. Mueller attempts to re-arrest Agatha for cutting off her ankle monitor, but Cecil intervenes, proclaiming Agatha an “Unlikely hero”. Urquhart’s crimes, including his modus operandi and confession, are leaked to a true crime forum on Reddit (implied to be Echo’s doing), leading to public condemnation and making his books bestsellers. Agatha keeps Chance and continues her job at the senior center, which proves successful. Martin applies to increase her ankle monitor’s radius. Agatha finds a sense of community and friendship with Martin, Echo, and Jada. She and Martin share a moment of connection that hints at romance but is interrupted by Echo. The story concludes with the unexpected arrival of **Big Phyllis**, a formidable former inmate, at Agatha’s house.