

A Mother-and-Me Mystery

Dead Shrinks Don't Talk



Sandra Gardner

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I hurried along to Dr. Ditstein's apartment. I knocked on her door, not timidly, since timid would indicate that I was reverting to a childish state and expecting punishment from a parent-figure. Nothing happened. I knocked again and bit a cuticle. Maybe she was trying to punish me. Okay, mea culpa and all that jazz, let's go, Charmaine. I called her by her first name in my mind but not to her face, unlike Ron in the group. The clock was ticking and an incarnation of my mother was snoring away on my couch.

Still nothing. This was getting silly and I was getting annoyed. I banged harder on the door and it swung open.

Definitely weird. My hand flew to my mouth. What if she'd been mugged? What if the mugger was still there? I rocked back and forth on the threshold.

Indecision, thy name is Marabella.

The apartment was silent. Taking a deep breath, I walked into the foyer and stopped when I reached the living room.

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When Marabella Vinegar finds her psychotherapist's bloody corpse, she becomes the NYPD's perp of choice. Her recently deceased mother—the bane of her existence in life—comes back as a ghost to help get her out of trouble and find the real killer. Things get even worse when, thanks to Marabella and her mother's sleuthing, someone tries to kill her. Then another body is found and Marabella is thrown in jail, awaiting trial for two murders. Can she and her mother-the-ghost-detective find the killer before Marabella becomes corpse number three?

KUDOS for *Dead Shrinks Don't Talk*

In *Dead Shrinks Don't Talk* by Sandra Gardner, Marabella Vinegar is shocked and dismayed when her mother, who has been dead for a week, shows up on Marabella's couch as a ghost, hinting that Marabella is in trouble. Marabella doesn't think she is in any trouble, and she hurries off to see her shrink, as she is late for her appointment. But when she gets there, she discovers that the shrink has been murdered, and the trouble her mother warned her of is her being the prime suspect. Since the police are convinced they have the murderer, Marabella and her mother start investigating, trying to find the real killer. But when they get too close to the truth, Marabella discovers that she is about to become a corpse herself. Well written, clever, and fun, the story combines mystery, suspense, and humor for a highly entertaining read. I thoroughly enjoyed it. ~ Taylor Jones, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

Dead Shrinks Don't Talk by Sandra Gardner is the story of a young woman with serious problems. Marabella Vinegar has been seeing a shrink for eight years, struggling to work out her issues with her mother. When her mother dies, Marabella is both devastated and relieved. And feeling guilty, of course. Then suddenly, a week later, her mother is back as a ghost, claiming that she has come back to help Marabella in her time of trouble. Marabella doesn't know what trouble her mother could be talking about, and she isn't sure how to deal with her mother's presence. So she heads off to her appointment with her psychiatrist, Dr. Ditstein, dying to hear her take on this latest issue with her mother. But to her dismay, Dr. Ditstein has been murdered, the police suspect Marabella, and the real killer wants her dead to keep her finding out the truth. Marabella's in trouble, all right, but how is a ghost going to help her out of this mess? *Dead Shrinks Don't Talk* is cute, clever, fast paced, and intriguing. With marvelous characters, a solid plot, and plenty of surprises, it is one you

will want to keep on your shelf to read again and again, just for the sheer enjoyment. ~ *Regan Murphy, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

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Dead Shrinks Don't Talk

A Mother and Me Mystery

Sandra Gardner

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: MYSTERY-DETECTIVE/WOMEN SLEUTHS/PARANORMAL THRILLER

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Dead Shrinks
Don't Talk

Chapter 1

My mother had only been dead a week when she appeared on my sofa. She shoved me off onto the floor, as a matter of fact. I had just settled down for a quick nap between my crazy-making job and a late-evening rendezvous with my shrink.

“A lady doesn’t sit on the floor, Marabella,” my mother scolded.

She pursed lips that still had traces of her favorite Revlon shade, Rose-of-Sharon, and peered at me from under her shaggy mud-brown hair. Her hair really needed cutting—shaping too, come to think of it.

“What are you doing here?” I tried to muster as much dignity as someone in my position could manage, plopped on the floor as I was. And being berated by a...my mother, who was dead! Wasn’t she? “Aren’t you...” My tongue tripped on the words, “Didn’t you...”

Of all the crazy stunts my mother had ever pulled, this one took the cake. But I shouldn’t be all that surprised, since she’d always been capable of just about anything. So why not this?

“Yes, and no.” She leaned back against the sofa pillows, smoothing down the bottom of her dress, the white satin-

and-lace number she'd been buried in. "You think it's that easy? Has anything in my life..."

Oh, no, I thought, I have to keep listening to this stuff even after she's dead?

She clapped a hand over her mouth. "No, nope, I'm not going to do it, I promised." She glared at the ceiling. "And I couldn't help it about the sofa, either. I haven't sat down in a week."

I got up off the floor, dusting off my behind. "Why are you here?"

"Why am I here? Very shortly, you're going to need me, sweetheart," she said, with a self-satisfied smile.

This was more than I could take, her thinking that I should need her help from beyond the grave. "They sent you back here? Like, on an assignment?" Like I still needed a mother's watchful eye, at the age of (gulp) thirty-nine? Granted, I occasionally had a little difficulty making decisions—okay, a lot of difficulty. And I knew I was too dependent on my therapist, Dr. Ditstein. We'd spent many cathartic hours together, much of it dealing with my relationship with my mother. And now here she was, again.

"I put in a special request," my mother said. "Because where else should a mother be when her daughter's going to be in trouble?"

"What kind of trouble?"

"You'll see," she said.

Okay, whatever it was, she wasn't going to tell me. See if I cared. I took a new tack. "How did you get here? Did you fly or what? Considering that you've always hated airplanes—were even afraid of high buildings—how the heck did you learn to fly at the age of seventy?"

"It's just something that comes naturally, sweetheart," she said. "You don't even have to think about it." She yawned. "I'm a little tired out right now."

"Tired? You sleep? You need sleep?" I was beginning to feel dizzy.

She gave me a baleful look. “You’d be tired, too, if you’d traveled as far as I did. Remember, I volunteered for this job. For you.” And she closed her eyes and stretched out full-length on the sofa.

I studied her. Something was different. She was thinner. No, not exactly thinner. There seemed to be less of her. And she was so pale.

Okay, maybe being under the ground, in the casket? I shivered, not exactly wanting to relive that scene.

The funeral had been pretty traumatic, because my mother’s family’s behavior at anyone’s funeral was to screech, sob, and tear at their bosoms, and since bosoms in my family generally came in the large-economy size, that made for quite a bit of tearing.

Biting my cuticles—a habit I’d been trying to break ever since I had cuticles—I stared at her. What was I going to do now? Thank goodness, I had an appointment with Dr. Ditstein tonight.

I had to think. I tiptoed to my bedroom, so as not to wake her up, popped a Xanax, and crawled into my four-poster bed. It barely fit in the room, but it was heavenly to sleep in.

I pulled one of the lumpy afghans my mother had made over my head. She’d crocheted these for me so I’d have lovely hand-made keepsakes to remember her by, she told me.

The question was: Why had I kept them? According to Dr. Ditstein, it was because of my ambivalent relationship with my mother. Which, in turn, seemed to be part of the reason why I had trouble making decisions and moving on with my life?

Maybe I’ve finally gone over the edge, I thought, which my best friend Toniann Di Lorenzo warns me will be my fate if I keep working at Chelsea College. Maybe I’m dreaming this—I mean, I’ve been working really hard—so, okay, let’s say I kind of went into some kind of dream-state and conjured my mother up.

But why would I do that to myself? That much of a masochist I didn't think I was, especially now that I'd just completed my eighth year of therapy, including two years in group.

I had to hurry to get to my appointment. But before I left, I was going to find out whether or not I had hallucinated my mother.

Jumping off the bed, I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, ran a comb through my tangled hair, and shoved my bangs out of my eyes.

Now I was ready to confront my resident... whatever.

I marched back into the living room. There she was. Sound asleep. Snoring loudly. *They actually snore?* She was obviously in a state of complete exhaustion.

Didn't I realize the poor thing needed her rest, especially after what she'd just gone through? She also needed some new clothes, which I'd have to lend her, since that dress wasn't exactly meant for lounging around in. I went to the closet to retrieve another afghan.

I crept over to the sofa and covered her. A delicious smile appeared on her face—sort of beatific, come to think of it—and she snuggled down into the afghan, mumbling, “There's a good girl.”

I beamed. Then I gasped. What was I doing? What was *she* doing?

I grabbed my denim jacket and oversized leather pocketbook and headed out the door.

I hoped Dr. Ditstein might have some answers. But this could be too much for even her magical talents.

Since Dr. Ditstein's place was on the East Side of Manhattan and mine was on the West Side, I was afraid I might be late. I figured a cab would be faster than the subway. I was wrong. By the time we pulled up to Dr. Ditstein's, I was definitely late.

There were at least forty-five apartments-cum-offices in her building. It was overrun with shrinks for all disorders: sex, animals, eating, phobic, as well as those like Dr. Dit-

stein, who serviced run-of-the-mill neurotics. So you could usually find representatives of any type of weirdness roaming the corridors. But the building was quiet. Everyone was already fifteen minutes into their fifty-minute hours. I caught the next up elevator and pushed the button for the sixth floor.

When I got out, I heard a click from the apartment across from the elevator bay and felt eyes peering at me through the oversized peephole. *Dr. Shokum, I presume?* I had to stifle the urge to press myself up against his door and go eyeball-to-eyeball with him through the peephole. Somebody told me that Dr. Shokum was so terrified of people, he only did telephone therapy. All I ever saw was his eye. I wondered if his patients would stop going to him if they knew about his phobia. Probably not. I also heard that he gave great phone.

Other than Dr. Shokum's breathing, not a creature was stirring. I hurried along to Dr. Ditstein's apartment, knocked on her door, not timidly, since timid would indicate that I was reverting to a childish state and expecting punishment from a parent-figure. Nothing happened. I knocked again and bit a cuticle. Maybe she was trying to punish me. *Okay, mea culpa and all that jazz, let's go, Charmaine.* I called her by her first name in my mind but not to her face, unlike Ron in group. The clock was ticking, and an incarnation of my mother was snoring away on my couch.

Still nothing. This was getting silly, and I was getting annoyed. I banged harder on the door, and it swung open.

Definitely weird. My hand flew to my mouth. What if she'd been mugged? What if the mugger was still there? I rocked back and forth on the threshold.

Indecision, thy name is Marabella.

The apartment was silent. Taking a deep breath, I walked into the foyer and stopped when I reached the living room.

Dr. Ditstein lay face down, sprawled on the wall-to-wall blue-and-gold Oriental. A pool of blood had spread from the back of her head.

Oh, my God, oh, my God! My breath was coming in gasps, and I was shaking all over. Was she shot? Stabbed? Did she fall and hit her head?

What was I going to do without Dr. Ditstein? Why did this have to happen? What kind of person would do this? Oh, God, oh, God. Maybe the person was still there. Maybe if I pretended to faint, they wouldn't think I saw anything. I made myself fall on the floor in a heap. And landed next to the body. Aarrgh.

I jumped up. This wasn't going to fool anybody, especially a killer. *A killer.* Just saying the word in my head made me shudder. Poor Dr. Ditstein. Poor me, with no Dr. Ditstein.

Should I call an ambulance? No, I better call the cops. I picked up my Droid, but my hands were shaking so hard, I dropped it on the floor. *Breathe, Marabella. In and out. The way Dr. Ditstein taught us. Breathe. Okay, now try again.* This time, I was able to make the call.

"I don't know what to do. I think there's a—dead—woman on the floor of her apartment," I stuttered, and gave them the address.

Then I bent down and made myself lift her wrist and take her pulse, just in case, even though I knew she was probably dead. Her wrist was still warm. It occurred to me that meant the murderer must have just left. And I may have just missed being his second victim. A tiny key fell out of her hand. I picked it up without thinking and shoved it into my jacket pocket.

I probably wouldn't have noticed if there was anything out of place, since I was not exactly the noticing type. I was more like the type who walked into walls. And the only thing I could focus on was all that blood, so much blood.

I didn't want to believe she was dead, my poor harmless holistic shrink, who didn't have an enemy in the world! Correction: she seemed to have had at least one. Who'd just killed the most important person in my life.

Chapter 2

I didn't want to leave poor Dr. Ditstein alone, so I sat down in the nearest chair and waited for the cops. And I tried not to look at the second dead person in my life in a week.

The guilt wheels began whirring in my brain. If I hadn't been late for my appointment, my shrink might not be dead.

Or we could both be dead.

I heard footsteps, and the door flew open. Several beefy, blue-coated men stood in the entrance. Another one, tall and lean, with a sour expression, was wearing a beat-up blue jacket and brown pants.

"Detective Eddie Rivera," the wardrobe-challenged cop said, walking over to me. "Who are you? What are you doing in this apartment?"

I pulled out my driver's license with the candid shot of a Bedlam-inmate that the DMV had substituted for the real me.

He squinted at the picture and handed it back with a yawn. "I asked you what you were doing in the apartment."

I told him about being late for my appointment with Dr. Ditstein. And what I found when I got there. "Since I was the one who called you, you know I didn't do anything. Can I leave now, please?" I said.

Ignoring my request, he asked, “Did you see anything? Hear anything?” When I shook my head, he said, “How about outside, on your way in, on the elevator, on the stairs?”

“No, nothing.”

“Did you touch anything in the apartment?”

“Um, I touched her wrist. When I took her pulse. She didn’t have one. A pulse, I mean,” I babbled. I decided not to tell him about the key. “And, um, I touched my phone when I called the police station. Of course.”

He looked at me strangely, maybe because I was acting like a gibbering idiot. “Okay, is that it? That’s all?” he asked. When I nodded, he said, “One of my men will take you home. But since you’re a witness, I’ll need to talk to you again soon.” He asked for my address and phone number and ushered me out of the apartment. One of the blue-coated gentlemen escorted me into the elevator, down to the lobby, and outside into a police car.

On the way home, I began to shake in earnest. What was I going to do without Dr. Ditstein? Who could I depend on? Who could help me make decisions, now that my go-to person was dead?

Chapter 3

I dragged myself into the lobby of my building and into the elevator. When I got out, my neighbor Sam was there, bringing his trash to the trash room.

Sam shook his head. “You look terrible. Oh,” he said, looking apologetic, “how could I be so thoughtless? You’re upset about your mother, of course.”

I leaned against the wall. “Sam, I couldn’t begin to tell you. It would take all night.”

“So? I’m an old man, what else have I got but time? Come in, I’ll make you some tea.”

I couldn’t help smiling. “Sam, you’re a sweetheart, but I’m pooped. I’ll tell you about it as soon as I can. And by the way, I’ve got some audio books for you.”

“I’m more worried about you than the books.” He ran his hand through his thinning white hair. “But knock any-time, I’m always up.” He waved goodbye and opened his apartment door.

Sam was in his late-seventies. A self-educated man who loved books, he got really depressed when he began losing his sight. So I picked up audio books for him whenever I could get to the library. He’d been a traveling salesman who’d never married because his lifestyle wouldn’t have been fair to a wife, he said. But he hadn’t lacked for female

companionship. I'd even introduced him to my mother before she became really ill, and they'd enjoyed each other's company. In fact, I secretly got downright jealous. Dr. Ditstein's take on it was that Sam was a father-substitute for me.

My father died of a stroke when I was twelve. He was a quiet man who'd worked his behind off in his pharmacy, six days a week. When he was home, he was so dog-tired he frequently fell asleep in the TV chair right after dinner, to the tune of my mother's comment, "God forbid, but he looks like a corpse."

I grew up thinking that all men must be like my father: the man who wasn't there. According to Dr. Ditstein, this was the key to my lousy relationships with men. I couldn't bring myself to trust them. So I'd pick the wrong ones. With the good ones, things would start off okay, but then I'd do something to screw things up before they could reject me.

When I got inside my apartment, my mother was still asleep. I foraged for an extra robe and a couple of nighties plus underwear for my mother and laid them out on the chair next to the sofa. I knew she'd complain mightily about the fit.

I really loved—had really loved—my mother. I'd also heartily hated her. After all, how could you not love—and hate—a smart, funny woman who thought you were the most wonderful being on earth as long as you did what she told you to do? And I wouldn't exactly say I missed her, not that I didn't think about her a lot. She'd been a smother-loving parent, who loudly sacrificed her life for me. Breaking away would have taken independence, a quality that didn't stand a fighting chance around my mother.

I fell into bed without even attacking my new crossword puzzle book, one of my all-purpose remedies for unwinding. Another one was my aerobics class, which I only managed to get to on a highly irregular basis—depending on how hungry I was, since I couldn't eat between work and class.

The major one—more of a lifesaver, actually—was my bedtime dose of Xanax. It helped me focus and made me be-

lieve I could cope with whatever craziness came my way—one more thing I was dependent on, besides my therapist. While I was brushing my teeth, I thought about my mother and Dr. Ditstein and took a double dose.

During the night, I felt a light touch on my cheek and the covers being pulled up around me. If this was what having my mother back again meant, maybe it wasn't so terrible.

But I didn't sleep well. A blood-drenched Dr. Ditstein was chasing me in my dreams. Though she didn't seem to want to harm me. She seemed to be trying to tell me something.

I woke up to the smell of something familiar and burning. I staggered out of bed into the kitchen. My mother was wearing my bathrobe barely tied.

"This robe doesn't exactly fit in the bust, but who's looking? Humph. Your bust, it's respectable, but it can't stack up to mine," she muttered.

She was overcooking French toast at the stove. A smoke haze curled around her. She gave me a concerned look. "Breakfast in a jiffy."

I sank into a chair at the table and choked. "There's an exhaust fan," I said.

"A little griddle smoke is nothing. I read in a column it has vitamins or minerals in it. And that exhaust fans only blow the air around."

I could have used a little of that blown air right now. Considering last night's events, I didn't have much appetite. And her terrible cooking wouldn't help.

She looked down at the bathrobe, overflowing with its unaccustomed contents. "Maybe I could open up the seams," she said, sliding a plate of charred lumps in front of me. "Your favorite. And boy, do you need to keep up your strength with what you're going through."

I shot her a glance, but she was back at the mess on the stove again. Did they have ESP?

“It’s not exactly ESP, sweetheart. But up there—” She pointed to the ceiling. “—we acquire special abilities, you might say.”

“Besides the transportation issue?”

She chuckled. “In some cases, we can tell what’s going to happen and who it’s going to happen to. And also, I might add, read somebody’s mind.”

Aarggh. That had been a real problem when I was growing up, especially when I started going out with boys. And now she’d fine-tuned it?

She nodded. “But it doesn’t always work right. Sometimes the system gets jammed. Or goes down. Or gets screwed up from whatever gadgets they use nowadays.”

I was speechless for a moment.

“And there’s more—”

I closed my eyes.

“—there’s the appearing. And the disappearing. Or dematerializing, I guess it’s called. That’s sort of an automatic safety device. Because, otherwise, it could get a little confusing. The same with who can see and hear you.”

Were we really having this conversation? About what people could and couldn’t do after they—

I shook my head. This was crazy talk. Somebody must have told her about what happened. “Ma, you weren’t on the phone yesterday, were you? I mean, nobody called, did they?”

I poured a ton of maple syrup over the stuff on my plastic plate. Since I tended to drop china like anorexics dropped weight, I’d finally given up and bought plastic.

She looked insulted and drew herself up to her full height. “And who would I want to talk to on the phone? My no-good relatives or so-called friends, for examp—”

“Don’t start,” I said.

Everyone and everything offended her. If the weather turned bad, she took it as a personal affront.

She looked at the ceiling with a worried expression. “All right, all right,” she whispered. Then she said, “But I have to

know, darling, why wasn't Cousin Sylvia at the funeral? A first cousin, she couldn't be there, she had someplace else better to be, like her hairdresser?"

I thought her question about attendance at her funeral to be in poor taste. "Sylvia broke her leg getting off her exercise bike," I explained.

My mother chortled. "Serves her right, the klutz. And Marty was late, so he comes just in time for the food at the *shiva*, as per usual." She shrugged. "Well, he's just a brother-in-law, so it doesn't really matter."

Marty was my Aunt Evelyn's husband, skinny as a ferret, who ate his way through any affair.

"But Evelyn—" Her eyes narrowed. "How could she wear that horrible purple thing? I happen to know that she owns a little black suit, a Chanel knock-off, she bought on sale. *This* she saves for important occasions? Not like her sister's funeral, of course."

My aunt Evelyn probably figured, why waste the Chanel knock-off on a dead person? Evelyn would have had no idea that her purple dress would come back to haunt her, so to speak.

"Eat your breakfast, it's getting cold. And we've got a murder to solve," she said.

"How did you—" I started to say, but she waved my question away. "Ma, I don't have time, and I never eat breakfast," I said, as gently as possible, given her condition.

She not only looked hurt but also seemed to be a bit paler today than last night.

"A cup of coffee will be great." I gulped it down with a handful of vitamins and patted her shoulder. "Take it easy, Ma, I've got to get ready for work now. We'll talk when I get home."

She pointed at me, wielding the pancake turner like a sword. "Take it easy?" Slicing the air with it, she added, "And are you still working at that terrible place? Where they treat you like an indentured servant?"

“Ma, you’ve only been gone a week.” Horrified at what I said, I mumbled, “We’ll talk later, okay? And don’t...go out. Or answer the phone or the door, okay? I’ll be in the shower.”

After toweling off, I rooted in my closet for something clean and unwrinkled. I finally found a dark green blazer to go with a black watch plaid pleated skirt and a Kelly green blouse. I pulled on my sneakers and tossed my pumps in my tote bag.

Leaving the apartment, I prayed nobody would call the fire department until I got out of the building. If they did, I thought, what would they think about my mother, the apparition? As the elevator made its way down to the lobby, I realized they would probably just worry that I might be, God forbid, subletting or sharing my Upper West Side rent-stabilized digs. Never mind with whom—or what.

Chapter 4

I walked out into the street. Lucy was at her usual corner. “Hey, how’s it going?” I asked. She looked bone-tired and was coughing. But she gave me her usual toothless grin. “I bet it’s going to be a good day, hon, just you wait and see. He told me so this morning,” she said, pointing to the sky.

She spat into a handkerchief that looked spanking clean, like the rest of her raggedy attire. Lucy had to be the cleanest homeless person in New York.

I dropped a dollar into the Yankees cap she had at her feet. I hoped the nasty kids across the street wouldn’t grab the cap again and toss it in the gutter. “Hey, take care of that cough, will you? You should get somebody over at the clinic to look at you.”

She waved away my concern. “The Lord will bless you for helping old Lucy, wait and see.”

I knew she wouldn’t go to the free clinic unless she was at death’s door. And maybe not even then. She figured the Lord would protect her.

I decided to walk the twelve blocks to the Chelsea College campus. Maybe navigating the crowded sidewalks and avoiding the maniac drivers would keep me from brooding

on the scene at Dr. Ditstein's. I also thought it would make up for my no-show at aerobics lately.

My virtue was rewarded by witnessing a woman dressed to the nines, looking nonchalant while her dog crapped all over the sidewalk. She, and it, left a huge steaming pile. What class.

When I got to my building, the usual group of protesters was stationed in front of the door. They looked about the same as the ones I'd seen every one of the nineteen years I'd been in the public relations department. Wearing tee-shirts with slogans, they carried placards and were very earnest. At least they cared enough to protest. I smiled at them, wished them a nice day, and went inside.

Donna Tomiello, my boss, and Twinkie, her vicious little dog, weren't in evidence. A note taped to Donna's door said: *Emergency meeting with Board of Trustees. Lionel in the hospital getting ear spliced together after his iguana tried to bite it off. Maybe he should feed it more often, ha, ha. Interview with Dr. Adriance, the vet, scheduled for 9:30 in the cafeteria. Get Lionel's notes.*

Lionel Yung was a cute child science prodigy who'd graduated high school at fifteen. He was sent to Chelsea College because the trustees had pumped a lot of money into hiring top-notch science faculty. And his mother thought that starting at a community college would be better for him socially, since he was so young. The course-work wasn't enough to keep Lionel occupied. So he was getting work experience in our office writing science news and articles.

I occasionally reproached him for not being more interested in his Asian heritage. When I'd asked him where his family was from, he said, "The Bronx. I'm American, same as you."

His grandparents had emigrated from China, and by the time he was born, the family had been thoroughly Americanized. He got his name because his mother, Mei Lee Yung, thought it sounded American.

I spent many hours advising him about acne and girl problems. In return, I got to avoid all the science news from CC that was fit to print. I was a grade-A science-and-technophobe.

However, I was an excellent writer and editor and could spot a typo at twenty paces. This came in handy in my job as editor of the in-house newsletter. I also did the humanities and social science public relations writing. That meant a lot of ink promoting our English, soc, and psych courses. Not to mention boasting about our community involvement in substance abuse education and early childhood programs.

I was starting to hyperventilate and popped a Xanax. Lionel had scheduled some new muckity-muck scientist for a welcome-aboard interview today. This stress-maker I did not need. A ghost and a corpse and the cops were quite enough, thank you.

Standing in front of Lionel's desk, I tried to think for a moment, something I didn't do too clearly in the morning. Unfortunately, my immediate thoughts were of the dream I had last night. What was Dr. Ditstein trying to tell me? She was pointing to something in her hand. A book...or maybe a ledger. Then my mind went to the murder scene, and I shuddered. *Stop it*, I told myself.

I took a deep breath and got back to the present. If I were Lionel, where would I put a veterinarian? Under medicine? Biology? Zoology? I peered into the folders: bioengineering, quantum physics, plant chemistry—aha, there it was, under veterinary medicine. Scooping up the file, I sat down at the desk. Thank God, the physics professor, who'd graced us with his deodorant-challenged presence last semester, wasn't back again. Though since this new guy probably lived and breathed horses, who'd want to be around him?

I leafed through the file on John Adriance, DVM. Taught veterinary medicine for ten years before making full professor at Jeremiah Veterinary College in Pucksville, Pennsylvania. Hmm. Sounded like Podunk University to me. PU. Ha, ha. I'd have to remember to stifle the urge to giggle.

Besides Jeremiah, his CV said he had a large animal practice. Did that mean a large practice of nice little animals? Or a small practice of the other kind? Or both?

I should probably mention that I was generally terrified of any creature much bigger than a breadbox or that didn't have any legs or that had too many of them. That eliminated everything, I think, except cats, rabbits, gerbils, and goldfish.

I figured I was safe because it wasn't likely that Dr. Adriance traveled with his patients. *Let's see, what else?* I rifled through the folder. Oh, yeah, he was coming to Chelsea College to train veterinarians' technicians. Kind of like medical assistants. Or dental hygienists, I guess. Only they didn't have to deal with brushing or flossing. Or maybe they did. This thought made me a bit queasy on my empty stomach. I closed the file and geared myself up for the interview, stopping by my office to grab a notebook and a couple of pens. And headed to the cafeteria for the nine-thirty meeting.

The early meeting was because Lionel was a morning person, a very annoying quality of his. Here I was, barely awake, heading to a rendezvous with someone who spoke a language I wouldn't understand, namely horse or dog, and whose profession I wanted nothing to do with.

I took the elevator to the basement. It was dimly lit and dank from the water that was always dripping from somewhere. I followed the corridors to the cafeteria, peering over my shoulder. In the past couple of years, we'd had six assorted lurkers: two peeping Toms, three flashers, and one guy who just stared. I comforted myself with the fact that lurkers didn't usually kill people—like whatever scum killed poor Dr. Ditstein.

I peeked into the cafeteria to see if he was there yet. A guy in a tweedy sports jacket was sitting by himself with papers spread all over the table. Everybody else was clumped in twos and threes, so it had to be him. I waved to the people I liked, ignored the ones I didn't, and made my way to his table.

The closer I got, the more I liked what I saw. Tanned face. I know, bad for the skin, causes premature aging, possible early death—but this was worth it. Crinkles—okay, wrinkles—around deep-set brown eyes. Lots of curly dark hair, cute ears—kind of pointed around the edges—and a spectacular set of dimples, which I got to view up close as I introduced myself. Not to mention a great pair of shoulders. I couldn't see his arms and chest as to whether they were particularly furry. That would have to wait. Hopefully, not for long.

He stood up and flashed a smile. He had to be at least six feet tall.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, walking up to him and shaking his hand. A quick glance at his left hand told me it was naked, thank goodness. No wedding ring. “I know you were expecting Lionel West, but he...uh...had a little accident. I'm Marabella Vinegar.”

The family name, by the way, was courtesy of the kind folks at Ellis Island. We were respectable Vinnaucyurs back in south-middle Poland. My strange first name came from my grandparents on my mother's side: Marvin and Bella.

John Adriance, DVM, smiled. “My luck.” Then he said hastily, “I mean, it's too bad about Lionel, of course, but I'm sure you and I will do just fine.”

As he sat down, he pushed his papers into a pile next to him. With a sinking feeling, I saw they were full of statistical graphs. Not an auspicious beginning for a mathematically challenged writer.

I slid into a chair opposite him and noticed that his jacket was covered with some sort of animal hair. My hands were itching to run over his body with a dust buster.

His brown eyes gazed penetratingly at my teeth, checking me out as if I were a horse.

“I still have all thirty-two of them, no caps, and very few cavities,” I said proudly, and opened wide for him to get a better view. With his looks, I didn't care if he loved me for my teeth, my hair, my firm limbs, my anything.

“Charming,” he said and laughed.

I was thinking, *Whatever we do is fine with me: dinner, dancing, a quick trot around the block, a nightcap back at my place.* Then I flashed on my roommate. And the murder. I couldn’t let romantic, sexy thoughts distract me, right?

I shoved my hair out of my face, took a deep breath, and tried to look businesslike. “Okay, let’s get started,” I said, trying not to drown in his eyes. “Um,” I said, opening Lionel’s folder. “I should ask you...”

He leaned back in his chair. “Ask away, I’m all yours.” He grinned. This showed off his dimples even more.

Was that a promise? *Stop that,* I thought. This was supposed to be a business meeting. “I read in your file that you were at Jeremiah College in Pucksville, Pennsylvania. Doesn’t sound like a real big place, Pucksville,” I said, trying to bite back a giggle.

“Last census, the goats had the majority, four to one,” he said.

“And Jeremiah must be very different from Chelsea College,” I said.

“About as different as sheep dip and cow pies,” he said with a wicked grin.

Sexy, good-looking, intelligent, and a sense of humor. *Be still, my heart.* My eyes roamed the parts of his body that were visible and finally lit on his tie, a blue-green paisley print.

“Lovely tie,” I said. “Did you buy it around here?” *Oh, great. Real businesslike.*

“I haven’t had much of a chance to go shopping or see anything, yet,” he said. “Been too busy getting me and the boys settled in my house and preparing for this program. I really could use a friendly guide to show me around.” He smiled. “How long have you lived here, anyway?”

“Oh, just all my life,” I said. *The boys? His children?* “How many children do you have?” I asked, with what I hoped was studied casualness.

“None,” he said, looking puzzled for a moment. “Oh, the boys.” He laughed. “They’re my dogs. St. Bernards.”

I didn’t know whether to be relieved or not, given my large animal phobia. But I tried to smile. “How did you decide to become a vet?”

“I’ll tell you. But first, I want to ask if you’d be willing to help a stranger find his way around the city. I hear New Yorkers are supposed to be very savvy people.”

Talk about an offer I couldn’t refuse. “I’d be happy to.”

“I love your chestnut mane,” John Adriance said.

Another minute, I’d be Jell-O. If I were going to come up with a half-decent article—okay, any article—I’d have to steel myself to think unsexy thoughts. Animal thoughts. *No, not that kind of animal, Marabella. Horses. Cows. Sheep. Think sheep.* But sheep made me think of curly hair, my fingers running through dark curly hair.

Our eyes locked. I took a few deep breaths and remembered I was supposed to be conducting an interview. “About your plans,” I said, more firmly in command, at least for the moment. “Tell me what you’re going to do and how you’re going to do it.” Somehow, that wasn’t exactly coming out right.

“You know,” he said pleasantly, “maybe this isn’t the right atmosphere. Is there a park or some grass around here? I’m always much more at home outdoors.”

He gathered up his papers and me. Then he led me outside, kind of like he was taking me for my walk, except without a leash. And I didn’t even care.

Chapter 5

I made a lunch date with Toniann, figuring this would do double-duty: allow me to do some serious venting and, hopefully, help me try to sort things out.

A couple of hours later, Toniann and I were sitting in our usual Italian restaurant, halfway between my office and hers. She was dressed in an off-white suit. It showed off her legs that wouldn't stop, and I knew she would walk away from lunch with nary a spot on it. Whereas my lunch always stuck to my clothes like Velcro.

Toniann could put away enough food at a meal to sustain a steelworker for a week and never gain a pound. She was also blessed with huge blue eyes fringed with thick dark lashes, nicely shaped lips, and a perfect oval face. The only thing she lacked in the looks department was a chest. Hers was virtually nonexistent. I must confess that her envy of my generous bosom gave me the tiniest bit of satisfaction. Okay, a lot of satisfaction.

We became instant buddies when we were both in the public relations office at Chelsea College. Toniann was the kindest person I'd ever met, generous to a fault, and utterly loyal to her friends. I knew she'd go out on a limb for me without batting one of those luscious lashes. Of course, I'd do the same for her.

Now she worked for Otis Pinckney, a lawyer and would-be politician, which meant she was paid real money, not the college's slave wages. We tried to meet for lunch or at the health club whenever we could mesh our schedules.

Right now, she was chomping away on her calzone and fries slathered with ketchup. If I didn't like her so much, I'd hate her, which I sometimes did anyway. Especially when I was sitting across from her, nudging my fork around my small, limp-leaved salad, which had already dripped a couple of oily spots on my blouse. There wasn't anything worse than usual about the salad, but I was actually in too much of a state to eat. A chorus of horrors kept wailing in my head: the murder, my mother. Well, at least it might help stave off the horrors of my hips.

"How are you holding up?" Toniann asked, reaching across the table to pat my arm.

She'd been to the funeral and had stayed with me afterward. She brought me gourmet food and tried to get me to eat, even though that was the last thing I'd felt like doing. Was that only a week ago? It felt like a year, at least. "All right, I guess."

She shook her head. "It must be such a hard thing, losing your mom."

I just nodded, not trusting myself to say anything. I realized I was going to have to tell her about my roommate and about my shrink, even though Toniann already thought I was seriously neurotic and would probably decide that I was hallucinating my mother. Maybe from all the vitamins I've been taking, like a vitamin B-12 illusion, or something.

Deciding to start with the easy part, John Adriance, I launched into a full, spare-no-details description of our encounter.

After reaming me out for missing aerobics and my promise to get there this week, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die, she said, between bites, "Whaddaya gonna do about this hunk?"

“Well, I’m not taking him home with me yet.” I started telling her the story about my shrink, in phases, to make it go down easier. First, the murder. Then my worries about a future interrogation from the detective.

“Geez Louise, what a bummer.” She pushed her brown curls away from her face. “Maybe the cops will find the person who did it.” She tilted her head to one side, something she did when she was thinking. “Well...”

“Well, what?” I asked.

“Uh, just in case...”

“Just in case?”

“Uh...” She looked down at her plate, which was pretty empty. She’d practically licked it clean, all 10,000 yummy calories of it. “...just in case this detective decides to go after you, maybe I should talk to Otis.”

I choked on a lettuce leaf. “Your blowhard, toadying boss? The same Otis who you refer to in private as the ass-kisser? And why would the detective go after me, anyway? Just because I—”

“Found the body,” she said, nodding. “That happens all the time, you know.”

“What happens?” I was getting nervous.

“That people who find bodies get to be suspects,” she said ominously.

“Gee, thanks,” I said drily.

“And,” she said, ignoring me, “Otis is still a practicing lawyer, even though he wants to run for city council. Besides, who else do we know that wouldn’t cost a fortune?”

“Maria Perez,” I said. “I heard she won the case for a woman who’d fractured her leg falling off a broken step in one of the dilapidated brownstones next to my building.”

“Didn’t you tell me she went back to Puerto Rico after she got married?”

I nodded. “I forgot. Well, how about your cousin Jerry? He’s a lawyer, right?”

Toniann raised her eyebrows. “Oh, my god, he’s a tax lawyer, and not even a good one. His clients are always getting audited.”

There had to be somebody, anybody, other than Otis. “Wait, I know. Your old boyfriend, what was his name, George...”

“Grayson. He was disbarred for stealing his elderly clients’ money. What a loss. He may have been a crook, but boy, was he ever good in bed.” She licked her lips.

“Don’t let Peter hear you say that.” Peter was her current boyfriend, a struggling law student, and a really nice guy.

She sighed. “I might as well be in a convent. He falls asleep as soon as he comes back from the library.”

“Once finals are over, things will be hopping again,” I soothed.

“I’ve got the days marked off on a calendar and a new sheer black number from Victoria’s Secret in my undie drawer,” she said with a wicked grin. “Anyway, to get back to the subject of lawyers—I guess that leaves Otis.”

I sighed.

“And—” She threw in the sweetener with a smirk. “—he’ll be cheap.”

“Economics aside,” I said, knowing I couldn’t put them aside, since I had exactly \$200 in my savings account, “when’s the last time he handled a criminal case?”

She wrinkled her forehead. “Lessee, there was that guy making porno movies in the nursing home. And the woman who set fire to her sister. Kind of like, remember the movie, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* The woman took her sister back home after they both got out of the hospital, as I recall.”

“Very admirable causes, I’m sure, but neither of them was a murder case. Which, of course, they haven’t charged me with. Yet.”

“Murder, shmurder,” Toniann said. “People get off all the time. Or at least, they don’t get the gas chamber anymore, do they?”

This was supposed to make me feel better? “As a matter of fact, New York State doesn’t have a death penalty. At this point, anyway. But many thanks for bringing it to my attention.” I glared at her. But she was oblivious, as usual.

“Don’t worry.” She patted my arm again. “You’ll be in good hands with Otis. You know, just in case.”

Somehow, the thought of my life being in the hands of Otis Pinckney, attorney-at-law and city council hopeful, did not make me rest easier. But I thanked her anyway, since I could end up needing a lawyer, and Otis was probably more or less affordable, if not a particularly admirable human being. Though I’d still have to take out a loan that I’d be paying off for eternity.

We signaled the waitperson—which in this place, meant standing up and walking toward the door, the only way they ever noticed you—when I realized I hadn’t told her about my mother yet. But this was not something you could blurt out on the run.

“Don’t worry,” Toniann said, giving me a quick hug as we left the restaurant for our separate jobs.

She was working downtown, creating fictions for the press about Otis to prepare the way for his campaign, while I worked uptown. Actually, though I missed having her around all day, I was glad I’d be alone for the walk back to the office. I had a lot to think about, none of it good, not counting a certain dog-haired person with cute pointed ears. Except that somehow, I didn’t think I could tell him about being deathly afraid of horses and medium or large dogs. I’d have to try to get over it, I guess. Maybe get a book on large animal phobia. Or talk to my shrink.

Guess it hasn’t really sunk in yet.

Chapter 6

When I got home that night, an unpleasant surprise was leaning against my door in a rumpled brown jacket and navy pants, looking half-asleep. Detective Rivera, in the flesh.

I did not say, “Come in.” But he did anyway, walking inside in front of me.

“Well?” I asked, standing next to him with my arms folded across my chest, hoping he’d be brief if I didn’t invite him to sit down in the living room.

Turning to me, he said, with a yawn, “Here to ask you some questions.” He consulted his black book. “Okay, let’s hear all about it. What were you doing at the apartment of the deceased? And why were you seeing...uh...Dr. Dinstein?”

Taking a few cleansing breaths, the way my shrink taught us as part of her holistic therapy, I thought, a cop’s life must be so boring, feeling a moment’s sympathy for him having to listen to all these details, hoping to find some tiny shred of guilt. No wonder he looked so tired. *Jerk*, I thought, *he’s trying to find YOU guilty. Stop feeling sorry for him.*

“You remember that I was the one who called the police first, after the murder?” I said. “So why are you interrogating

me? Why aren't you out there questioning some suspects? Like the other members of the group, for instance?"

"It's been done before, you know. After you knock someone off, you call the police for cover," he informed me.

Over his shoulder, I could see my mother, dressed in one of my oversized tees and a pair of tights, signaling me from the kitchen.

"Stall, stall, and give him a nice plate of brownies. That'll soften him up. Or give him a heart attack," she said.

"Shhhhh," I whispered. "Brownies? Where would I get—"

With a flourish, she whipped out a plastic plateful, covered with a white linen napkin I'd never seen before. "Just a little something I figured you'd need when you got home. And I know how much you always loved them. But I had to use a mix. You were out of scratch ingredients."

I excused myself to the detective and went into the kitchen to fetch the brownies. My mother followed me back into the living room, settling in on the sofa.

Before I could ask her where on earth she got the napkin or the mix, since I hadn't had any ready-to-bake anything in my kitchen for the last ten pounds, I realized he was staring at me.

"How long since you've been talking to yourself? Is that why you were seeing Dr. Ditstein?" Rivera asked.

It dawned on me that my mother had decided to grace only me with the ability to see and hear her ghostly self. Oh, great, Casper the friendly mother-ghost was shy around strangers. I glared at her. She ignored me.

"Have a brownie," I said smoothly, handing him the plate. They really did look yummy. "Thanks, Ma," I signaled, this time with my eyes.

Still looking at me strangely, he turned to the brownies. I could see the internal struggle between the suspicious cop mind, especially dealing with someone he thought was probably nuts, and the heavenly chocolate smell. The chocolate

won, and he scarfed three of them down in a row. He looked almost embarrassed.

“My wife, she’s a nutritionist. She doesn’t believe in junk food,” he said with a sigh.

Then he started to sit down on my mother.

I had to get him away from the sofa before he squashed her. But how? What would make me bound up and chase after someone if I were a cop? Other than someone else with a gun?

Bolting into the bathroom, I opened the window and climbed onto the fire escape, screeching at the top of my lungs.

That got him up, gun drawn, chasing after me. “What the hell’s going on?”

I crawled inside, my clothes and my hands sporting fresh rust stains, and pointed out the window. “I heard something weird out there.”

He pushed past me and looked out, then back at me, and shut the window. Shaking his head, he said, “The only thing weird around here is you.” Replacing the gun, he picked up the notebook, flipping the pages.

I didn’t care what he thought, as long as he hadn’t succeeded in turning my mother into a pancake. Trotting out to the living room, I sat down near her head at one end of the sofa and pointed to a hand-carved oak rocker across from it, one of my best flea market finds.

Rivera lowered himself into the rocker, looking wistfully at the brownies. “These are really good, you know? Okay if I have a couple more?” he said, reaching for the plate, which I extended politely, glancing at my mother.

“Catch more flies with honey,” she said.

Still chewing, he consulted his book. “Okay. Why were you seeing Dr. Ditstein?”

“I started going to Dr. Ditstein because I had...some problems...that I needed help with. I couldn’t afford someone very expensive, and she was listed on the college’s EAP.”

“Yeah, Employee Assistance Plan.” He nodded. “We got one in the Department.”

“There were only a couple of names on the list. But I lucked out. She was terrific.” I felt a lump growing in my throat.

“Why were you there so late at night? Don’t therapists usually keep normal office hours?”

Taking a few cleansing breaths, I said, “She was trying to accommodate my schedule. I had a late appointment, my regular every-other-week appointment—”

“Why every other week?”

“Because the other week was group.” I tried not to gnash my teeth. *Deep breaths, Marabella, deep cleansing breaths. Aaahhh.* “We had group therapy on alternate Thursday nights from seven to nine.”

“Okay, go ahead. Then what happened?”

“I walked down the corridor, which smelled like tomato sauce, and—”

“Tomato sauce?”

“Dr. Ditstein’s apartment was next to the trash room, so you’d get these strong smells. Like, if anybody stuffed a pizza box in there, there’d be tomato sauce. Or if there was Chinese take-out, probably egg roll smells and—”

His eyes were glazing over, and he yawned again. Either this was all terribly boring, or he was severely sleep deprived. Or both.

“Smells,” he said. “Okay, tomato sauce. Then what?”

“What happened next was that when I knocked on the door, she didn’t answer,” I said. “I knocked again and didn’t hear a sound. And the only sign of life was Dr. Shokum.”

He sat up. “Dr. Shokum? Who’s that? What was he doing there?”

“He lives across the hall from Dr. Ditstein. But he wasn’t exactly *there*,” I said. “I mean, he wasn’t at the scene of the crime.” I felt a tiny satisfaction in being able to use his language.

“So, where was Dr. Shokum?”

"Where he usually is," I said smugly. "Peeping out of his peephole."

"How do you know that?"

"Because when he opens the peephole cover to see out, it makes a snapping noise."

"Why does he do that, peeping out at people?"

"Because people say he's phobic about actually dealing with people in the flesh," I said, wondering why he needed to know all that.

"Okay," he said. "What was Dr. Ditstein like?" He yawned again. "Trying to get off caffeine," he said, making a face. He riffled through his notes. "How long were you seeing her, anyway?"

"Eight years."

He shook his head. "So, what was your feeling about her? Sometimes there's a love-hate relationship in these things. And do you know why someone would want to kill her?"

The idea of discussing my eight-year relationship with Dr. Ditstein with Detective Rivera was particularly repellent. But I didn't think I had much choice.

"Dr. Ditstein," I said, "was a kind, caring, humane person. I can't think of any reason that someone would have to hurt her." I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

"How did you get along? Ever had an argument? Ever get mad at her?"

"We got along fine. No arguments."

He yawned. "In eight years, no fights?"

The man was seriously annoying me. "Look, Detective Rivera," I said, "we might have disagreed about a few things occasionally—"

He pounced. "So, what did you *disagree* about? She say something to tick you off? Some of these therapists can be really aggressive, you know?"

Lord, give me strength. Deep breaths. "Dr. Ditstein was a very nurturing person. She was very fair about everything, in general." Except for her peculiar tolerance for Henry,

which I wasn't about to tell him because Henry scared the hell out of me. "In fact, for the past couple of years, she was only seeing a few long-time patients, the members of our group, because she was so devoted to her research on mental illness in children. She wanted to try to make the world a better place." Tears stung my eyes.

"So, what did you disagree about?"

Bulldog, thy name is Rivera. I hesitated. "She and I didn't agree about one of the people in the group. I thought that person was too...uh...upset to be in group and really needed more individual therapy." This wasn't the half of it. I thought Henry was far too crazy to even be on the streets. Especially after the incidents.

Rivera was practically sniffing the air. "So what happened?"

"She didn't agree. And she was the therapist. So that was that," I said, thinking back to the times I'd pressed my case. She'd stuck to her guns, saying that she had knowledge that I didn't, that I was rushing to judgment, that I really didn't know Henry. And now she was dead.

"Who was it?"

"Henry Nusbitt!" I blurted. *Sorry, Henry, it's either you or me. And I never liked you anyway. Wait a minute! Henry will find out what I said and go after me, possibly with a blunt instrument! Calm down, Marabella. Get centered.* "Detective Rivera," I said, "I'd be extremely grateful if you didn't tell Henry who you've been talking to."

He got up. "Oh, by the way," he said, "don't leave town. I may want to question you again."

Now, where would I go with my mother on the sofa? "Okay," I said. "But what about Henry?"

"I never heard it from you." He stuffed a few more brownies into his pocket and headed for the door. "I'll tell him," he said with a laugh, "a little ghost told me."

Chapter 7

After he left, I had the horrible feeling that Rivera considered me a suspect. What could I do? *Dr. Dittstein, wherever you are, please tell me. Give me a sign. An inkling. An anything.*

Interrupting my thoughts, my mother said, “Okay, sweetheart, we’ve got work to do.”

“What kind of work? And what about dinner?” I said, my stomach rumbling. “Don’t we have to eat?”

Hoisting herself to a sitting position on the sofa, she pulled bifocals out from the bosom of the tee shirt.

“Where—” I started to ask, but thought better of it. *Let sleeping bifocals lie.*

Adjusting them on her nose, she said, “Nosh on the brownies. We’ll eat later, it’s in the fridge. Get me a pad of paper and a pen.”

“Why?”

“You should be ashamed, something so dumb coming from your mouth, you with the one-hundred-forty IQ.” She wagged a finger at me. “So we can figure this whole thing out, that’s why,” she said. “Or would you rather wait for that policeman to do it?”

“Detective. Are you serious? What makes you think we can do this?”

“Of course we can, why not?” She crossed her arms under her chest. “The nerve of him, asking you questions as if you were guilty of something.”

I went to my bedroom to get the pad and pen from my washstand desk. Dealing with Rivera had completely unnerved me. I popped a Xanax. Then I wondered why my mother couldn't just conjure up her own writing materials, the way she did with the brownie mix and linen napkin. Maybe her conjuring abilities were rationed. Maybe she could only do so much in a day. Or maybe she was lazy. Or embarrassed to do her tricks in front of me. Or not allowed. Or maybe she didn't have magic powers at all. *Then how did she do the brownies, tell me that?* Maybe she heisted them from one of my neighbors.

I chewed a cuticle, wondering if I'd have to deal with a call about a missing box of brownie mix and a napkin: *Oh, sorry, it was my mother-the-klepto-ghost. She didn't mean to swipe your food and linen. And don't call the police, thank you. They've already been here today.*

“No, dear. It's a question of why waste these powers for something that's just as easy to get the old-fashioned way?” she called from the living room. “They're very strict about that, you know.”

I slapped my forehead with my hand, feeling dizzy again. “Oh, of course, why didn't I think of that?”

“Sarcasm is not attractive.” Her forehead was creased in concentration when I handed her the writing implements. “Thank you, darling. Now let's make a list.”

“Of what?” I searched for any crumbs Rivera had neglected. There weren't many. “Ma, I'm starving.”

“Work first, eat later.” She wet the tip of the pen, a habit of hers that always drove me crazy. I was sure she'd had massive doses of felt-tip marker poisoning. Come to think of it, maybe that had finally impaired her judgment and turned her klepto. “Tell me everybody who's in your group, their names, and what they're there for. And anyone else you think might be important.”

I knew this wasn't exactly easy for her, since she was convinced that I—and anyone else seeing a shrink—spent all our sessions discussing what terrible mothers we'd had. Which wasn't altogether true. I'd spent at least a few of the sessions on my father.

"I really appreciate you helping me, Ma," I said, meaning it.

She waved my thanks away. "So what's a mother for anyway? Never mind. How many?"

I thought for a minute. "Oh, I just remembered. Dr. Dirstein had a boyfriend. I saw them on the street together once. Pale, elegant, good-looking. Black hair, hanging straight down to his shoulders. Black eyes, too. Looked right through you. Had a strange accent, sounded Eastern European. At least ten years younger than her. She introduced him. Zoltan Karyoli. Not a name you'd easily forget." He'd smiled at me, revealing dazzling white teeth.

My mother was scribbling away. "The boyfriend. Okay, who else?"

"Dr. Shokum, in the apartment across from her."

"Did they get along, this Shokum, with your therapist?" she asked.

"Damned if I know."

She clucked her tongue. "Don't swear."

"Sorry."

"How many in your group?"

"Six, including me. There's Ron Dolan, Maxine Williams, Beth Hronska, Chris Ragamoni—"

"Chris man or woman?"

"Christine," I said.

"Who else?"

I sighed. "Henry Nusbitt. He's new to the group."

My mother chewed the top of her marker. "So, what's with this Henry that he gives you such heartburn?"

"It would take a lot of explaining, Ma. Henry's not...easily described."

"So, explain." She crossed her legs. "I'm listening."

Maybe the best thing would be to describe the last group session I'd been to, the one just before my mother died. The hell with the confidentiality. Dr. Ditstein was dead. And so was my mother. And I could be in serious trouble with the cops.

So I gave her a blow-by-blow account of my last group session, while she chomped away on the marker.

Chapter 8

Telling my mother really brought the whole night's events back, in living color.

We straggled in, the way we usually did, in ones and twos, more or less on time, around seven that Thursday night. Dr. Ditstein was a vision in orange: orange blouse, orange pants, orange socks, orange hair scrunchie. Since she was rather long and tall, though attractive, with frizzy red hair, this made her resemble a carrot, or maybe a scarecrow. Her hair was another subject entirely. Suffice it to say that it was unmanageable—actually, out of control was more like it. The weird thing was that Dr. Ditstein, with her bizarre appearance, was a crackerjack shrink. In fact, the stranger her attire, the better she seemed to be at her craft.

I traipsed through the foyer into the living room/cum treatment room, which I found as fascinating as her get-ups. Huge asparagus ferns on ceiling hooks quivered in the air above us, replenishing the oxygen we used up during sessions. Tie-dyed folding chairs were grouped around boxes of Kleenex and paper bags for hyperventilation emergencies. There were two armchairs, one straight-backed, one curved-backed, for Dr. Ditstein to alternate in, depending on whether or not she was in linear-thinking mode. Tonight, she dropped into the curved chair, closed her eyes, whispered her

mantra three times, opened her eyes, smiled beatifically, and turned on the recorder. The usual signal to begin.

I sat next to Chris, whom I kind of related to, in terms of mother-problems, as in your usual love-and-homicidal relationship. She gave me a watery smile, and I gave her an encouraging one back. She was so used to slouching because of her height, she even did it when she sat. Though she seemed harmless enough, painfully shy, even, there was something about her that kept nagging at me, some peculiarity that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Chris was a mind/body worker, which meant, I think, that she talked to people while massaging their various body parts. Just wait till Rivera heard there was a masseuse in the group. He'd be sure she was into porn. Or was some kind of kinky sex worker.

Ron, treating us to his usual overpowering smell of *eau de cheap* aftershave, was sprawled on Chris's other side. He'd already cracked one of his sexist-pig jokes to Maxine, who hated not only his jokes but also his guts.

"Disgusting," she hissed at him, spraying spittle on his skin-tight leather pants.

A well-deserved response, I thought. Maxine was an African-American woman who'd fought her way out of the ghetto through sheer brains and street-smarts. She was also a karate expert and, one of these days, she was going to lay Ron out flat. I fervently hoped I'd be around to witness that.

Beth blew in breathless, late, as usual, her streaked-blond hair flying. "Sorry, sorry, sorry." She flashed her capped teeth at us. "You know how it is, guys, when you're in the biz."

No, I didn't know, I wasn't in the "biz." I didn't give a rat's ass what itty bitty role her agent was supposed to have absolutely been promised, cross his heart, to his very fave star. I found Beth shallow and narcissistic. But she didn't get to me the way she got to Maxine.

Maxine shot her a filthy look. "Not all of us get to live the charmed life of a person in the *biz*."

Beth ran her fingers through her hair and gave a hearty, phony laugh. Seemed like the more she got into the biz, the more unreal she got. Maybe the bigger the rising star, the less real you were?

She gave Maxine a superior smile. "You don't know the half of it. What I went through today with my costume changes, you wouldn't believe. I guess they're just not making clothes to fit teeny waists these days."

Maxine's lips twisted, and not with a smile. "What I believe, what I believe, you bitch, is that you're a bitch," she growled.

"Stop picking on her, please," I said. "This sounds like kindergarten."

"Maxine, chill," Dr. Ditstein interjected. "You too, Marabella."

I forgot to mention that Maxine was square-shaped, with absolutely no waistline that anyone could find. Beth, on the other hand, who looked as if she had a major eating disorder, weighed in at about ninety-eight pounds soaking wet.

Beth turned to me, raising one over-plucked eyebrow, and turned up the palms of her pink jeweled fake-finger-nailed hands. "Some people, you know, have a pretty limited vocabulary."

"Will you please cut it out?" I said.

"Sarcasm is counterproductive, Beth," Dr. Ditstein admonished.

I figured Maxine had a problem with Beth mainly because of Beth's looks, though our resident starlet's personality didn't exactly help matters. Beth, on the other hand, seemed to harbor a strange urge to push Maxine's buttons.

At this point, Dr. Ditstein began alternate nostril breathing, putting her thumb on one nostril, breathing in, putting her finger on the other nostril and breathing out, a sure sign of concentration. Delicately removing her fingers from her nose, she said, "Why do you suppose you have the need to make a grand entrance at group, Beth? Are you afraid we won't pay you enough attention otherwise?"

I thought she hit the nail on the head, especially after Beth began to flush, which actually seemed genuine.

“I never got any attention from my mother,” Beth said. “She was too busy screwing around. And my father was God-knows-who. So I made it my business to make the other kids like me. And they sure did.” A quick teeth-flash. “I was prom queen two years in a row. Guess that’s what gave me a taste for the stage. That and being in the senior play. I was Juliet, of course.”

“Big f-ing deal,” said Maxine.

I sighed. “Please, just let her talk, okay?”

“Let’s show each other a little consideration, Maxine,” Dr. Ditstein said, frowning.

“The whole town turned out for the show,” Beth continued, with a far-away look. “Everybody but my mother, that is. She was in some motel somewhere.”

Dr. Ditstein did her yoga breathing, working her nostrils again, so I knew she wasn’t through yet. With a steady gaze at Maxine, she said, “Why does Beth’s choice of career upset you? Does it make your job as a comptroller less important?”

Maxine sucked in her breath. “No, I...yes, I don’t know,” said the person who was never at a loss for words. “I like what I do, I’m good at it.”

“Very good, I hear,” said Dr. Ditstein.

“But,” Maxine said, “I’m behind the scenes all day, crunching numbers. Not out there sticking my—” She glared at Beth. “—face in front of people.”

“Is that what you really want to do? Be an actress?” Dr. Ditstein asked. “You could always make a career change, you know. It’s not too late.”

Beth opened her mouth, obviously to say something sarcastic, but Dr. Ditstein cut her off at the pass with a forbidding look.

“Well,” Maxine said, thinking. “I don’t know. I never thought about doing anything else, I guess. I’ve always been very good at math, actually, the best in my class. *And*, by the way, the *only minority* in my class.” A quick glare at Beth

again. "So I just naturally went for a career in finance. And it pays *really* well." A smirk. "Plus, I have a *corner* office. With a *great* view. On the *thirty-sixth* floor. That has to count for *something*."

Dr. Ditstein nodded. "Right."

"Hey, a gal like you—" Ron said,

Maxine gritted her teeth about the "gal" business.

"—with your corner office and big money, why would you want to give that up?"

The grit turned into a grin.

"For what? I'd love to make your kind of bread, if I could do it," he said, with a shrug. He smoothed down his hair. "I bet our *starlet* here has never even seen that kind of dough, no matter what kind of part, or should I say, body part—"

Beth turned red. "How dare you, you slimy rat!"

"Enough!" Dr. Ditstein said. "No *ad hominum* attacks from anybody."

Ron scrunched lower in his seat, assuming the male chair posture: arms folded across chest, legs spread wide open, crotch front and center. Tight pants, too, of course. Leather. To show off his...whatever, I guess. He made a career of stupid jokes, which was what he did at scuzzy night-clubs. So we had the privilege of being his practice session.

"Did you hear the one about the woman who was such a lousy cook, when the roaches came to her house, they ate first?" He laughed so hard I thought he would land on the floor.

No one else laughed.

Dr. Ditstein removed her finger from her left nostril. "Inappropriate, Ron," she said in dismissal. "Let's move on, shall we? What's on your minds tonight?"

"My mother," I began.

"Oh, I know that one," Maxine said. "Do I ever."

As per usual, nobody let me talk. Sometimes this group made me feel like Rodney Dangerfield.

"Marabella was talking," Dr. Ditstein said.

“Oops,” Maxine said, with an insincere grin.

“S’okay,” I mumbled, though it wasn’t. “My mother is really sick. It’s her heart,” I said, looking down at my lap. “Serious complications from congestive heart failure.” Tears welled up in my eyes.

There was a collective whoosh of breath.

“Oh, God,” Beth said, “My mother had that, that’s what she died from. Uh, I didn’t, uh, mean that.” She looked upset, for real.

“So what did you open up your big fat mouth for then?” Maxine sneered.

“Cool it, Maxine,” Dr. Ditstein said.

In that whispery voice of hers that practically caused everyone to fall forward to hear her, Chris said. “At *least* Marabella has some respect for her mother. That’s probably more than *most* of you could say about your own loved ones.”

“Thank you for your consideration, Chris,” I said, smiling at her.

Maxine and Ron both rolled their eyes.

Chris patted my arm. “I’m so sorry for your trouble. But your mother should really try to get rid of her bad energy. There’s probably blockage around her heart chakra. Get rid of that with a good aura cleansing, and she’ll be just fine. You’ll see.” She beamed a few good energy waves in my direction.

Though I knew she was trying to be helpful, it would have been a hell of a lot more helpful if they’d all let me talk. I was feeling pretty terrible.

Dr. Ditstein to the rescue. “This is Marabella’s time, people,” she said, giving me a kind smile.

I shot her a grateful look. “I feel guilty about my mother, because...well, I love her of course, but I still have a lot of negative feelings about her. And now, with her being so—sick.” My voice cracked. Chris patted my arm again. “I can’t stand the idea of losing her.” I burst into tears.

Chris handed me a Kleenex. I blew my nose.

“Losing a loved one is a very heavy thing,” Dr. Ditstein said. “Especially in a...should we say?...complicated relationship.”

Even though I was crying, this made me laugh. “Complicated doesn’t *begin* to describe me and my mother.”

I had yet to mention Henry. I had been resisting this part of the story. With good reason. Henry was making disgusting snuffling sounds, as usual, ensconced in one of those leftover-from-the-sixties beanbag chairs that Dr. Ditstein had unearthed somewhere for patients who needed extra “settling,” as she called it. Privately, I called it extra coddling. Anyway, Henry was nodding off, probably due to whatever anti-psychotic drugs he was on. Unfortunately, they didn’t seem to do much to improve his mental state.

I’d found him pretty creepy ever since he first appeared, about two months ago, after his release from the hospital for a nervous breakdown. When he’d talk, he’d narrow his pale gray eyes and focus on each of us, in turn, as if he were measuring our response to him. And when someone else was talking, he’d stare at them.

There was the time Ron had been blathering about problems with his latest girlfriend, whom we all felt pretty sorry for. Dr. Ditstein had just asked Ron a leading question about his relationship patterns, when Henry sprang out of his chair, not an easy thing to do, planted himself in front of Ron, cursed him out, and walked back to his seat as if nothing had happened.

And during another session, one of the times when Maxine and Beth really got into it, Henry pulled out a letter opener and pretended to carve an imaginary line in between them on the rug.

Other than murmuring, “Inappropriate, Henry,” Dr. Ditstein didn’t even call him down about it. She went easy on him, she’d told me, because of his fragile mental health.

So, old Henry seemed to be out of it, as usual, when the conversation eventually turned from relationships with par-

ents to childhood relationships with other kids and the special types of torture we'd had to endure during recess.

"The kids used to call me rigatoni, because my last name is Ragamoni," Chris said, looking at the floor. "Sometimes, Kraft's macaroni and cheese."

Ron snorted. Both Maxine and I glared at Ron. "Those were *little* boys who did that, right?" I said. This made no impression on Ron, of course.

"You think that's so bad?" Maxine said. "How'd you like to be called 'Maxie Pad.' Or just 'Pad,' to my friends."

Ron was doubled over. "Hey, can I use that in my act? Of course, I'd change the name. To Mini-Pad," he hooted.

"You're a miserable person," Maxine said.

"That's inappropriate, Ron," Dr. Ditstein said. "And you know that everything here is confidential."

"I was only kidding, Charmaine, you know that," he said, giving her an oily grin.

He was the only one who called Dr. Ditstein by her first name to her face, which really annoyed me. The fact that she let him annoyed me even more. And I saw him try to put the make on her more than once. Fortunately, she had the good sense to put him in his place, actually pretty firmly, for her. He had gotten pissed about her daring to reject God's gift to women, though I suspected it was probably more of a blow to his ego than having real feelings about her.

But sometimes I did think that Dr. Ditstein was prejudiced in favor of the men in the group. At least, she never seemed to really criticize them. Though I must say that mine was a mild objection, more of an observation. Maxine, on the other hand, periodically went ballistic over what she thought was Dr. Ditstein's unfair treatment of women, by which she meant unfair treatment of Maxine. Then again, Maxine was still dealing with the detritus of leftover anger at her tall, slim, shrink sister, which she often transferred onto guess who.

Anyway, when I suggested to Dr. Ditstein in an individual session, in an objective manner, of course, about

the seeming most-favored status of the males in the group, she told me to not take everything so seriously, think good thoughts, and things would work themselves out, give them time. Right. And now she was dead.

“Look at *my* name,” I said, “don’t you think I went through elementary school hell? I mean, the kids had so much fun with Vinegar, they didn’t even bother calling me ‘Hebrew National Salami’ the way they did my friend, Betty Cohen.”

“Funny, I never got called any names,” Beth said. “I guess because the other kids all liked me.”

“No accounting for tastes,” Maxine muttered.

“Maxine!” Dr. Ditstein said. Then she said, gently, “Henry, what about you? Would you like to tell us how it was for you?”

He flew into a rage, if someone could be said to fly when he was all scrunched up in a beanbag chair. His face turned purple, and he let out a stream of curses. Finally, he stopped and sank back into the chair, twisting the tufts in his sweater. “You shouldn’t have asked me to tell them that, Dr. Ditstein,” he said. “That wasn’t right. It wasn’t right, at all.”

Dr. Ditstein looked stricken. “I’m really sorry, Henry. I thought it would help, since we were all trying to deal with the same thing.”

“No!” he yelled. “It wasn’t the same! Not for me! Never!” He jumped up and slammed out the door.

“He’s really rather strange,” Beth said, her eyes wide.

“Rather strange?” Maxine snorted. “He’s fucking nuts, that’s what he is.”

Chris, the sensitive soul, had tears pooling in her eyes. “I think he’s very upset. And I think it’s all our fault.”

Dr. Ditstein looked concerned. “This is your group. What do you think happened here just now?”

“You’re the one who jerked his chain,” Maxine said, throwing her a dirty look. “It’s your fault. Not ours. You’re the professional here.” Her eyes glittered.

Ron shrugged. “Hey, the guy’s a wacko, so whaddya want from us?”

“You have some nerve, calling other people names,” Maxine said. “How would you like it if people called *you* names?”

“Lay it on me, man,” Ron snarled. “Just you try it. Then you’ll see what *real* name-calling is. I’m a master.”

I was afraid he was going to take a bite out of her. “Hey, it’s *our group*, like Dr. Ditstein said.”

Dr. Ditstein shot me a grateful look, but I could tell she was upset. “Okay, we were talking about the way peer interactions, negative peer interactions from childhood, affected us. That’s pretty heavy.”

“Right, hey, I didn’t have it so great, either. Even the nuns in my school weren’t too nice to me,” Ron said, looking at the floor.

“*Big surprise*,” Maxine said.

Dr. Ditstein sent her a warning look.

“But you learn to live with it, not like our friend Henry, here,” Ron said. “I don’t usually dwell on it, but I got the crap beaten out of me on a regular basis when I was a kid.”

Maxine snickered. “Not all of it, unfortunately.”

“Maxine,” Dr. Ditstein said.

Beth gave a mighty groan. “What a nasty little bunch we are, aren’t we?”

Just as I was collecting my thoughts, Dr. Ditstein’s chimes rang. She disdained regular clocks. Too pedestrian, she said. So she used a Zen chime clock, which she set for our sessions. She closed her eyes, did her nostril thing, and then flicked off the recorder.

We left under the blazing sun of her beatific smile. The last one I ever saw.

Chapter 9

My mother looked up from the pad she'd been scribbling away on. "Not very nice people, this group of yours," she said, clucking her tongue. "You, at least, seemed to show some concern about me. Even though it was just for a little while, back there."

I rolled my eyes. "Ma—"

She waved my protest away. "Let's get going here. These people, do you know where they all live?"

I shook my head. "Not really. Except that Chris lives in the Village and Ron lives in Tribeca. And Maxine works at Stanton and Poole's. We didn't exchange addresses, because of confidentiality."

She chewed on the top of the marker.

I started to say something about chemicals and brain rot and then shrugged. She'd never listened to me when she was alive, so why would she now?

"So, the names and addresses and phone numbers must be in the doctor's files. Which, at this moment, is probably in police custody," she said, through a mouth full of toxic substances.

"Right, so that's that," I said, wondering what she was thinking.

"No, it isn't." She grinned. "I'm off to the races."

I stared, as she wafted herself up from the sofa—How did she do that?—and began to evaporate in front of my eyes. “Wait, Ma, don’t go yet—” I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to her again so soon, just when I’d more or less gotten used to having her back again.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, this is just a quick trip,” her disembodied voice soothed. “Back in a flash.”

I closed my eyes and began counting my breaths, to erase the unnerving vision of my dematerialized mother, trying to push away the question of whether my youthful quest for the perfect hallucinogen had anything to do with all this. By the time I was up to breath number eighty-nine, I felt a stirring in the air and a faint groan. I opened my eyes as she came in for a landing.

“Whew, this is hard on the arms, not to mention the rest of me,” she said, dropping onto the sofa, looking exhausted. She thrust the files at me. “Here, copy these quick.”

She’d really snatched the things. I guess she had turned klepto. “Ma, this is stealing!”

She looked indignant. “Number one, it is not stealing, only borrowing. Number two, I did it for you. Number three, don’t talk to your mother that way.”

“But—”

“And number four,” she shot at me, “How else were you going to get their addresses? Tell me that, will you, oh-so-smart daughter of mine?”

She was right, of course. I sighed, picked up the files, and began flipping through them for names. First, the boyfriend. That shouldn’t be too hard. How many Zoltan Karyolis could there be in a file? Oh, wait, he wouldn’t be in her patient files. I’d have to try to get it from the phone book. “Okay,” I said, “I’ll put them in my contacts right away, and then you can, um, get these back to the cops.” I didn’t relish the thought of her exhausting herself again, but what were the options? I should drop off the files myself at the station? I should put them in the mail, to be traced back to me? I should throw them away, to be traced back to me?

And didn't I want the cops to have them so they'd be able to solve the murder? Though I was afraid that Detective Rivera seemed to be pretty comfortable with me as his perp of choice.

I quickly copied the last names and addresses into my Droid and wrote down their addresses. At the last minute, my mother *noodged* me to add their email addresses.

"You never know what could be useful," she said. "Remember all those plastic bags and string I used to save? And buttons, I had a whole tin of buttons."

"The buttons maybe, but what use was all that string? And the recycled waxed paper?"

My mother could never bring herself to dispose of waxed paper. Her kitchen cupboard had been a waxed paper museum.

"Stop sassing me and finish your list," she said.

Which I did, not wanting to have stolen property in my possession any longer than necessary. I handed the files back to her and closed my eyes, not relishing the thought of witnessing her disappearing act again. I heard a grunt and felt the air rustle. I kept my eyes closed, counting my breaths. On my eighty-second inhale, I heard her panting, and she descended heavily on the sofa.

"Ma, all this activity is not good for your health. You're not a spring chicken, you know."

"I'm just not used to all these ups and downs and sideways. They should have warned me." She lay there, breathing hard for a few minutes. "I appreciate your concern, darling. But that's what I'm here for, to help you. Don't worry, I'll be okay in a little while. And you know I never had a very good sense of direction."

That I knew. Turn her around the wrong way, and she'd get lost in her own kitchen. No inner compass or something. I remembered the time she decided to take me to Brighton Beach to swim when I was about six. We got all dressed, with our bathing suits under our clothes, packed a picnic lunch and towels, and ended up in the South Bronx. She

made a regular routine out of getting lost in department stores. I had to be the only kid who had to have salespeople find her mother. And unfortunately for me, I inherited her directional disorder. The last time Toniann and I went out for dinner, and I walked into the lobby to go to the ladies' room, I opened a door and ran straight into a man at a urinal.

My mother was sitting up again, with a bit of color back in her cheeks. Not that she had as much coloring as she'd had before she...died. It was kind of a paler version of it. And she had even less of it when she overly exerted herself.

"We better conserve your energies, Ma, for when we really need them," I said.

Drawing herself up, she said, "The rainy day is here. Who do we tackle first?"

"Tackle?"

"Interview, interrogate," she said. "Like what that Rivera should be doing, only he's probably not bothering because he thinks you did it."

"We're going to be police persons? How are we going to do that?" I shuddered. "Should I call Otis Pinckney? Do you think they're getting ready to arrest me?"

She brushed this aside. "What we have to do is find the real murderer ourselves. Before you are in need of that Otis's services. And just where would you be without me, sweetheart? In jail, that's where. Waiting to be tried for murder, that's where."

"Okay." I didn't need any more convincing. "But just how are we going to do that?"

My mother had a gleam in her eye. She was actually enjoying this, the callous soul. "By detecting, by figuring it out," she said. "Like Jessica Fletcher on *Murder She Wrote*." She had a far-away expression on her face, probably reliving steamy episodes involving horny septuagenarians. "And who knows who you could meet—"

"This isn't Century Village," I said. "And you shouldn't get too excited. It's not good for your...condition."

She grinned. "A little romance never hurt anyone. Anyway, we need a plan." She tapped her teeth with the marker. "Get someone on your side first. Who's the easiest?"

"Chris," I said without hesitation. At least she wasn't violent and seemed to like me.

"Okay. Call her and tell her you want to come over to talk about Dr. Ditstein, to commiserate with each other, over coffee," she said.

"Probably herb tea, since she's a healer," I said.

"Okay, over a cup of flowers, then," she said, handing me my phone.

I scrolled down to Chris's number. I got a machine. But not your ordinary machine. She—it—said, "Relax. All will be well. Though I am not physically present, I am very nearby spiritually. Let me know you are nearby, too, and we will connect very soon." After some tinkly bell sounds, I left my name and number.

"Now what?" I asked my mother.

"Now we eat," she said, lifting herself off the sofa and moving into my kitchen.

When she took the cover off the pot, I smelled lamb, a substance I'd considered to be inedible for years. Besides the fact of its innate greasiness, I'd had an unforgettable experience with a sheep at a 4-H show in upstate New York ten years ago. After that sheep had fixed me with a homicidal look from its blazing red eyes under a mountain of black wool, I was done for. I swear it had been a serial killer in a previous life.

But there was one of its relatives, stewed, on a plate, being served up to me. Maybe I could plead a touchy stomach. "What else are we having, Ma? Do you need any help?"

Lifting the cover off another pot, she brushed my offer aside. "Green beans and peas and carrots, I made a medley."

Those, I knew, were fresh from the can. When I was a child, I thought all vegetables grew in cans or, if they were really fancy, in freezer bags.

Salad consisted of iceberg lettuce—who actually eats iceberg lettuce?—a tomato still redolent of its plastic carton, and bottled French dressing. Fortunately, she'd put out seltzer water to wash it all down.

This was why I tended to avoid any restaurant that advertised itself as “Mother’s” or “Home Cooking.” For now, though, I was so hungry I wolfed down the salad and veggies and managed to pick at the stew when she asked me why I wasn't eating it. I figured the sheep encounter excuse wouldn't go over too well with her.

“Are you becoming a vegetarian these days?” she asked, sipping her seltzer. “I don't think it's so healthy, not to eat meat. After all, we were meant to be meat-eaters, from our earliest days.” She belched delicately. “Aahh. Who needs Maalox when you've got seltzer?”

I was trying not to think about a number of things about this meal as I ate. As in, for starters, how did it happen? Did she waft into the meat counter in Fairway, picking out the best cut of lamb with invisible fingers and spiriting it away? The same with the produce?

“It all works somehow, sweetheart. Most of the time, anyway,” said my mother-the-mind-reader.

Then there was the fact that she was diving into the food—well, maybe not so heartily—but eating, all the same. Not to mention guzzling the seltzer. She needed food and drink? Or was she just keeping me company?

She evidently had developed ESP along her travels, so to speak. “Yes, I'm eating, though I admit, I'm not enjoying it as much as I used to.” She heaved a sigh. “But that's to be expected, I guess,” she said, gnawing away at what used to be part of the leg of a live sheep.” Swallowing, she said, “Thank God, I've still got most of my own teeth.”

I chugged some seltzer, trying not to look at what she was devouring, when the phone rang. It was Chris. I asked her if I could come to her place, for her convenience. Putting it this way was my mother's idea, to, as she said, “grease the skids,” while we snooped around. I suggested to Chris that

we might lend each other support in our mutual grief, a prospect she damply embraced. I heard the sound of nose blowing. Since tomorrow was Saturday, we settled on eleven o'clock, and she promised to serve me a special new tea made from twigs and bark. Yum. I was really looking forward to that.

After dinner, I went over to Sam's with some audio books. He settled me in the overstuffed chair in the living room with a cup of Sweet Touch Nee tea. I never knew what he did to the tea, but it was always absolutely delicious.

"Okay," he said, dropping onto the sofa on the other side of the coffee table. "So, tell me, how are you doing?"

I recounted the story about Dr. Ditstein's murder. When I got to the part about Detective Rivera's suspicions, he grew indignant.

"How dare they treat you like that?" He pursed his lips. "Why aren't they out there looking for the killer, instead of questioning a nice girl like you?"

"Thanks, Sam," I said.

"Nothing to thank me for, Marabella. It's not right, that's what it is." He got up, came over, and patted me on my arm. "As if you didn't have enough heartache, with your mother gone."

I choked a little on my tea, as he sat back down.

"What's the matter, is there maybe something wrong with the tea? I'll make a new cup." He was starting to get up again.

"No, no, it's fine, Sam. Really." I waved him back onto the sofa. "Delicious as usual. I'm just...a little nervous, that's all."

He leaned back. "And no wonder, you poor girl. Why do the nicest ones have all the trouble, I'll never understand."

I felt positively bathed in fatherly concern. I really loved this man. But it was time to get back to my mother, who, by the way, I was sure would have preferred to be sitting in Sam's chair herself.

I got up and kissed Sam on the cheek. “Thanks for the tea and sympathy, Sam,” I said. “It was just what I needed.”

He walked me to the door. “Whenever you need a shoulder or a cup of tea, you don’t have to ask. I’m always here.”

Chapter 10

Lucy's cough was definitely worse, and her cheeks looked sunken. "Lucy, you've got to go over to the clinic," I said.

"It'll pass," she said, smiling at me before another coughing fit took over.

I shook my head and dropped a dollar into her cap. I added another after my mother shot me a look.

"Give her another one, don't be so stingy," my mother muttered.

"Ah," Lucy said. "You're a good girl, you are. I bet your mother would be proud of such a daughter."

My mother squeezed my arm. I beamed at her, which caused Lucy, even in her feverish state, to give me a funny look.

We would have taken the subway to the Village but I was worried about my mother's fragile state, so I got us a cab whose insides smelled like a humongous ashtray. We couldn't get the windows open so we were stuck with the smell for company. I was practically gagging by the time we got out at Chris's street.

Chris lived on a street chockfull of fancy-schmancy brownstones. Strange, I thought, that a masseuse—all right, a body worker—could afford such a lifestyle.

“Must have been family money, or else something very illegal,” said the mind-reader.

Chris’s apartment was a second-floor walkup in a brownstone. I buzzed the speakerphone to tell her I was here. I walked behind my mother while she made her way up slowly, gripping the handrail.

“You all right?” I whispered.

“I just need to catch my breath.” She stopped halfway up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs, a door opened and Chris poked her head out. “Marabella! I’m so glad to see you!”

“Me, too.” I realized I had to make it look like I was having trouble negotiating the stairs. “Old ankle injury,” I explained.

“Good thinking,” my mother mumbled, clambering up the rest of the way ahead of me and going inside.

A puzzled expression appeared on Chris’s face as I walked inside with her. “I felt a...presence...come in with you,” she said. “Did you feel it, too?” She shivered, drawing her glittery purple shawl, which matched her glittery purple top, tighter around her shoulders.

“Probably a draft,” I said. “Getting windy out. Strange weather this time of year, isn’t it? Unpredictable. Could be hurricane season. Feels like anything could blow its way in.”

She giggled. “Just like Oz. That’s one of my all-time favorite movies.”

This was an understatement. Chris’s living room could have taken up residence in Emerald City. There were plaster busts of Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow, and Tin Man, a mural of the tornado scene complete with a dead witch’s feet sticking out from under the house, blow-ups of the Wizard and the good and bad witches, and a large plush Toto. A pair of red patent-leather pumps hung from a mirror. Glass and silver art deco objects served to gild the lily.

“There’s no place like home,” I murmured.

Chris nodded then said, "This isn't where I do treatments, of course. That room is very professional and rather severe."

"Tell her you'd love to see where she does her work," my mother hissed in my ear.

Chris stopped and seemed to sniff the air. "You know, I really feel...something..." She shrugged. "Well, it's probably harmless, whatever it is. I don't feel anything negative in the air. So don't worry." She smiled at me.

"Negative, huh?" my mother said in my ear.

Harmless, huh? I thought.

"Marabella, I'm so sorry, I forgot to ask you. Your mother..."

"Um, she..." It was all I could do to nod my head.

"Oh, it can be so difficult to deal with a loved one's passing," she said in a soothing voice. "I'll get us some tea. I have water brewing. Be right back."

"Now's our chance," my mother said, full of energy again. She whipped over to the delicate little white desk in the corner and began rummaging through the drawers.

"Ma," I said, shocked.

"Shhh, let me work," she said, quickly sorting through papers.

I walked over to her. "Not only is this illegal or whatever, the important stuff is probably all locked up." I pointed to the deep-set bottom drawer, which was, indeed, locked.

"Turn your back," my mother said.

I obeyed. "Hurry up, she'll be coming back in a minute."

"Aha! Oho!" came from behind me.

I turned around, and my mother swept the papers back into the desk with two seconds to spare before Chris made her way in with her tray of goodies, which she set before us as if it were a banquet. We sank into silver-trimmed armchairs in front of a huge silver-and-glass coffee table. I decided to move cautiously, since nothing on the tray remotely resembled any species of food I'd had even a nodding acquaintance with. There were giant white things that looked

like man-eating plants, a fleshy reddish pulpy substance surrounded by a grayish sauce and bits of dark green that looked like seaweed—for garnish, I guessed.

“It’s all natural, and this—” She pointed to the pulp. “—is my own recipe. It’s good for you, trust me.”

I declined the food and accepted a cup of the *eau detree*, instead, with plenty of milk and sugar. Both substances were raw, of course, and I tried not to imagine zillions of bacteria saying, “Ready, Set, Go!” as they took off for a great adventure in my insides.

“Chris,” I set down my cup and got to the point. “How do you feel about what happened to Dr. Ditstein?”

Her eyes filled, and I could see her fingers trembling. “I still can’t really believe it. Who’d want to harm such a beautiful person? I can’t talk about it.” She sniffed and reached into the pocket of her flowered purple pants for a Kleenex, dabbing her eyes.

“I’m sorry to upset you, but I think we need to talk about this. After all, somebody killed that beautiful person,” I said.

She flinched. “How can you be so cruel? I thought you were a good person,” she reproached.

“I didn’t cause Dr. Ditstein’s death,” I reminded her. “But someone did. Don’t you think that someone should be punished?”

Mopping her wet face, she stared at me a few minutes, then something flickered behind her eyes. “Yes,” she said, her voice hard, “very definitely, absolutely, they should be punished.”

“So, what we need to do is first establish our own whereabouts on that night,” I said, trying to lead her in the direction I wanted her to follow.

My mother was patting my back behind my chair.

“That’s my girl,” my mother said.

“This way, we can use a process of elimination. Of course,” I added, “we know that we didn’t do it.”

“Elimination?” Chris said, looking a little dazed. “You think one of *us* did it? One of the group?”

“It’s possible,” I said. “In fact, it’s pretty likely.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Look at the timing. Because who else would have such access to her apartment but one of us, one of her group?”

A few years ago, Dr. Ditstein had cut way back on her patient load because of her commitments to research on children, she’d said. So we—the members of her group therapy sessions—were it. “And because who else would have a reason?” I asked.

Of course, there was also Dr. Ditstein’s boyfriend. And Dr. Shokum. But I didn’t need to discuss them with Chris.

“What reason?” She had her hand against her mouth. “She was helping us with our problems. That’s like, uh, killing the goose, you know...”

“That laid the golden eggs,” I said, trying to be patient about her logic, though it set my teeth on edge. “Well, maybe one of us didn’t think she was such a hot...goose. Anyway—” I segued into my trap, “—you didn’t happen to be anywhere near her office Thursday, did you? Because you might have seen something suspicious.”

Her eyes flew open. “Oh, no, Thursday isn’t my appointment day. I go on Tuesday at ten a.m., before my first client. My clients never come in before noon, usually. I mean, who wants to get a massage first thing in the morning? You don’t start getting stressed out till the afternoon, so that’s when they start piling in. Sometimes I’ve got them back-to-back, so to speak, till eight at night.” She giggled. “Of course, they’re not really back-to-back. That was just an expression. I give a very personalized, individualized service. Very client-oriented.” Narrowing her eyes, she gave me an appraising look. “You know, speaking frankly, I hope you don’t mind if I speak frankly, but you really look stressed out and I mean really. I bet you could really use some good bodywork. Not that I’m trying to sell my services.” She giggled again, a habit which was beginning to stress me out.

“Gee, thanks for noticing,” I said, giving her a wide smile and nod of appreciation. “One of these days, when I have time. Speaking of time,” I said, though we hadn’t been, but I figured she wouldn’t have followed the sequence of conversation too closely, “do you have clients back-to-back on Thursdays?”

Chris wrinkled her forehead in concentration. “Thursdays, well, usually I have Marcy at one, she comes while her kids are at school, you know how stressed out you get with little kids.” I didn’t know, but I nodded to encourage her. “But she couldn’t come because her middle one, that’s the nine-year-old, had an earache. That must be so painful. Have you ever had one?”

I gritted my teeth. “No, can’t say I have. But who came after Marcy didn’t?” I tried to smile, but it may have come out more like teeth-baring.

“Uh, my two-thirty, that’s Tom, he comes before he starts his shift at the hospital. He’s an orderly, and he threw his back out trying to get a patient on a stretcher into an elevator that closed its doors on him.” She shuddered. “It must have been awful. And you’d think at a hospital, they could fix him up, but nobody could take the pain away, until I started working with him,” she said, beaming.

“You must be really good at your work,” I said, after my mother poked me in the ribs, muttering, “Keep her talking.”

She grinned, trying unsuccessfully to look modest. “After Tom, there’s Mrs. Reilly, my four o’clock. She’s sixty-five and such a sweetheart. She calls me her little dolly.” I geared myself up for the forthcoming giggle. “She says I make her feel like fifty again.”

“Amazing,” I murmured.

“Ken comes at five-thirty.” She made a face. “I wish he didn’t, between you and me and the wall.”

I never did understand this expression but nodded at her as if I did. “What’s the problem?”

She sighed. "Most of my clients are, you know, just so into getting relaxed, feeling good, and really respecting my work."

"As well they should." I actually heard myself using one of my mother's expressions.

"Well, Ken doesn't...seem to respect that," Chris said, wrinkling her nose. "Or me. I mean, he's always making suggestive remarks, just a hint, nothing that I could really catch him on. But it's not very pleasant."

"That must be..." I searched for a word.

"It's very painful to me," she finished. "As a professional, I mean."

"I understand," I soothed.

She looked mollified.

"And your seven o'clock?" I asked.

"Oh, that's Harmony Light. She's another body worker, and we work on each other to give ourselves a break. Otherwise, *I'd* get stressed out, you know?" Giggle, giggle. "I go to her on Mondays. She's just down the street, so I don't have to take a lot of time out."

"Harmony is your last appointment on Thursdays?" I asked.

She nodded. "After that, I'm ready to collapse. So I just turn on some really soothing music that just blends in with my surroundings and sit on the floor in the lotus position for about twenty minutes. It really does the trick."

"I know just what you mean," I said. "For me, it's the sofa and TV."

"You'd really be better off with a little meditation or at least some quiet time," she said. "Much better for your poor jangly nerves, I'm sure."

"I'm sure, too," I said. "Oh, by the way, you wouldn't happen to have Harmony Light's phone number, would you?"

She looked shocked. "That's therapist-client confidentiality," she said. "By the way, how did you get my phone

number, Marabella?” The softness seemed to melt before my eyes.

“Tell her you looked in the professional section of the phone book,” sounded in my ear.

“Oh, I found it in the phone book.”

She looked pleased. “Oh, didn’t they do my ad up nice? You should have seen the one they did in last year’s phone book. Awful. I tried to get my money back, but no go. You know how big corporations are, you can’t win.”

“I know,” I said.

I took another sip, which was just about all my stomach could stomach, and put my cup down. “Aaah, that was good. Thank you so much for the tea and goodies.” I got up from the chair. My mother followed suit.

Chris looked a little upset. “But you hardly ate a thing. Didn’t you like it?”

“Loved it, but I don’t want to ruin my lunch.” I patted my stomach and winked. Walking toward the door, I said, “Oh, just one more thing...”

“Shades of Columbo,” my mother said.

I wanted to smack her.

Chris looked startled. “What?”

“Um, how long are your sessions? Just in case—” I thought quickly. “—I can schedule one sometime.”

The relief spread over her face. “Oh, about fifty minutes. You know, the fifty-minute-hour. Just like—” She sniffed into her handkerchief. “—poor Dr. Ditstein.”

She closed the door as we made our way down the stairs, not quite as slowly this time, since going down was easier on my mother than going up. Less strain on her cardiovascular system, which was not exactly in great shape.

As soon as a cab, whose windows were fortunately wide open, got us home and we were safely ensconced in my apartment, I settled my mother on the sofa. Then I pounced.

“Okay.” I planted myself in front of her and assumed my best questioning position: arms folded across my chest. “What was all that ‘turn your back’ stuff back there when

you were rifling through Chris's papers? And what was the 'Aha, Oho,' business?"

Her eyes had a definite gleam. Ignoring my first question, she said, "What do you suppose I found in that secret drawer of hers?"

I sighed. "Ma, I'm no good at *Jeopardy*, either. Why don't you just tell me what you found?"

She was really enjoying this. Leaning back against the cushions, she said, "I found a birth certificate."

I was getting a tad irritated. "Okay."

She was grinning from ear to ear. "An important birth certificate."

"Everyone has a birth certificate, Ma, that they usually keep in a locked drawer," I said, enunciating clearly, "because they don't want people looking at their private papers."

She snorted. "Not this kind of birth certificate, sweetheart."

"What, already?"

She was playing my nerves like a beginning violin student.

"A birth certificate that belonged to a baby boy, sweetheart," my mother said triumphantly. "Your Christine is really a Christopher."

Chapter 11

It took me a few minutes to digest this information. But as I absorbed it, it made sense to me. There had always been something nagging at me about Chris, something not quite kosher. Then it hit me: that something was her Adam's apple. Men have them, women don't.

"Okay, so what does this mean in terms of Chris's status as a suspect?"

She picked up the marker lying on the coffee table and tapped her teeth. "Hmmm, I can see some interesting possibilities here."

"For instance?"

"Maybe Chris was being counseled by Dr. Ditstein, and she didn't like the counseling. And another thing. Just because you're a therapist, doesn't necessarily mean you know everything."

"That's not grounds for murder," I said. "It's grounds for malpractice. Get real, Ma."

She threw me a wounded look and shook her head. "Such a mouth on you." Tapping a tune on her teeth, which, by now, were probably contaminated with ink, she said, "Okay, try this for size. How about blackmail?"

I stared at her. "I always knew you were jealous of her, but how could you sink so low?"

She did not look at all abashed. "Think about it. Christopher-Christine has a sex change operation, which comes out in therapy. Now Christine has a boyfriend, who she doesn't want to know that she used to be a he. Dr. Ditstein sees a way to make a bundle. Christine gets tired of paying for silence. So, bang! Or—" She nodded. "—maybe they were both interested in the same man. So Dr. Ditstein decides to fix Christine's wagon good, and tells the boyfriend that his girlfriend was a boyfriend. And then she/he does her in."

"You've been watching too many TV movies," I said.

She gave me a reproachful look. "I haven't seen TV in—"

"A week," I finished for her, feeling like a slug for reminding her.

"I still like the blackmail idea," she said.

The idea that Dr. Ditstein would have done such a heinous deed was such a betrayal of my trust that it was totally unthinkable. I reminded myself that there were other, more likely possibilities. The other members of the group, for instance.

Then I remembered why I'd asked Chris about the timing of her sessions. Even to my math-o-phobic mind, her fifty-minute hour left forty minutes in between sessions, since her sessions were scheduled every hour and a half. I did some calculations. Forty minutes was time enough for her to get to Dr. Ditstein's apartment on the East Side, do the dirty deed, and hurry home to work on the next body, so to speak. Not only that, I recalled, she'd had a one o'clock cancellation, the woman whose kid had the ear infection. But that was way too early. With a shudder, I remembered that Dr. Ditstein's body had still felt warm when I found her.

But now there was something else. Why would I think that Chris was necessarily telling the truth about her clients as to who showed up and who didn't that day, since she'd lied—okay, omitted, the truth—about her sex change? What about Chris's colleague, Harmony Light? If she didn't show,

would she lie for Chris? Was there a massage therapist code of silence? I made a note to look up her number in the yellow pages and ask the cops to check out Chris's alibi.

And wasn't it a bit odd that Christine hadn't ever talked about her previous gender state in group? After all, wasn't group the place to unburden yourself? *Whatever happened to trust?* I wondered. *Who knows what other secrets have not been bared in group? There could be all sorts of serious nuttiness bubbling underneath, never rising to the surface, just waiting to come to a furious boil. Speaking of nuttiness, what about Dr. Shokum?*

No one from the group had ever seen him, and as far as the rumor mill had it, none of his patients ever had, either. But that didn't mean that he didn't go out when he thought no one else was around. Or that he didn't have something against Dr. Ditstein. Something bad enough to kill for.

Chapter 12

The rock music was blasting away as usual when I rushed into the Healthy Woman Fitness Center after work the next night. Julie-the-svelte, as Toniann and I referred to her, was frowning prettily at me at the front desk.

“Bad girl!” she shouted over the music. “You haven’t been here in a long time!”

I looked properly ashamed. “I’ll make up for it tonight!” I shouted back.

Toniann and I had tried for years to get them to tone down the volume, to no avail. According to Julie, the other customers, whom she referred to as clients, loved it. Of course, most of them had barely reached drinking age.

Julie gave me her perfunctory smile. “Class is starting, better hurry up, hon!”

I ran into the locker room, fiddled with the combination lock, which always gave me trouble, and finally got it to unlock. I changed out of my work clothes, hung them up in the locker, and changed into the only sweats I owned that my mother wouldn’t wear. She hated Kelly green. I thought it brought out my green eyes.

Toniann waved at me across the exercise floor, and I walked over to join her. She was dressed in spotless white, from head to toe. Even her sneakers were sparkling white.

“How do you do that?” I asked, looking down at her feet.

“Shoe polish,” she said. “Once a week. Easy.”

“I’m lucky I even made it to class.”

Chloe, the aerobics instructor, clad in a skin-tight silver leotard, danced across the floor to the front of the room. The walls were lined with full-length mirrors, the better to motivate us, I guess. Or to scare the hell out of those of us who weren’t among the svelte. I was one of those unfortunates. No matter how much I dieted and exercised, I still had what was politely called a “full figure.” Translation: a bit too much figure, especially around the hips. I’d give my eyeteeth to have Toniann’s long, slender body.

“It’s in my genes,” she told me. “The Nordic side. They’re all pretty leggy. But I wish I had half your chest.”

Generous bosoms and hips were my genetic portion. A slim body and long legs weren’t.

Chloe barked at us over the music. “Let’s go, girls! Remember, your body will thank you!”

Not my body, I thought. *My body will curse at me*. Before I grabbed the painkillers I kept in stock for after exercise.

After we warmed up with neck, shoulder, and side stretches, we went into aerobics, my ears pounding from the music. Toniann and I had tried ear plugs. That didn’t work, because we couldn’t hear the instructor. I couldn’t believe that even the nymphets in the class actually liked it, but they were grooving on it, snapping their gum to the beat.

“Jumping jacks!” Chloe screamed, leaping into the air like a gazelle.

I huffed and puffed. “Maybe we’re getting too old for this!” I yelled to Toniann.

“No way!” Toniann yelled back. “Just keep on going!”

“Heel pumps in four, rocking horse in four!” shrieked Chloe.

I pumped and rocked.

“Cross over into grapevine!”

I grapevined, wondering whatever happened to the California raisins. Probably keeled over and collapsed from all that grapevining.

Chloe put us through a bunch of squats, kicks, and knee lifts. When I was about ready to drop, she cooled us down. I checked to see if I still had a pulse and trailed Toniann into the locker room. I huddled in a corner as I stripped and quickly covered myself up with a beach towel. Not only was I a locker-room prude, but the sight of all these great bodies didn't exactly make me want to strut my stuff. Toniann always told me I had a really sexy figure, and I should stop wishing I looked like someone else. It wasn't easy when the national ideal these days was Ms. Anorexia. Jane Russell was fifty years out of date. Hell, even Marilyn Monroe would be considered fat by twenty-first-century standards.

After Toniann and I showered, we put on bathing suits and settled into the whirlpool. "Aaah," I said, as my body collapsed in gratitude.

Two women lounging across from us were communicating in a language I'd never heard before. Whatever it was, I was positive they were making fun of us in it, because they kept looking at us and giggling to each other. I glared at them, but it didn't do any good. The giggles got even louder.

"This is the life," Toniann said, closing her eyes.

"Speaking of life, I haven't heard anything from the cops."

"No news is good news," she said.

"Yeah, right. But I don't suppose they're straining themselves to make a big effort to find the real killer."

She patted my shoulder. "They'll find him or her, don't worry."

"What, me worry?" I tried to laugh.

"One day at a time." Then as if trying to change to a more promising subject, she said, "Hey, what's with the animal—" She made some lascivious growling sounds. "—doctor?"

The mention of John made me think animal thoughts, too. “We’re going out Friday night. A long, lovely dinner at Le Bijoux.”

She sighed. “How romantic. I wish Peter and I could do an evening like that. I’m lucky if, these days, we get to a pizza joint.”

“But it’ll all be worth it when he graduates from law school,” I said. “You shouldn’t complain. You’re the one who encouraged him to go back to school in the first place, remember?”

“That’s because I thought he was wasting his potential as a paralegal.”

“You were right,” I said. “So—one day at a time.”

We laughed and clambered out of the Jacuzzi.

Chapter 13

As for the next suspect on my list, Shokum, I figured getting inside his apartment would take a minor miracle. After I discussed my theory with my mother, I had to forcibly restrain her from turning into the Cheshire cat and wafting over to his apartment that minute.

“Rest for a while, first, Ma.”

By the time I finished tucking her up with the afghan and pillows on the sofa, her eyes were drooping with sleep. I went into the bedroom and did a crossword to clear my head. At the point where Indonesian metal product intersected with Australian insect, the wheels began to turn.

Besides her exhaustion, there was another reason not to rush my mother into a break-and-entry at Shokum's. It might be more productive if I first attempted to gain lawful entry and talk to him in person. This way, I could hopefully soften him up enough to get some information out of him, such as what he'd been doing just before I found Dr. Ditstein. Then I realized he probably wouldn't tell me a damn thing. As a shrink, albeit possibly only on the phone, even he had to be clued in enough to know what I was fishing for.

But there was still a good reason to try to do the in-person scene first. I'd get some sense of Shokum *in situ*, in his own claustrophobic little habitat, and maybe that could

answer some questions. I could always send in the heavy artillery, i.e., my mother, later. And she really did need a rest.

Convincing Shokum to let me in behind his peephole was going to take some doing, though. Like what?

I had it. I'd tell him I needed another therapist, ASAP, to help me work out my feelings of grief and loss about Dr. Ditstein. And, though I'd heard the rumor that he only treated patients on the phone, I was interviewing replacements, and that had to be done in person. The idea that I was an eight-year-therapy veteran ought to tempt him. Think of the phone mileage he could get from another eight years. He could become a major shareholder in AT&T.

I opened the phone book and turned to the Yellow Pages marked "Psychologists." I half expected Shokum to be listed in his own little esoteric sub-category—"psychologists-phone"—but there he was, in alphabetical order, right in the mainstream. Then I punched in his number.

"Dr. Shokum, here." An incredibly sexy voice came on the line after one ring. Must have been waiting for customers, willing it to ring.

"Dr. Shokum," I breathed, using my best "flies with honey" manner, "I'm Marabella Vinegar, a patient—a former patient—of Dr. Ditstein's. I'm so glad I found you in." I figured it would be better if he thought I wasn't aware of his little peculiarities.

A silence ensued. Then a throat clearing. "Ah, yes, tragic, tragic thing," he murmured. The voice deepened, became more honeyed: "How are you?" The effect was as if he were blowing directly in my ear, taking little bites, nibbling delicately, licking around the edges with his probing tongue. *What a wonderful instrument the telephone is*, I thought, trying to press it harder against my head.

"I—" I had to remember that I was supposed to be interviewing him, not getting an ear-job. "I haven't been feeling very well," I said, trying to stick to a description of my general state of mind, not my raging hormones. This was not easy.

"Tell me how I can help," he purred. "Anything I can do. Anything at all."

Oh, the possibilities that conjured up. I tried to concentrate: *Marabella, remember your purpose. This man could have done in Dr. Ditstein. Not to mention be neurotic as hell.* Or was he? Maybe this was all just crazy gossip, started by some disgruntled patient. Or maybe it was part of an image—not leaving his apartment, doing therapy on the phone. Part of a Dracula-type fetish, perhaps? A walk on the dark side? The man could be keeping some very strange objects in that apartment. Whips and chains? A satin-lined coffin to sleep in?

"Um, I'm kind of stuck, that is..." I fumbled for the right words. "I was a longtime, a very longtime patient of Dr. Ditstein. And now..."

"I understand completely," he crooned. "You need someone to talk to."

"Yes, someone to talk to," I said, trying unsuccessfully to ignore the waves of heat racing through my body. It was—he was—too much for my right ear and the rest of my poor, sex-starved body. My body couldn't remember the last time I'd had any, and was obviously on a roll. Finally, I gave up and sank down on the bed, the phone glued to my ear as he continued to murmur deep, heartfelt nothings into the receiver. My innermost parts began to twitch and tingle, my breathing rapidly reached a crescendo. "Yes, oh, yes, yes, yes, to talk to," I gasped. Molly Bloom had nothing on me at this moment. Finally sated, I unstuck the phone. God, this was embarrassing. What would he think?

I got my answer soon enough. "I hope it—I—was good for you," he whispered.

"Uh," I said, trying to clear the mucous from my head and everything else, "I don't usually..."

"No need to explain," he intoned. "I was with you, all the way."

This was his phone therapy? Did this fall under the category of sexual harassment? Sex with a patient's ear?

“I need to see you. I mean—” I said, thinking rapidly, “—I’m starting to interview therapists, you know, to continue treatment. And also,” I threw in, “to work on my feelings of loss and grief about Dr. Ditstein.”

Another silence. Then, “I do not generally hold sessions in person. My patients,” he oozed, “generally find that my telephone sessions provide complete satisfaction.”

“Oh, I understand—completely.” I matched his tone. “But I need to at least have an initial interview in-person. In order to make a more responsible choice and comparison. After all, I’ve been with Dr. Ditstein for eight years. And,” I lied, “I already have three other therapists that friends have offered me whom I’m scheduled to interview. This week,” I threw in for good measure, turning the screws. He would not want to lose such a potential reach-out-and-touchable gold mine. “And it would have to be after work. I’m at Chelsea College till around five.”

Another silence. I could hear his little gray cells busily pondering the big question: To keep my door closed or to entice this potential cash cow?

A throat clearing. “Well, I suppose I could make an exception and allow you to conduct an interview. But you must appreciate that this is not normally my practice. And that I have an extremely tight schedule. So I can squeeze you in for...” A rustling of paper. “...about thirty minutes this afternoon around five-thirty. I have a cancellation.”

“Fine, terrific,” I said. “I appreciate you taking the time. But, you understand, I have to be able to know what—whom I’m getting.”

A low, throbbing chuckle, which set my ear to vibrating again.

I bid him a hasty goodbye and hung up. Dripping wet.

Chapter 14

I never made it to Shokum's inner sanctum that day. I spent most of the afternoon and evening getting booked, photographed, and fingerprinted at the police station. And charged with second-degree murder.

Turns out that some scumbag—somebody in my group?—informed Detective Rivera that I had been heard screaming at Dr. Ditstein. That someone, it seemed, had been early for his—or her—appointment and was waiting in the foyer that led to Dr. Ditstein's room for individual sessions. He or she heard me accusing her of ruining my life. Yelling that it was all her fault. Shrieking that I hated her guts.

“Not only that,” Rivera informed me. “We found the threatening letter you sent to Dr. Ditstein, in her mailbox.”

“I never sent her any letter,” I said. “And what makes you think it was from me?”

“Maybe because it had your address on the envelope,” he said, with a smirk.

Pushing aside thoughts of getting revenge on the scurvy slime who was setting me up, I remembered what happened with the so-called argument I had with Dr. Ditstein. That was the day her old white noise machine died, and my loud and angry voice could be distinctly heard, yelling and screaming about my problems with my mother that had yet to be re-

solved in therapy. Dr. Ditstein had encouraged me to “let it all hang out,” in terms of my rage and fantasies. She was an active supporter of role playing, which, in my case, meant that she stood in for my mother.

“Feelings are always healthy,” she’d said. “Venting them in a safe place is a good way to let them dissipate without hurting you or the person you feel rage about.”

Good old Dr. Ditstein. I’d felt so much better after that session, I’d even been able to talk to my mother the next day without either blowing up at her or gobbling peanut butter out of the jar with a tablespoon, my usual method of dealing with my post-anger-at-my-mother-syndrome.

Now it was coming back to haunt me, pardon the expression. And maybe hang me, thanks to some ratfink from the group. I explained to Rivera what happened. He asked if I had any proof. Of course I didn’t, I said. Unless, it dawned on me, there might be something in Dr. Ditstein’s files—that I must have missed when my mother kidnapped them. Rivera reminded me that those files were confidential. Of course, the fact that I was rapidly being hung out to dry by some helpful member of the group—who?—didn’t matter.

He went off to consult with the prosecutor about the charge against me, while I was interviewed by somebody from the Criminal Justice Agency, to decide whether or not I should be sent to jail.

Since I had no previous criminal record—I guessed being caught smoking pot at a couple of rock concerts in the park didn’t really count—and wasn’t about to flee, maybe I could throw myself on the judge’s mercy.

Rivera decided that I’d threatened to kill my therapist, instead of my mother, about whom I’d been having serious homicidal thoughts. To him, this, plus finding me with the corpse, qualified me as perp of the month.

Never mind that Rivera said Dr. Ditstein was killed with a .38 caliber pistol. And that the only gun I’d ever owned was a water pistol in second grade, which I employed to fight back against the boys who were always squirting water

down my back. As for motive—what was mine supposed to be, anyway? An unwholesome attachment of eight years? Fear of her blabbing my deep dark secrets? I was more than ready and eager to blab them myself whenever a crisis struck. On occasion, I had actually been accused of treating my friends as a giant ear, there for the sole purpose of hearing me out.

The subject of ears evoked very warm memories of the telephone episode earlier in the day, which I quickly squelched.

Getting all hot and bothered in a police station was probably not a great idea. I switched to thoughts of Otis Pinckney, which had the immediate effect of a cold shower. I'd used my phone call to call Toniann, who said she'd call Otis, promising to drag him down here as fast as she could. That was an hour ago.

I began thinking about why somebody would've called the cops about me. Maybe he or she was trying to frame me because he or she did it?

Since my behind was getting sore from sitting in a hard-backed chair, I got up, popped a Xanax, and paced for a while. The room was small and dank, smelling of mold, with vile yellow paint peeling off the walls.

Probably it was about the size of a jail cell, I thought, except there would also be a metal cot and a toilet, with no lid. Was there a sink? Where did they keep the toilet paper? I'd lay bets it wasn't Charmin, either, but some cheap, scratchy gray stuff.

Toniann was racing down the corridor with Otis huffing and puffing in her wake, like the Queen Mary. She blew into the room, hugged me, and wailed, "This is terrible!"

"No shit," said Otis, heaving his green-plaid-suited bulk into a chair that protested by creaking and wobbling underneath him. He mopped his moon face with a large green handkerchief then took off his steamed-up tortoise-shell glasses and polished the lenses. I knew better than to rush him into anything. Otis would never be accused of rushing

into anything, except maybe where a lot of money was involved. Since I would be a charity case of Toniann's, he wasn't moving any too quickly.

"Otis," I said, trying to control my impatience, "I want to thank you for helping me out here. I truly appreciate it."

"Not at all, not at all." He waved his meaty hands in a gesture worthy of a duke addressing his serfdom. "Otis Pinckney for the underdog. That's his motto."

One of Otis's less-endearing traits was his habit of referring to himself in the third person. As for his so-called social conscience, it was nonexistent, except for those who might possibly be able to do him some good if he ran for office. Maybe he was hoping to get some mileage out of defending me. Selling his story to a TV movie of the week, maybe? "Woman kills therapist after eight-year-relationship," or, "Too much therapy can kill"?

Toniann was crossing and uncrossing her rose-colored pant legs, something she did when she was either trying to show off her best feature or was agitated. I figured it was agitation in this case, since she'd hardly waste it on Otis. "Let's get her out of here, Otis. Do what you have to do. And hurry, please," she said.

Telling Otis to hurry was like telling grass to grow faster. He eased his plaid bulk off the chair, one butt-cheek at a time, and got to his feet. "Okay, we gotta talk to the detective." He ruffled through some papers, "They said unpremeditated, okay." He plodded to the doorway and down the corridor. A minute later, I heard him say, "Hey, who do we gotta see for my client here, the Murder Two."

I willed myself not to move. Otherwise, I was going to kill him, which would make me a Murder Two, Two. "He might as well be working for the DA," I said to Toniann. "He's got me tried and convicted already, after being here for five minutes."

Toniann patted my arm and clucked her tongue. "He's trying to negotiate with the cops, he's just talking their language, that's all. Don't worry, he'll take good care of you."

I had profound doubts of that, but I thanked her for her support. "If it wasn't for you, I'd be a total mess right now." I grabbed her hands. I could feel my hands trembling and the rest of my body starting to shake with huge sobs. Tears poured down my face, and I couldn't stop them. I just couldn't take one more thing, that's all. My rope had just ended.

She squeezed my shoulder and dug out a Kleenex. "Here, blow," she said. "It's good that you're crying. You needed a good cry. After all, you lost your mother, and then your therapist. And then all this happened."

"And then there's—" I stopped in mid-sentence. My mother must be worried sick about me. How was I going to let her know I was all right, well, at least, not in agony? Not only that, there was my missed appointment with Shokum. Probably my only chance. What was I going to tell him? "Oh, sorry I couldn't make it, I was busy being fingerprinted?"

"What?"

"Um, my...shrink," I said. "I miss my therapist."

"Yeah, I'm sure. I missed mine for a while, too, after he was indicted for having sex with his patients. You know," she said, looking puzzled, "I often wonder why he never approached me, you know, that way."

Sometimes I couldn't believe this was an otherwise intelligent, hip woman of the twenty-first century. "It's not quite the same," I said.

"Oh, I know." She nodded her head. "I only saw Dr. Charles for a couple of months. You saw Dr. Ditstein for a long time, and you had a really good relationship with her," Toniann said. "How many years was it? Three? Four?"

"Eight," I said, feeling my face get hot. She gaped then looked away. "Some of us have a lot to work out," I said.

Clumping sounds signaled Otis's return. "Okay, we've gotta get to the arraignment." He pointed to me. Turning to Toniann, he said, "Wait here. It shouldn't be too long. Camino likes his cocktails early."

I followed Otis and the prosecutor out of the precinct office over to the courthouse building next door. Judge Camino's courtroom, which was on the second floor, was a veritable Sleeping Beauty's castle. Camino's elegant white head was propped up in his hands, his elbows on a huge pile of papers on his desk. His eyes were half-closed. Probably bored to death. I didn't know whether that was a good or bad sign. The gray-complexioned court clerk down below was shuffling papers in slow motion.

After Otis had a brief discussion with the prosecutor, he clumped back to me. "Cripes, he's gonna to be in a helluva mood, especially if I startle him," Otis whispered, indicating the judge. He shook his head and shambled to the bench. "Good day, Your Honor," he said quietly.

"Whuzzat?" Camino jerked upright, his robe rustling, looking furious. Probably embarrassed at being caught half-asleep. Not a good omen. "You were saying?"

"Good day, Your Honor," Otis repeated.

"Not that, you fool," Camino said. "What's the case?"

"Right. My client, here, Ms. Vinegar—"

I could see Camino trying to stifle a grin. Turning to Otis, he said. "So, give me the papers for the name change. I don't blame you one bit, miss," he said, with a smile. "Though I must say, I thought it was another one of Pinckney's feeble attempts at humor."

Otis sighed. "Your Honor, Ms. Vinegar here has been charged with murder in the second degree. The charges are ridiculous—"

"I'll be the judge of that." Camino stared at me, his mustache twitching. "Geez. It's always the quiet, good-looking ones."

"I didn't—" I started to protest.

Otis pinched my arm. "Your Honor, sir, Ms. Vinegar is not guilty of anything. There isn't a shred of evidence. And she's never been in trouble with the law."

“Except for a couple of pot-smoking incidents when I was little more than a mere child,” I muttered under my breath.

“Shhh.” Otis glared at me. “She’s regularly employed at Chelsea College, in the...” He looked at me.

“Public relations department,” I said.

“Right. Where she’s worked for...”

“Nineteen years.”

“Right. She lives in the area, in an apartment on...”

“West Ninety-sixth Street.”

“Right. Where she has lived for...”

“Nineteen years.”

“Right—”

Camino interrupted, “All right, you two, cut the Alphonse and Gaston routine. Give me the paperwork.”

Otis handed up the file. Camino opened it, flipped through it, gave an “Mmmmm,” and an “Ummmm,” and closed the file.

He motioned to the prosecutor to come to the bench. A short period of low-voice discussion among the three of them was next, followed by Otis and the prosecutor returning to their seats.

Camino harrumphed. “This case is cockamamie crap. They’ve got an anonymous typed letter in an envelope with a typed address. And the other thing, she’s accused of what, yelling? This is evidence?”

I let out my breath. He was on my side?

“Young woman,” Camino said, “go home and don’t get into any more trouble, please. Like finding any more bodies. And, uh, try not to yell anymore.” He actually seemed to twinkle at me.

“Right,” said Otis.

Camino checked his watch and stood up, drawing his robe around him. “Scram. I’m late.”

“Right.”

“Shut up, Pinckney.” Camino looked down at some other papers on his desk. “Michaelson, file these under Wooten

versus Wooten, damn their eyes. Another damn stupid waste of my time...”

The gray-faced clerk got up from his chair with a groan and plodded to the bench.

“Thank you, Your Honor, sir,” Otis said, practically genuflecting.

We made our way back to Toniann at the precinct office.

“Okay, we’re done,” Otis told her “Those cops were wasting everyone’s time. There’s no case.”

“Thank God,” Toniann and I said in unison.

He turned to Toniann. “And I wasted my time.”

“I really appreciate this, Otis,” I said. “A lot.”

“Just try to keep out of trouble,” he said to me.

I got to my feet. “How soon can we leave?” Not only was I not thrilled with the ambience, but I was worried about my mother. She could be *in extremis* before I got home. My nerves couldn’t handle another death scene at this point.

Otis looked annoyed. “These things can’t be done in a minute. There’s paperwork. Which I have to take care of.”

“Sorry,” I said, abashed. “Look, Otis, thanks a lot, from the bottom of my heart. Otis Pinckney is the best.” I laid it on with a trowel.

He beamed, which turned his moon face into a jack-o-lantern.

I tried to make conversation. “So, how’s the campaign going?”

He stuck his thumbs into the bands of his green suspenders, snapping them. “Of course, we still have money to raise.” He warmed to his subject. “You can’t have enough money for an election campaign these days. Goddamn outta sight expensive TV spots. Even radio.” He lumbered to his feet again. “Don’t go away,” he said to me, chuckling as he went out into the corridor.

“This is whose hands I’m putting my life in?” I said to Toniann. “Mr. Cheap Yuks?”

“He’s taking care of everything, that’s the important thing.”

I could feel exhaustion creeping over me like kudzu. I had trouble even keep my eyes focused and I felt dizzy.

“What’s the matter?” Toniann leaned over me anxiously, trying to sit me up in my chair.

I shook my head, trying to clear it out. “Just very tired. I need to go home and crawl into bed for about two days.” Of course, I wasn’t going to be able to do that, since I had to deal with my mother when I got home. And then call Dr. Shokum and try to reschedule. And somehow have the energy to go to work tomorrow. That brought up pleasant, animal-like thoughts involving a certain animal doctor. I sighed. How could I think romantic thoughts at a time like this? Was I sick?

“Are you sick?” Toniann was asking.

“Yes,” I said, not really listening.

“Should I call a, whatever they have here, a matron?”

I grimaced. “Not yet.”

Otis finally came back. “Okay, you can go home now,” he said. “But don’t—”

“Leave town,” I said.

He nodded solemnly. “Right.”

Toniann looked at him. “You just want to make sure Marabella’s okay, right? Because Otis Pinckney really cares.”

Otis bobbed his head up and down, making it look like a beach ball. “Right. Otis Pinckney always cares.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

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About the Author



Sandra Gardner is a former contributor and columnist for The New York Times. She is the author of four non-fiction books: *Six Who Dared* (Simon & Schuster), *Street Gangs* (Franklin Watts), *Teenage Suicide* (Simon & Schuster), and *Street Gangs in America* (Franklin Watts). Gardner's first three books in her mother-and-me mystery series are scheduled to be published by Black Opal Books.

Street Gangs in America received a book award from the National Association of Press Women. *Dead Shrinks Don't Talk*, previously titled *Mother, Murder and Me*, her first mystery novel, was the winner of Swyers Publishing's 2011 First New Author (fiction) Contest. Her novella, *Halley and Me*, won the 2012 Grassic Short Novel Prize from Evening Street Press.