

For Beretta or Worse



An Annabelle Starkey Mystery

ZOE BURKE

For Beretta
or Worse

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For Sibby, as fine a friend as one could ever be

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I love New York City, and I enjoyed including some of my favorite haunts in this plot. However, the restaurant *Per Favore* is entirely of my imagination—thank goodness.

My family and friends make me one of the most fortunate people in the world. A special shout out to my sister, Martha, and my friends Bonnie, Kathleen, Margaret, and Sibby, who all helped me see this book through.

To Thomas, my husband, well, jeez. I cannot tell of what is limitless. (Juliet said that to Romeo.)

Chapter One

Mickey and I were sitting at the bar at The Crooked Knife on Fourteenth Street on the south end of Chelsea in New York. It's a funky bar and restaurant with great food, convivial bartenders, and a laid-back crowd. The wall behind the bar is covered with white paper cocktail napkins illustrated with drawings by various customers. I've tried a few little casual sketches, but none of them ever made the cut. The bartenders are harsh critics. Okay, so I can't draw.

We had just been to a second-run movie theater to see the noon matinee of *Joy*, starring Jennifer Lawrence, and Mickey was gushing about how beautiful she is. "There's something about her smile, her round face, and the blond hair really suits her, don't you think?" He took a gulp of his Bronx Pale Ale and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Mickey, wow, you're all swaggery and mouthy and stuff."

"I kind of remind you of Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, right?"

"I should have never insisted on watching *that* movie last night." I swallowed some of my own draft. "Anyway, sure, Jennifer Lawrence is really cute and she can act her way out of a bases-loaded, fourth-down disaster, but I think you're going a little bit nutso over her."

He laughed and kissed me. “She’s got nothing on you, Annabelle.”

I knew he was lying but I let it slide. I’m nowhere near as pretty as Jennifer Lawrence—though Mickey has told me I’m beautiful lots of times—and while I’m in good shape and can probably run faster than she can, my limp hair and peony-size ears would never make it to the big screen.

Mickey and I both love movies, though I’m more of a fanatic than he is. This Saturday afternoon we were taking a break from a case that had fallen into our laps the previous Monday. Mickey and I—and our best friend, Luis—have a detective agency, Asta Investigations. They’re both ex-cops, while I’m still learning the ropes. Mostly, I’ve been concentrating on background research. But sometimes, I’m up against the bad guys right alongside of them. Or before they show up.

Anyway, this case had to do with the ex-husband of a wealthy Upper-East-Sider, Beverly Musgrave, who was convinced that he, Oliver Musgrave, was sabotaging her at every opportunity. The windshield of her Lexus was smashed, her email account was hacked, some of her jewelry was stolen, she would show up for dinner reservations and they would have been canceled, her dry cleaning was missing. We found the woman completely unlikeable—a Cruella de Vil, only without any Dalmatian puppies. While we thought it more probable that *she* was a torment to her ex, Beverly Musgrave insisted that he was seeking revenge for their divorce settlement, which left him “higher and drier than a Montrachet Grand Cru.” I had to look that up later. A bottle costs boo-coo bucks, in case you didn’t know.

Mickey and Luis hadn’t wanted to take the case, given that the client was disagreeable at best. But I pushed for it, wanting more experience and offering to be her main contact.

Given my experience as a publicist for more than a few prima donna authors in the publishing industry, I felt I could handle Ms. de Vil, no prob.

So, we submitted our quote, she hired us, and Mickey, Luis and I had been switching off, tailing the ex and Beverly for three days. Nothing happened. Then Oliver got on a plane for Chicago a couple of days ago, and yesterday morning, Beverly called in a panic, claiming her diamond watch had been stolen, which “must have been snatched right out of my purse when I was testing perfumes at Bergdorf’s. I had put the purse on the floor by my feet.”

I knew she had gone into Bergdorf’s, since I was keeping tabs on her that day. But I hadn’t followed her in, opting to see if anyone was tailing her besides me.

Mickey and I listened to her on speaker phone as she then went on to describe it as a man’s Rolex, which I thought was weird, since Beverly was petite and dressed like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*—slim black dresses and ultra-feminine glittery jewels. All I could figure was that the watch was one of the most expensive ones she could find—the woman loved to broadcast her bucks.

Mickey, Luis, and I didn’t figure someone could have rummaged around at her feet in her mammoth-size Hermès purse—it would have been wiser to simply pick it up and skedaddle out of Bergdorf’s. But she was insistent. “It was him, that rat, that ungrateful, selfish man-boy.”

I guessed that Beverly was too upper-crusty to actually cuss.

I calmly told her that we had confirmed Oliver was in Chicago, so it wasn’t him. Mickey had a contact there, an old pal named Norman, who had eyes on Oliver each day.

“He paid someone to do it. I’m certain of it.”

“Anything caught on security cameras at Bergdorf’s?”

“That’s your job, isn’t it? Earn your money!”

“You didn’t report this to the store?” Mickey asked.

“I didn’t realize the watch was gone until I got home. I shouldn’t have to explain myself to you! Are you going to stop Oliver or not? I’m frightened so badly that I’m wearing my two-million-dollar diamond stud earrings, all the time, even to bed. I never take them off anymore. I’ve even purchased a pearl-handled gun to protect myself!”

Mickey grimaced. “Legally, I hope?”

“Of course. I would never partake in criminal behavior, Mr. Paxton! Really, how dare you!”

“No offense intended, Ms. Musgrave,” I assured her while rolling my eyes at Mickey. “We’ll check out the store security cameras and get back to you.”

We did that afternoon and there was her purse at her feet, and it didn’t move, and no one touched it.

So, she was either lying, or the watch had been taken some other time.

We told her about the camera footage and said we’d continue surveillance for the ex’s return, but we were starting to wonder if she was delusional. We had no evidence of any further crimes committed against Beverly since she had hired us. And other than the smashed Lexus windshield (which could have been the act of a complete stranger) and some stolen jewelry (if, in fact, it was stolen), the other misdeeds could have been entirely of her imagination.

She must have sensed our ambivalence because she got snippy. “I’m not sure what good your so-called surveillance is doing me. I suggest we rethink our arrangement. I won’t leave the apartment tonight or all day tomorrow, and I won’t pay you for any more hours, starting now. Call me on Monday and I’ll let you know if I want to reconsider.”

I asked her to check in with us hourly, but she refused.

I told her to keep her door locked and not let anyone in, to which she responded with “you must think I’m a moron,” and hung up.

Now, at The Crooked Knife, we were pretty much settled on dropping the case whether Beverly wanted to keep us on or not. “Sorry, Mickey. I guess my diplomacy was no match for Ms. Musgrave. Do we need to bring Luis in on this decision?”

“Nah. He never wanted it to begin with. What time will he be back from Boston tomorrow?”

“Late in the day.” Luis and Ruby, Luis’ very pregnant wife, had left the day before to visit a friend of hers in Boston, someone she hadn’t seen in a long time. Luis wasn’t thrilled about taking the trip—he had confided in us that this friend was a “*chismosa*,” which I mistakenly took to mean a cheap chisler and asked, “She makes Ruby pay for everything?”

“Gossip, *amiga*. She talks too much.”

But he wasn’t going to let Ruby go alone. “She is eight months pregnant. She should not be traveling.”

I know nothing about traveling pregnant, so I patted him on the back and said what I hoped were reassuring words. “Just think of all of those pregnant women who bravely ventured west on wagon trains, or fearlessly crossed the Atlantic on steamer ships, or galloped away on horses to escape from the Tsars.” I stopped momentarily, history not being one of my strong suits. “It’s a safe train ride, and if she has the baby on the train, there will be lots of people to help.” I smiled brightly.

“If she has the baby on the train?!”

Mickey put his hand on Luis’ shoulder. “It won’t happen that way. It’s only June. She’s got another month to go.”

“Three weeks, *amigo*.”

“Try to relax.” Mickey frowned at me.

I shrugged.

Mickey, Luis, Ruby, and I had only recently been sharing a building in Chelsea. Mickey is well set—financially, as well as physically—and bought it five months ago in January. There’s office space on the first floor where we conduct the business of Asta Investigations. Then there are two flats on the second and third floors. Mickey and I are on top, and Luis and Ruby are below us, soon to add the lucky baby to their family.

Lucky, because Luis and Ruby are the most stand-up people I’ve ever met. I don’t know Ruby that well—she and Luis had moved to New York from Las Vegas recently, in February. She’s quiet, holds things close to her chest, while I tend to spill my guts at the slightest urging. She’s been nervous about the pregnancy, while Mickey and I have no intention of having babies. She’s been getting used to New York, which has been overwhelming for her, Luis told me. I’ve reached out to her several times, to get pedicures or go for walks, and the four of us have had meals together a couple of times a month. So, I like her. I just don’t know her like I know Luis, who is my favorite man person in the whole world—besides Mickey, of course. I mean, we’re engaged, after all.

Back to The Crooked Knife. We were getting ready to leave when I noticed a napkin on the wall that I hadn’t seen a few days earlier. It was a sketch of a dog, with a penned message: “My dog Fargo is missing. He’s white with one black ear. If you see him, please call Kathleen at this number,” along with the ten digits.

I leaned over the bar to take a closer peek. “Mickey, look at that.” I pointed. “Didn’t we see a dog like that when we were walking here from the movie theater?”

He squinted at it. “I suppose . . .”

“White, short hair, ears were a little floppy, remember? Muscular, too, and kind of big. It was sitting outside a drug-store on Eighth Avenue.”

“Hmmm.”

“Let’s go.” I typed the phone number and the owner’s name, Kathleen, from the napkin into my phone.

“We’re going to save a dog?”

“You have better things to do?”

He smiled. “Yes, but they can wait until I have your full attention.” He wiggled his eyebrows up and down.

“Swaggery, that’s you.” I took his hand and pulled him toward the door. Take that, Jennifer Lawrence.

Chapter Two

We headed west on Fourteenth Street, me pulling Mickey by the hand. I love dogs. Dusty, a golden retriever, belongs to my parents, and he's as much a member of the family as any of us. So, yup, I think saving a dog is as important as saving a human.

But Mickey pulled up short, yanking my arm. "Stop. Wait a minute." He was reading a text on his phone. "This is going to be one helluva day."

"What is it?"

"The husband."

"Huh?"

"Maybe he really is the bad guy."

"Mickey, what are you talking about?"

"First text is from Norman, my friend in Chicago. Oliver left to fly home."

"Um, so?"

"Next text is from Kermit. Beverly Musgrave. She's dead. I told him about our case yesterday when we met up at the gym."

Kermit Calhoun is Mickey's ex-partner at the NYPD. "Holy moly, Mickey, Oliver? This is nuts! Is Kermit going to arrest him? Do you think he had her murdered and now he

can come home, since he had a great alibi? I was so sure she was wrong and crazy and . . .”

He held up his hand to stop me. “Slow down, Flash. I said ‘maybe’ he’s the bad guy.” He stuck his phone in his back pocket. “We need to mosey over to the station.”

I started to protest, wanting to find Fargo the dog, but I couldn’t argue. I got my phone from my purse to call the dog owner to let her know we had seen her pooch. Just then it dinged. I scanned the text message and held it out to Mickey. “Hold on there, Captain, we might have another errand first.”

Mickey read the screen. “What the . . . ?”

It said:

I have proof now. Come see me at once.

It was from our dead client.

“Are you some kind of psychic, Mickey?”

“What are *you* talking about?”

“You predicted this would be one helluva day. Looks like you’ve tossed a field goal.”

“Babe, please, field goals are not tossed. Reply. Ask her, or whoever it is, where she is.”

Mickey doesn’t appreciate my sports metaphors. I texted back and we waited for a response, but got nothing.

At that moment, we didn’t know who was dead or wasn’t—could Kermit be wrong?—who might have killed our client—if, in fact, she really was dead—or who sent me that text. The morning was as “cloudy with a chance of meatballs” as a June day in Manhattan could be. Like Flint Lockwood said in that movie, we had a *diem* to *carpe*. Then again, I remember he also said, “Holy crap balls.”

Mickey flagged down a cab and we sped over to Third Avenue and up to Sixty-Seventh Street, where Kermit would meet us at the Nineteenth Precinct. Traffic was unusually light, so we were there in twenty minutes.

I called Kathleen on the way. There was no answer, so I left a message about Fargo, telling her my name and including my occupation as a P.I. for Asta Investigations.

Kermit's real name is John, by the way. What parents would call their own flesh and blood "Kermit" unless they had a family tradition of honoring the Muppets? He got his nickname because he looks like a frog. Really. Big wide mouth and eyes that bug out a little. And he has the unfortunate habit of wearing green ties. I had met him before only a couple of times, even though he and Mickey are close. They used to be partners, like I said, and they share a lot of history. I mostly try to stay out of their friendship.

Kermit met us on the landing in front of the building—a damn nice building, with big gray stone blocks framing an arched doorway. He shook hands with Mickey and me. "Hi, Kermit," I greeted him cheerily. "This place is classy. I can imagine it as a movie set, with Al Pacino strutting up the steps as *Serpico*. Did you ever see that film?"

Kermit regarded me with a neutral expression. "I did." He's not much of a conversationalist.

Mickey put his arm around me. "Let's go inside, okay?"

We did. Kermit motioned us to two chairs by his desk and then filled us in.

A neighbor found Beverly Musgrave bludgeoned to death. She was lying face down on her living room floor. Someone had conked her on the head with a very heavy object. Forensics were still at the scene collecting evidence, but Kermit could tell us there had been no forced entry. Her front door was unlocked and ajar when the neighbor passed by. Apparently she was killed in the early morning hours, they figured between three and six.

"Her ex-husband was in Chicago but is on his way home," Mickey said.

“Yeah,” Kermit rubbed the back of his neck. “We called him. He’s flying into LaGuardia in a couple of hours. You know who he is, right?”

“A rich lawyer who’s not so rich anymore. He lost a pile in that Ponzi scheme, Beverly told us.”

“Millions, in fact, after they were divorced,” said Kermit. “Oliver has a son. Did she talk about him?”

“Mentioned him, name is Gregory Wilcox. Said she loved him like her own and we were to stay away from him.” I paused. “We never saw him. We don’t even know what he looks like. Our orders were to concentrate on Oliver and Oliver alone. He could have hired a hit, right?”

Mickey leaned forward in his chair. “Could be.”

Kermit frowned. “Where were you guys? I thought you were watching out for her.”

I pulled out my phone, brought up the text I got from Beverly, and handed it to Kermit. “She pulled us off, but this came in after you called us.”

“A text from a dead woman,” he monotoned. “Whoever has her phone, I’m not clear why he or she would text you.”

“Beverly was convinced her husband was out to get her, but we couldn’t find any proof of that. We think she was either altogether batty or possibly after the wrong man, though we never witnessed any kind of assaults after she hired us.”

Kermit adjusted his forest-green tie. “Good movie, *The Wrong Man*. Hitchcock. 1956.” He didn’t crack a smile.

I did. “Mickey, you never told me Kermit was a movie freak!”

“He’s not. He’s a Hitchcock freak. Specializes.”

Kermit stood up. “I’m going to need your case notes to get up to speed on all of the complaints Mrs. Musgrave was feeding you. Maybe we can trace them to her tormentor.”

Mickey and I stood up, too. “We didn’t get very far with that ourselves, Kerm, but sure, you’ll have them right away. We were only on it this week, and like Annabelle said, she was insistent that we only tail Oliver, but we did keep an eye on her apartment.” Mickey gave him a man hug. “Tomorrow morning, okay?”

Kermit nodded. “Another thing. She was wearing one earring only. We haven’t found the other one in her apartment.”

“They were expensive, by Beverly’s account,” Mickey recalled. “According to her, just one of those would bring in a million bucks.”

“Maybe the murderer took it. Let’s hope we solve this beyond *A Shadow of a Doubt*.” I grinned.

“1943,” Kermit said, still expressionless. “High on my list of favorites. Joseph Cotten rocked that film.”

I gave him a thumbs-up sign while Mickey said, “Later,” and we split.

I looped my arm around Mickey’s. “I don’t think Kermit likes me very much.”

“He’s hard to read sometimes. Don’t worry about it.” He took my hand. “Let’s walk home.”

“It’s a *my* long walk, forty-seven blocks south and, um, six long blocks west. It’s longer than the best odds at a horse race.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but what a beautiful evening! Still light out. We can meander through Central Park. Maybe stop for a glass of wine.”

“You’re awfully chipper, for just having had a client murdered.”

Mickey grinned. “I leave you *Spellbound*, don’t I?”

I punched him.

Chapter Three

On the way home I left another message about Fargo for Kathleen, asking if she had found him.

“He’s probably not still there, huh, Mickey.”

“Mmm. But she’ll be glad to know he’s alive and well, or, at least, he was about ninety minutes ago.”

I didn’t like to think that ninety minutes could have brought harm to Fargo, so I changed the subject. “Mom and Dad . . .”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Yup. And Grams in the afternoon. I’m glad they’re finally meeting each other. It’ll be a good thing.”

“Your mother and my grandmother will be quite a duo. Grams says what she thinks, no matter what, and Sylvia . . .”

“Says what she thinks with as many profanities as she can muster.” I took his arm. “It’ll be fun. I love Grams. Mom and Dad will, too.”

Mickey and I had visited Grams in Camden, Maine, a few months earlier, to tell her about our engagement. She poured us shots of bourbon and said, “Mick, your parents would be happy about this.”

Mickey’s parents died in an accident long before I met him. It was nice for Grams to say this, of course, but I

couldn't resist asking her, "And you, Grams?"

She swallowed and put her glass down on the butcher block kitchen island. "And me what, Belle?"

"Um, are you happy about this?" I suddenly felt a little nauseous, readying myself for a *Maggie-Smith-in-Downton-Abbey* barb.

She studied me for a few moments, picked up her glass, and took another swallow. "Elated." Not a smile on her face. But then she winked at me, and I knew I was in.

So, we were going to have quite a week. Mickey and I had decided to get married in Manhattan, and as soon as we told Mom and Dad, Mom had jumped at the chance to fly out from Portland, Oregon—with Dad, of course—right away to help decide on the venue, the caterer, everything. I had made it clear that it would be a modest affair—forty guests at most—but she was adamant about helping. My mother, a retired doctor. Who knew she aspired to wedding planning?

Since Grams had never met my parents, we invited her to come at the same time. She would stay with us, on the futon in our guest room. Mom and Dad were going to stay at the Eventi Hotel, not too far from our building. I was excited about it all, but apprehensive. I had warned them that we might be busy with a case, which now had taken an uncertain turn.

Mickey and I walked through Central Park and emerged onto Eighth Avenue at Columbus Circle. It was about five-thirty, and a cold glass of champagne suddenly appealed to me. "Mickey, let's go to the lounge at the Mandarin, have a drink, and soak up the view."

He wrapped his arm around my neck and kissed my temple. "Perfect. It may be the last sane respite we have before the family shows up."

Mickey and I like to smooch big time when we're alone

on elevators. We go for the scene in *Fatal Attraction*, plastering each other against the wall, kissing and fondling furiously, all the time wondering if we're being watched on some secret elevator camera. But this time, as soon as the doors closed to take us to the thirty-fifth floor, my phone dinged. Hoping it was news about Fargo, I pulled it out and took a look. "It's our dead client again."

Mickey peered over my shoulder. "Let me see."

This time, whoever was texting wasn't trying to impersonate Beverly. The message read:

I know who did it. I will meet you tomorrow.

"Should I text back?"

"Ask where and when."

I did, and we waited for the answer.

Nothing.

The elevator stopped, and we exited into the lounge. I stuck my phone in my pocket, ready to appreciate the stunning view of Central Park and Manhattan, not to mention a crisp glass of bubbly.

We were lucky to score seats on a couch right by the windows. Mickey carefully clinked his martini glass to my flute. Whatever lay ahead of us the next few days would not be quiet, what with a dead client, a lost dog, a mysterious texter, and an influx of family.

Mickey must have felt the same way, since I'd only seen him drink martinis on special occasions. And I mean *really* special. Like when he beat Kermit at golf (apparently this was as miraculous as if Bill Murray had won the Pebble Beach ProAm, whatever that is, but that's what Mickey told me), and when he fixed Grams' espresso machine (she's an old coot, but she loves her coffee, and while Mickey is super smart, athletic—okay, not at golf—brave, and sexy, he's no handyman). He also bought me a pair of slippers that day

after his coffee-machine victory, come to think of it. He said he had never bought “footwear” for a woman before, so it was a banner day all around. The slippers are too big, which means three things: he knows I have big feet, he believes they are even bigger than they are, and he loves me anyway. So, I wear the slippers with super thick socks.

“Here’s to you, kid.” Mickey took a sip, placed the glass on the table in front of us, and leaned against the couch pillows, clasping his hands behind his head.

“Mickey, I love you, but that’s a terrible Bogart imitation.”

“It’s the martini talkin’, if ya’ wanna’ know the truth, little lady.”

“And your John Wayne is even worse,” I giggled. “What’s up with you? Are you drunk after only one sip?”

He shifted his weight, took my glass and put it next to his on the table, held my face in his hands and gave me a huge, very sloppy, tongue-y kiss.

This was odd behavior for my Mickey. He seemed to be coming unglued. He’s usually more like a suave Sidney Poitier in places like this, all dignified and handsome and low speaking. But now he was some kind of goofy Vince Vaughn from *The Wedding Crashers*—a movie I love shamefully, but I don’t want to marry Vince Vaughn.

Mickey pulled back from me and looked around to see if anyone had seen him kiss me like that. He sat up straight, gave me a little Sidney Poitier smile, coughed, and picked up his martini glass. “Sorry, I couldn’t help myself.”

I wiped the sleeve of my jacket across my mouth. “Wow. That was a wet one.”

“Yeah, well . . . Let’s get back to our drinks.” He held his glass toward me. “In fact, let’s drink them down, in one fell swoop.”

“Huh?”

“Just for fun, babe.”

It seemed like Vince was making a comeback, but I threw caution to the wind and tilted my head back to take three big swallows.

And then I choked on what I thought was an ice cube, wondering what the hell it was doing in my champagne.

I spit champagne all over the place as I coughed the little rock out of my mouth. It clinked on the table as I continued heaving, bent over my lap.

Mickey jumped up, alarmed, and started whacking me on my back until I shook him off.

I wiped my eyes and my mouth again on my jacket sleeve and glared at him. “What the hell, Mickey? What is going on? And why was there ice in my champagne?”

His face contorted like he was going to cry. “You could have choked to death!”

I snorted. “I doubt it. The Mandarin Hotel would not let that happen. And neither would you, for that matter. Will you please sit down?”

He sat and stroked my arm. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have made you chug it . . .”

“MICKEY!” I screamed. Then I plastered my hands against my mouth.

It wasn’t ice. Well, I mean, it was, but not the kind that turns into water.

Sitting on the coffee table was a ring. A beautiful solitaire diamond ring. Gold.

I pointed at it. “You put it in my drink when you gave me that weird kiss?”

“Was it weird, really? I mean, it was probably a little over top, but I think we both enjoyed it, at least a little . . .” He drifted off, and picked up the ring. “I finally found it.”

“You mean in the right store, or online, or . . . ?” Mickey

and I had gotten engaged when we were visiting my parents in Portland, but he had been waiting to find me “the perfect ring.”

He shook his head. “No, babe, this was my mother’s. Buried in the bottom of a box of papers that I forgot all about. And now it’s yours. The ring, I mean. Not the box.”

He took my hand and put it on my finger. It wasn’t too big, like the slippers. It was just right.

I flattened him on the couch and kissed him hard, wet, and sloppy.

I’ll never feel embarrassed about loving *The Wedding Crashers* again.

It’s entirely possible that we’re eighty-sixed for life from the Lobby Lounge at the Mandarin Hotel.

Chapter Four

Giddy and a little tipsy from our thirty-fifth-floor-aerie adventure, we glided down Eighth Avenue, his arm around my shoulders and mine around his waist. We decided to get Chinese take-out and watch a movie with Bonkers, our cat. Well, Bonkers is really my cat, but Mickey loves him, too. He just doesn't know it.

My phone dinged, and I checked the screen. "Oh, Mickey! It's Kathleen, Fargo the Dog's owner! She found him. I'm so happy. She says that she has to take him . . ."

I stopped on the street.

"Babe? What is it?"

"I got another text. Our mystery dead client. I'm supposed to meet him tomorrow afternoon at the White Horse Tavern."

"It's a him?"

"He signed it 'Samuel.'"

"Okay. We'll both go."

I considered this, then stopped. "No can do, *amigo*. The meet is at the same time as Grams' plane. You have to pick her up at the airport."

"Luis . . ."

"He won't be back in time. And before you say you'll tell

Grams to take a cab, just forget about that, Mickey. You have to get her.”

“Uh, I wasn’t going to suggest that.”

“Oh.”

We both stood still, staring at each other, and we both started talking at once.

“I’ll tell him it has to be a different time . . .”

“Tell him you can’t meet him then, it will have to be earlier . . .”

We both stopped talking. I scrunched up my face and took a deep breath. “I’ll go by myself. Really, I’ll be fine. It’s in a public place in broad daylight. Well, it won’t be very broad in the bar, but you know what I mean. And there’s no reason for this Samuel dude to want to harm me. I’m getting information. Nothing else.”

Mickey was nodding along with every word out of my mouth, but he was worrying his lower lip with his teeth. “I don’t like it.”

“I know. But Mickey, I want to do this. I *can* do this.”

He kept nodding for a few beats and then took my hand. “Okay. But one thing.”

I knew what was coming. “The gun.”

“Take it with you. Put it in your purse. Just in case. For me, please.”

My pink Beretta, which Mickey bought for me, still lived in a box in our closet, even though I had taken lessons and gotten my license-to-carry. I just didn’t like carrying it. I got the license quicker than most people, because as an ex-NYPD detective, Mickey pulled some strings. I probably shouldn’t have told you that. Anyway, if I took it to this meeting, it would be a first.

I hooked my arm around Mickey’s and we continued on our walk. A few blocks later, I gave him the answer he wanted.

“Okay.”



The next morning I was out of bed early, itching to go for a run. I’ve always been a good runner—big feet and long legs—and I like to sweat out nerves. My early-morning route takes me from our flat on Twentieth Street down to the Gansevoort entrance to the elevated High Line park to Thirtieth Street, and then back on the ground again to our flat. I figure it’s around two miles, but it’s a perfect day-starter and there aren’t a lot of people on the streets or in the park at six a.m.

Unfortunately, it was pouring rain. I call myself a runner, but I’m not a maniac like the Portland Oregonians who have running gear for all kinds of weather: no-rain-how-boring, a-little-bit-of-rain-looks-good-on-me, moderately-rainy-what-perfect-weather, it’s-pouring-aren’t-you-glad? I’ve witnessed firsthand the athletic gung-ho-dom peculiar to that city.

For me, coffee would have to be my sole wake-up call this morning. I padded into the kitchen, enjoying our cozy home on such a gray day. I love it. Wide-plank wood floors, high ceilings, kitchen cupboards with glass-paned doors, and lots of light, usually. The walls are all painted white, and Mickey’s collection of Japanese art prints hangs all over the place, along with photographs from both of our families. My Paris poster—a Brassai photograph of a staircase in Montmartre I have always wanted to climb—graces a wall in the kitchen.

Our sizable living room opens to dining area and onto the kitchen. Our bedroom’s big windows offer a perfect view of the garden in back, and we have a tiny bathroom with a shower/tub as well as a second bedroom.

I dumped the ground coffee into the basket, filled the machine with water, and inhaled the luscious bean scent, wondering if I could buy perfume made with coffee.

Mom and Dad wouldn't land at JFK until about seven o'clock that evening. Mickey would meet Grams' plane at three. I had plenty of time this morning before meeting Samuel Whoeverhewas at two-thirty to straighten up the flat, get the futon made up, put out fresh towels, buy some flowers, and make sure we had enough food and drink, especially pistachio nuts for Grams—she likes to toss the shells into a bowl placed far enough away to make it a challenge.

While I was mulling all of this over, waiting for the coffee to brew, and Mickey was sound asleep, snoring, I was gazing at the ring on my finger, moving it around so that it would catch some light and twinkle on the ceiling. I wished I had met his parents. I had seen pictures of them, of course, and now I wanted to look at those again to find one of Mrs. Paxton wearing this ring.

Mrs. Paxton. That would soon be me! Except I wasn't going to change my name. I snapped to attention. Mickey and I hadn't talked about this. I wondered if he would be upset about me keeping my name. I leaned my forearms on the counter. Nope. He was evolved. It would be fine.

The bat phone rang. We have an old-fashioned land-line phone, and it's red. It jarred me out of my reverie and I picked up the receiver quickly, hoping not to wake Mickey. "Hello?" I whispered.

"*Amiga*, I apologize for this early-morning telephone call."

"Luis! *Como estás?* How is Ruby? Are you coming home today?"

"Yes, I am getting the train this afternoon, but Ruby, she is going to stay here with her friend for a few more days. She is very happy here, Annabelle, and she promises to come home on Thursday, which is only three days without her if you do not count today and Thursday, so I believe she will be fine and it will be okay if I get the train because . . ."

“Luis, you’re rambling, and you are not a rambling man.” I guffawed on my song reference, but it went right over Luis’ head. He’s not big on old American rock and roll.

I heard him sigh. “It is the baby. I worry all of the time. I do not want to come home, but Ruby, she says I am making her crazy.”

I laughed. “I bet you are! Come home. We’ll take care of you. Hell, Mom and Grams and Dad . . . we’ll all take care of you!”

Mickey called from the bedroom. “Babe, who is it?” I apparently had stopped whispering.

“Luis!”

“*Sí, amiga?*”

“No, not you, I was telling Mickey . . . never mind. Just get here. Have dinner with us. Oh, and Luis, did you hear about Beverly Musgrave? Did Mickey text you?”

“No.”

“Hmm. Well, we had quite a day yesterday. We’ll tell you about it. But she’s dead. Murdered. And I’m meeting with someone today who says he knows who did it. Mickey can’t go because he has to be at the airport.”

Luis was silent on the phone.

“Luis?”

Mickey came shuffling out of the bedroom. “Is everything okay?” He yawned.

I nodded.

“*Amiga*, I am not sure you should do this alone. Is there another way?”

Now I was silent.

“*Amiga?*”

“Partners, Luis. We’re partners. I know I don’t have the same chops as you and Mickey, but this won’t be dangerous. I’ll be fine. I need you to trust that. Trust me.”

“*Sí. Comprendo.* I am coming home. We will talk tonight. You be careful.”

“I will. Hug Ruby for us. Try to relax.”

Luis chuckled. “You mean, I just have to relax and concentrate?”

I howled. “Luis! You’re quoting *Bull Durham!* But you have to get the lingo down. It’s ‘You just gotta relax.’”

“*Hasta luego,* Annabelle.” He hung up.

So did I, and turned to Mickey. “Is the coffee ready?”

He was smiling. “You remember that whole quote, right?”

I snuggled up to him and kissed his chest. “Making love is like hitting a baseball, you just gotta relax and concentrate.”

“The coffee can wait.”

We went back to bed.

Chapter Five

Mickey delivered our case notes to Kermit and then headed to LaGuardia to get Grams. I ran my errands and got ready for my meeting with Samuel at the White Horse Tavern. The White Horse is famous, of course, for being Dylan Thomas' pub of choice for drinking himself to death. The story goes that he downed eighteen shots of whiskey—eighteen!—and then went home and died a few days later. I wondered if Samuel's choice of venue meant that he had refined taste in poetry or if he simply had taste refined for whiskey.

I dressed in jeans, a black long-sleeved T-shirt, running shoes, and my San Francisco Giants baseball cap. The Chicago Cubs are my next favorite team, and not just because they finally won the World Series after more than a hundred years, but because Mickey and I met in Chicago, and that's pretty much where we fell in love. I got a Chicago Cubs cap online for Mickey, but he hadn't worn it yet.

I pulled on my black denim jacket and carefully stowed my Beretta in the inside pocket. The jacket style is loose. When I checked myself out in the mirror I couldn't see any bulge. The only way Samuel would know if I was packing was if I started fiddling with it unconsciously, which I noticed I was doing in the mirror. I stuck my license, about twenty

bucks and a credit card in my jeans back pocket, grabbed my keys and headed out.

It had stopped raining. I walked quickly south on Ninth Avenue to Hudson Street and made it to the White Horse in a little over ten minutes. I was pumped up. A little nervous. I didn't even know what this Samuel guy looked like. I patted the side of my jacket and then thrust my hands into my jeans pockets to keep them away from the Beretta. That's when I realized that I forgot my phone. Left it charging on the kitchen counter. I almost turned back, but there wasn't time, so I tried to talk myself down. *Okay, so detectives never EVER forget their phones, you lamebrain! But you gotta stay cool, Annabelle. As focused as Mireille Enos' Sarah Lund character in The Killing. Just don't end up in a psych ward like she did.*

The White Horse wasn't crowded at two-thirty. In fact, there were only three people at the bar, and two of them were women in their sixties, I guessed. I used my newly honed detective skills to figure out the sole thirty-ish guy was Samuel.

He was drinking a glass of water.

Maybe he picked this place because he likes horses.

I approached him and tapped him on the shoulder.
"Samuel?"

He jerked around. "Jesus, you sure know how to scare a stranger!" He was fidgety as he held out his hand to shake mine. "Annabelle, I guess?"

"Smart man, yes." I perched on the stool next to him and slapped my business card on the bar. "What's your poison?"

He looked alarmed. "Poison? She wasn't poisoned, and I didn't kill her, if that's what you're getting at . . ."

I tried to maintain a neutral expression, while considering that Samuel was both over-nervous about poison and not the brightest light in the chandelier. My nerves immediately

dissipated. “I mean, what are you drinking?”

He glanced at his glass. “Oh, just water. I’m not an alcoholic or anything, I just don’t have any money.”

The bartender was leaning against the back wall of the bar when he heard Samuel say this. He gestured to the glass and then to me. “And you? More free water?”

I wondered how long Samuel had been sitting there.

“No siree Bob,” I said. “Give me a pint of your choosing, my good man.” The pub scene was rubbing off on me.

Samuel frowned at me. “How did you know his name is Bob?”

“What? You’re kidding me, right?”

He was still frowning. Samuel was not a handsome man, but when he frowned, he reminded me of Robbie Coltrane playing Rubeus Hagrid in the Harry Potter movies. Looked like him—too much hair on his head and face, and too much heft all over—but the similarity ended there. Rubeus had magic and vision and took care of people and beasts. Samuel, I surmised, didn’t know how to take care of himself. Or a bartender.

My pint arrived—Guinness, natch. I smiled at “Bob,” slapped a ten-dollar bill on the bar, and took a swallow. Samuel eyed the money hungrily.

“So, Sam, what’s your story? What’s this big message you have for me about Beverly, and how do you happen to have her phone?”

“Samuel, not Sam.” He chugged the rest of his water. “She left it with me by mistake the last time I saw her.”

“Where and when was that?”

“At the Gramercy Tavern, a few nights ago. I ate there once a month with my mother.”

I couldn’t picture Samuel—who seemed dimwitted and downright penniless, since he still was eyeing my ten

bucks—as a regular at that elite restaurant, so I figured his mother must be rich. “Well why isn’t she helping you out with some money so that you can at least tip ‘Bob’ here for taking up one of his bar stools?”

The bartender overheard me. “The name’s Fenn.”

Samuel sat up straight and swiveled forty-five degrees to face me. “Because she’s DEAD! Don’t you get it? Beverly was my mother!” He swung around again, crossed his arms on the bar, and dropped his forehead onto them.

This bit of news jolted me so suddenly that I almost knocked my Guinness over. “What?! I didn’t know *she* had a son, only that Oliver did! Why wouldn’t she have told me and Mickey?”

Samuel mumbled into his sleeves. “She had an affair. I’m her bastard son. But she loved me, she really did.” He sniffed.

I watched his back and noticed it wasn’t moving very dramatically, like it would if he were sobbing quietly. I didn’t know if he was telling the truth, but Mickey, Luis, and I could probably confirm that with a little investigative work. I patted him. “Samuel, what’s your last name? And who do you think killed your mother?” *If it wasn’t you*, I thought.

He mumbled a reply.

“What? Hey, sit up and talk to me.”

He shifted his head sideways to regard me with contempt and said distinctly, “KRA-KOW-SKI.”

“So, who’s your father?”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s out of the picture.”

“He’s not the murderer?”

“NO!” He sat up. “Maybe it was Oliver. Or his asshole son. Oliver’s going to get her money, you know.”

I sighed. “Beverly explained it all to us. Their divorce agreement states that if she dies, he gets her assets. But he was out of town. Couldn’t have done it.”

“Then he hired someone!”

“If you think that, Samuel, why did you call me? Why not the police?”

“My mother liked you.”

I snorted. “Actually, no, I don’t think so, or she had a very odd way of expressing her affection.”

He shrugged. “True enough. Okay, I’ll level with you. I’m not sure who killed her. But I need money, and I’m her son. What do I do in order to get in on her estate?”

I stared at him. “Why do you need money? She was loaded!”

“She cut me off. Even made me return the keys I had to her apartment. Long story. So I need your help. I’m thinking you could investigate the will, find a way that it’s illegal. I mean, who leaves all their dough to their ex?”

I sighed and shook my head. “I don’t know. Maybe she owed him big time, for something, but I don’t know what. And I can’t help you, okay? This isn’t my line of work. Call a lawyer.” I patted the bar. “Fenn? Thanks much. Take that ten bucks before Samuel here squirrels it away.”

I turned to leave, but Samuel grabbed my arm. “Don’t go!”

I jerked away and was about to stand when I remembered a key piece of evidence. “There is one thing I can do for you. Give me Beverly’s phone.”

He pulled it out of his jacket and handed it to me. I examined the screen. “How did you get into this? You know her password?”

“Yeah. I set it up for her. She just got it a month ago.”

I stared him down, waiting.

“Okay. It’s Rolex. Capital R.”

I stuck it in my other back pocket. “I can hand this over to the police for you.”

“Hey! It’s not yours!”

“It’s not yours, either, and it’s evidence.”

Samuel popped off his stool and started following me out the door. Fenn was watching, and I figured he’d try to intercede at some point, but just when Samuel made another grab for my arm, another man entered the White Horse and froze when he saw us.

“YOU SON OF A BITCH!” he shouted. “I TOLD YOU TO STAY THE FUCK OUT OF HERE! THIS IS WHERE I DRINK, NOT *YOU*! WE AGREED!”

He advanced toward us. This guy was smartly dressed, like he had money—slightly fitted, collared shirt and Ray-Ban sunglasses, slick hair pulled into a ponytail, man jewelry: a rawhide and silver bracelet dangled from one of his wrists. He was a little twitchy—particularly in his left hand, which fluttered around his face, pulling on an earlobe mostly, like it was bothering him—and I wondered briefly if he was a druggie. Samuel ducked behind me. I held out my left hand toward the shouter and said, “Let’s be calm, here, okay? Why don’t you back off?” My right hand was reaching across my body to my gun in my inside pocket. I clutched the handle.

“I have no cause to hurt you, lady, but I’d like to throttle the little worm hiding behind you.” With that he reached out to shove me aside. I heard Fenn yell at him to stop, and then realized he was yelling at me.

I had pulled out my gun and was pointing it at the shouter.

“Holy fuck, lady!” He backed way off. “Like I said, I mean you no harm!”

Samuel ran.

I immediately knew I had made a huge mistake. I also immediately knew that I wanted to appear in control, solid. So, I lowered the gun slowly, stuck it in my jacket, my eyes

fixed on the shouter's, and said to Fenn, without looking at him, "Fenn. I'm sorry for this. I'm going to walk out of here now, and if you never want me in this place again, I understand."

Fenn walked over to the shouter, towered over him, and pointed at the door. "Out," he said. No one in their right mind would have taken issue with him. I surmised that the shouter was at least sane enough to scoot.

Then Fenn crossed his arms in front of his chest and regarded me. "I don't want guns in here, and you'd better go. But if we ever need a bouncer, can I call you?"

"You absolutely may not." I headed toward the exit but gathered myself enough to turn and ask Fenn if he knew the guy I had just almost shot.

"No. Never seen him before. This isn't my usual shift." I nodded my thanks and split.

Outside I saw the shouter jump into a cab. My gutsy inner detective told me to hail my own taxi and follow him, but I was feeling none too gutsy. After I walked a few blocks in some sort of daze, I found myself sitting on a bench in Sheridan Square thinking just one thing: *Holy Moly. Mickey and Luis better not let me and my Beretta loose again.*

Chapter Six

By the time I got back to our flat, Grams and Mickey had settled in on the couch and seemed to be enjoying an early cocktail hour. That is, Grams was sipping a bourbon, neat, and Mickey had his hand wrapped around a Stella. There were several pistachio shells lying around the bowl I had positioned on the table across the room, and more than a few on the floor. I stopped just inside the door as Mickey popped up. “I texted you twice and called you three times, babe, once at the airport, then again when . . .”

“I’m sorry. I forgot my phone.”

“That became clear when it rang on the counter.”

I didn’t move. “Hi, Grams.”

She offered her usual nod. “Annabelle, you look pale and undernourished.”

Good ole’ Grams is never one to mince words.

Mickey came to me and put his hands on my shoulders.

“What happened? How did the meeting go?”

In spite of my always wanting to make a good impression on Grams, I held back some tears and hustled into the bedroom, where I flopped onto the bed and landed with my Beretta under my ribs. “OW!” I sobbed.

Mickey followed me in and shut the door behind him.

“Jeez, Annabelle, are you all right?” He sat on the bed beside me and rubbed my back.

I rolled to my side and pulled the gun out of my jacket and held it in the air. “Please take this away from me,” I stut-tered. “I am not a responsible firearms person.”

He took the Beretta and I buried my face in the bed quilt and curled away from him.

“What the . . .? Did you kill someone or what?” I could hear him sniff the barrel.

“Almost, Mickey! I could be in jail right now! Arrested for murder! You’d have to visit me at Sing Sing or Attica or some-where, where I would be studying to be a jailhouse lawyer and I’d have to convince you to marry someone else, that you shouldn’t waste your time on me, because I’d be there for the rest of my life, since thank god New York doesn’t have the death penalty, and . . .”

“Will you stop?! Tell me what happened!” Mickey pulled me over and wrapped his arms around me. I never feel better than when I’m in his arms, no matter what is happening. He’s my Rock of Gibraltar, and if I could sing, I would serenade him with that Nick Cave song every day for the rest of my life.

So I told him, while he stroked my hair and kissed my forehead and said things like “hmm,” and “aah.” When I was finished, I had stopped crying and he kissed my lips. “You are over-reacting. Yes, you pulled your gun a bit hastily, but you do have a permit, and you could have been in danger, and in fact, you neutralized the situation.”

“Ha! I could have neutralized the yeller, if you know what I mean!”

“But you didn’t. And I’m sure you wouldn’t have unless he tried to attack you. And you’re not practiced, so you probably wouldn’t have killed him. I mean, you might have shot out a

light fixture or something . . .” He kissed me again.

“That’s worse! I could have killed an innocent bystander!” I sat up and wiped my eyes on my sleeves.

Mickey handed me a tissue. “That’s not what I meant. I just meant you wouldn’t have killed him, even if you pulled the trigger, I bet.”

I blew my nose. “Why doesn’t that make me feel better?”

“You’ll get used to the gun. We won’t send you out alone with it again for a while. But more importantly, babe, you need to get used to your phone, I mean, really? You must have been freaked out to forget it. I shouldn’t have let you go this afternoon by yourself.”

“It was dumb of me, I know.” Then I told him more about Samuel and what an idiot *he* was and that Beverly had cut him off. “Could be a suspect.”

Mickey nodded. “Definitely on our list. You have Beverly’s phone?”

I sighed. “Yup, at least I have *that* one.” I pulled it out of my back pocket and handed it to him. “You want to check it out before we give it to Kermit?”

“Will do, tonight.” Mickey squinted at me. “I was worried, Annabelle.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I won’t ever forget my phone again. Promise. Right now, I just want to crawl under the covers and lecture myself.”

“Well, understood, but right now Grams is making up all sorts of stories about you and probably needs a refill.”

I stood up and took a deep breath. “Right. Okay. But Mickey, if I ever murdered someone and was put in jail for life, I wouldn’t want you to waste the rest of your life on me. I mean, you should marry someone else.”

He smiled. “Nah. I’d bust you out and we’d find our way to the Maldives and live happily ever after.”

“Like Steve McQueen and Ali McGraw in *The Getaway*? I don’t want to have to kill a lot of people like they did escaping to Mexico.”

Mickey hugged me. “We’ll make sure to leave your Beretta behind.” He gave me a pat on my butt and led me by the hand to the living room.

Grams had taken good care of herself, having poured another drink, and was now rummaging in the fridge for, well, I didn’t know what. I tapped her on her shoulder and as she stood up straight I gave her a tight hug. “I’m so glad you’re here. Sorry about my dramatic entrance.”

“Humph. Wedding jitters?” She gave me a quick squeeze and then pushed away. “Mickey won’t hurt you.”

I laughed. “Oh, I know that! Here, let me pull out some munchies.” I grabbed a hunk of cheddar and a round of goat cheese along with a bowl of green grapes. I set the cheeses on a platter and arranged some crackers around its perimeter, while Mickey poured me a glass of Pinot Gris. We settled in on the couch and recliner as Grams dug into the food.

She looked the same as she always did, with her white hair done up in a sloppy bun and her clothes something like a cross between hippie chic and country bumpkin: a mid-calf peasant skirt, baggy socks, Birkenstock sandals, and a white, V-neck T-shirt, tucked in. She always wore the same pair of clip-on pearl earrings and a necklace made of a strip of rawhide with an onyx wolf dangling at its end. She’s fit and strong, even now in her mid-eighties (her exact birth year being somewhat of a mystery). We know she has a beau in Camden, where she has lived for decades. Mickey and I had met Bud on our last visit. All in all—fashion sense aside—Grams is an admirable woman. My own Nana died a couple of years ago, and I still miss her like crazy. She and Grams have a lot in common—both fiercely independent—but Nana

was sweet and amiable, while Grams is gruff and grizzly. I always seem to try too hard around her.

So when she said, “Thanks, Belle, for stocking up on the pistachios,” and then cracked one open, popped the nut in her mouth, and tossed the shell—bingo!—into the bowl, I beamed.

We were about to become best friends. I could feel it.



A couple of hours later, Dad called from the airport to let me know that he and Mom were about to get in a cab and would check in at the hotel before coming over. That would take about another hour. I started chopping greens and veggies for the salad, and Mickey began creating his “secret marinara sauce” for the pasta. To this day, I don’t know what the secret is, and I’ve watched him make it dozens of times. Grams said she would take a quick nap, but when I peered into the guest room, she was on her phone, saying things like, “I see,” and “Me, too,” and “You don’t say.” I figured it was Bud, given all of that mushy talk.

When the downstairs buzzer rang, I buzzed back and flew down the stairs to greet my parents. “You’re here!” I hugged them each hard. “How was the flight?”

Mom brushed my hair out of my face. “Oh, hell, Bea, you know, crammed in like fucking sardines, but I concentrated on the free movies.”

Dad laughed. “Free, but terrible. You look great, muffinhead.”

My full name is Beatrice Annabelle Starkey. Mom and Dad are pretty much the only ones who call me Bea, but Dad is definitely the only one who calls me muffinhead. I pretend to hate it, but it would kill me if he ever stopped.

Mom kept a straight face. “How you can say that about

Last Vegas, dear? I mean, what with Michael Douglas and Morgan Freeman . . .”

We started up the stairs. “Mom, seriously? Terrible film! Bad script. Even De Niro couldn’t save it.”

“Well,” she said, “Michael Douglas’ ass does it for me. Always has, always will.”

“TMI, Mom.”

Dad laughed again as Mickey greeted us at our door. More hugs, and then we were inside where Grams stood, stone faced, fresh bourbon in left hand, holding out her right. “Jeff and Sylvia Starkey, as I live and breathe. You are exactly as I pictured you.”

“And you, Dorothy Paxton, exceed my expectations!” replied Mom, who shook her hand warmly. My mother is rarely one to be upstaged.

Dad, on the other hand, the softiest softie in my life, ignored Grams’ hand and managed to wrap one arm around her shoulders to give her a squeeze. “We’re delighted to meet you.”

Grams stiffened, but didn’t move away. She held her drink up to him and said, “Time for you to catch up.” Dad smiled and made his way to the kitchen.

“Um, dinner’s actually ready, if you’re all hungry. Luis should be here any minute. The table’s set and the wine’s opened and . . .”

“Luis! What a treat, darling! But I *am* starved. The airlines don’t serve you a goddamn thing anymore.” Mom winked at Grams.

I watched in awe as Grams took Mom by the hand and led her to the table. They sat next to each other. My best-friend status just sank a notch.

I grabbed the bowl of pasta and placed it on the table, only to hear Dad say, “Wait a minute, there, Bea.” He took

the bowl from me and grabbed my hand. “Aah! I thought I noticed something glitter!”

I beamed. “Mickey gave it to me yesterday. Well, he almost killed me with it, but that’s another story.” I held out my hand between Mom and Grams. “Isn’t it gorgeous?”

Mom nodded. “Perfect, Mickey. Where did you find it?”

I froze. Did Grams know that Mickey had given me the ring that her son had given to his wife? Mickey was taking a beat in answering, so Grams piped up.

“I assume he found it in his mother’s belongings.” She took my hand to inspect it. “I always thought it a bit ostentatious. But it suits you.”

Hub? I thought. Mickey chuckled. “Grams, you’d think a fake pearl would be over the top.”

Grams patted my hand. “I only meant, Annabelle, that it shines as brightly as you.” She let go, and I bent over to plant a kiss on the top of her messy-hairedo head.

The buzzer buzzed, announcing Luis’ arrival. Mom jumped up to bear hug him, Dad handed him a beer, Mickey fist-bumped him, and Grams motioned for him to sit on the other side of her. I was beginning to think that Grams was drunk, given how sweet she was being. I would have to remember to keep plenty of alcohol stocked during her visit.

“*Gracias, Señora.*” Luis clinked his glass with hers.

“How’s Ruby?” I asked.

“Too far away from me at this moment, *amiga.*”

“Boy or a girl?” Grams asked.

“We have decided to be surprised.”

Mom started scooping pasta onto her plate. “Crap, I am starving.”

Dad stood. “Wait, Syl. We need a toast.” We raised our glasses. “Here’s to Mick and Bea’s pending nuptials, Ruby and Luis’s pending baby, and our pending friendship with

Dorothy.” We all clinked.

Grams set her glass down. “Pending, my ass. We’re already family.”

I ate with gusto.

Chapter Seven

A loud crash woke me the next morning, followed by a volley of curses from Mom. I groaned and rolled over to my side, noting that Mickey was already up, and imagining one of his family's crystal vases splattered all over the kitchen floor. At least Bonkers was under the covers and wouldn't cut his sweet little paws on pointy shards. I took a deep breath and sat up, stuck my feet in my big slippers, and shuffled into the living room.

Mom was sweeping, still cursing. It seemed no one else was home.

"What broke?" I mumbled.

"Oh, sweetie, goddammit, I was emptying the dishwasher from last night and I dropped a glass. Shit!" Her sweeping was no less than frantic.

"Which glass?" I rubbed my eyes. "Please tell me it was not the one that Grams drank her bourbon out of."

She stopped sweeping and stared at me, wide-eyed.
"Why?"

My eyelids raised to match hers. "Oh shit is right! That's her favorite glass! She actually brings it with her!"

Mom's shoulders sank. "Why?"

I yawned. "Grams. She has her ways. Doesn't like change.

She might even think that if she uses the same glass all the time—even though it’s washed—she’ll get more bourbon residue or something.”

Mom went back to sweeping. “It was nothing fancy. Plain, in fact. Well, we’ll just have to tell her, and we’ll buy her a new glass.”

“WE will? I think you mean YOU, Mom. I’m finally starting to feel at ease around Grams, and this, well, this could really screw that up.”

Mom brushed the glass pieces into the dustpan and dumped them in the garbage. “I’ll take care of it, darling. It was my fault, I’ll take the responsibility.” She put the broom back in the closet and regarded me with her hands on her hips. “You slept late.”

“What time is it?”

“Nine thirty.”

“Any coffee available? And where is everyone?”

Mom poured me a cup and set it on the dining table. I took a seat and slurped. She joined me. “Grams only said she was going out. Your father and Mickey are walking around Manhattan exploring parks as possible wedding venues. Apparently you two want to be married outside?”

“Don’t we have to actually set a date first?”

Mom grinned. “I just happen to have a calendar right here.” She lifted our Wolf Kahn wall calendar off of its nail and plopped it down in front of me. “It’ll have to be a weekend . . . October? Should be cool and pretty then! Like this landscape painting, in fact.” She pointed at the October plate.

I stared at her. Her bright eyes and hyper energy clued me in to something I had never imagined of my mother. An accomplished ER doctor and every bit as brainy as my astrophysicist father, she was nevertheless exuding some sort of schoolgirl excitement about the wedding. I sensed that if she

had it her way, Mickey's and my plan for a small, modest ceremony would morph into the Anglo-Saxon version of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, whereas I just wanted to get it done. Not that I don't love a party, but I'm not into big hooplas. At least we were two small families, so how big and crazy could it get?

Mom interrupted my reverie. "I've made appointments tomorrow to meet with caterers."

"No roasted pigs, okay?" I gulped some coffee.

Mom laughed. "Oh honey, this is going to be such fun! Are you hungry?"

"No, thanks, Mom, I'm not much on breakfast unless I go for an early-morning run."

"Good. I'll whip up some eggs for you."

Maybe my mother was Greek after all.



An hour later, after I was showered and dressed, Mickey and Dad came home. Mom suggested that we all sit down and talk about the wedding, but I nixed the idea by announcing that Mickey and I were on a case and we had work to do. Mickey backed me up, telling her that we had to turn evidence over to the police—Beverly's phone—and we had some interviewing to do.

Mom wondered about Grams, but Mickey told her not to. "Trust me, Grams enjoys being out and about on her own."

We were as in sync as old married people.

We trotted down the stairs to Asta Investigations' offices, where we found Luis at his computer, bleary eyed and slumped in his chair.

"Sleep much?" Mickey asked.

"No." Luis rubbed his face. "Give me something to do. I am not happy with my Ruby far away."

“Jeez, Luis, it’s just for three more nights. I know you don’t like her friend, but I bet it’s good for Ruby to enjoy some uninterrupted girl talk.” I smiled at Mickey. “Give him an occupation, Mr. Paxton, or he shall run mad!”

“Huh?”

“Oh, come on. Alan Rickman, in *Sense and Sensibility*? Don’t tell me . . .”

“That I never saw it?”

“Damn, I’m going to have to give this whole marriage thing some more thought.”

“My heart is, and always will be, yours.”

“Mickey! You did see it! I think you even loved it!” I kissed him.

“*Por favor, amigos*, can we stop the movie quotes and put me to work before I go *demente*?” Luis stood up and moved to our conference table where he re-slumped in a chair.

We joined him. Mickey reviewed everything that had happened on the Beverly Musgrave case, including my slipshod gunwoman performance. Luis sighed. “I told you, Annabelle, not to go by yourself.”

“I told her to go ahead, Luis, so it’s on me.”

“Hey, shut up, both of you. It’s on *me*. I’m not your little girl. I made the decision, I made the mistake. End of story.” I leaned back and crossed my arms.

Mickey resumed leading the meeting, relating what he found on Beverly’s phone, which wasn’t much beyond confirming that she had heard from Samuel a few times. The other numbers she called didn’t lead to any answers, as far as Mickey could see. “Not much there. A dentist, taxis . . .”

I sat forward. “She just got it, Samuel told me. Probably initiated a brand new number, since she was so freaked out.”

We decided that Luis should take the phone to Kermit, and that Mickey and I would try to see Samuel again. As soon

as Luis left on his mission, I texted Samuel, having retrieved his number from Beverly's phone.

I need to see you again. More about the case. Waverly Restaurant, 6 Ave, 1:30. OK?

His response was almost instantaneous.

OK

Mickey and I filled each other in on the family dynamics while we waited to meet Samuel. He and Dad had checked out Madison Square Park, Washington Square Park, and Gramercy Park, where they peeked over the fence.

"Mickey, that's a private park."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "I know people."

"Washington Square seems too busy, too many tourists. I don't want to be a spectacle."

"Agreed."

"Madison Square, it's one of my favorites. I like that idea."

"Me, too."

I poked him. "You don't even care, right?"

"Just want to get married. Whatever works for you."

"And for my mother, and my father, and Grams . . ."

"I don't think the last two will be very picky."

"Grams will be, in her own way. Won't want it too fancy."

I grabbed Mickey's hand. "I forgot to tell you! Oh crap, Mickey, Mom broke Grams' bourbon glass!" I thought I saw him pale, but it might have been the change of light outside. "She'll be furious! What should we do?"

"Buy her a new glass."

"But it was so special to her, how can we possibly replace it? She'll hate Mom for this."

Mickey squeezed my hand. "Grams'll surprise you, wait and see."



The Waverly is a classic diner where they treat us like family. My iced tea is on the counter before I even sit down, and the cook is already whisking the pancake batter before Mickey takes off his jacket. Mickey always has pancakes at the Waverly, breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

This time we took a booth, both sitting on the same side so that we could see Samuel when he came in. Omar greeted us with his usual glowing smile and placed the syrup dispenser in front of Mickey and my tea in front of me. “Veggie burger?”

“Yes, thanks, Omar, with cole slaw.”

He returned with waters and silverware and leaned over the table to speak softly to us. “There’s a guy in the men’s room.” He flicked his head toward the back. “Seems fishy. He came in here all nervous, looked around, and barreled his way back there. Mick, if you want to check it out . . .”

Mickey stood up. “Say no more, Omar.” That sounded to me like a line Leslie Nielsen would say in the movie *Airplane*.

Mickey made his way to the rear of the restaurant, while I twisted around in the booth to watch him. Samuel came out of the men’s room just as Mickey got there. Mickey checked with me and I nodded. It was Samuel.

“Hey, Samuel!” Mickey stuck out his hand. “I’m with Annabelle. We’re in a booth up front.” He pointed. “You okay?”

Samuel scowled and pushed past Mickey to our booth and plopped onto the seat. Mickey slid in next to me. “You want something to eat? Drink?”

Samuel shook his head. “I’m only here because I figure you have some news for me about my mother’s estate. About her murder. Have you arrested Oliver yet?”

“We’re not the police, Sam, and . . .”

“SAMUEL!”

The people in the next booth jumped and Omar started coming our way. I waved him off and mouthed "Sorry."

Mickey continued. "Samuel, okay, we don't arrest people. And there's not enough evidence to arrest anyone at this point anyway."

"Then why am I here? I thought you'd have some information about the money."

I sighed. "I told you to get a lawyer, didn't I? We can't help you with the will or the estate or the money or anything like that. What we want to know is, who was the guy who accosted you yesterday at the White Horse?"

Samuel pointed his finger at me. "That guy, that guy you almost killed?! You *know* who he is!"

"Well, no, I don't, and I really didn't almost kill him, I only . . ."

"Fenn will probably never let me in there again. He'll probably blame me. Everyone blames me all the time for stupid shit."

I drank some Arnold Palmer and brought my glass down with a bang. "Cut out the poor me stuff and tell us who this guy was." I glared at him.

Samuel shrank in the booth. "Give me a break. He's Oliver's son, like you didn't know. Gregory Wilcox. Biggest asshole in the world. He has it out for me."

Mickey and I gave each other a sideways glance. So that was Gregory, beloved by Beverly.

"What does Wilcox have against you?" Mickey asked, as Omar delivered his steaming pancakes and my veggie burger. Once again I communicated to Omar wordlessly, our apologies and thanks.

"Nothing. Except, you know, he probably thinks he should get some of the money, too. Like he has any claim on my mother." Samuel snickered.

Mickey frowned. "Why would he think he does?"

Samuel gawked at Mickey like he was the dumbest guy in the Dumbest Guys Class. "He's Oliver's son, duh! Maybe they both colluded to kill my mother. Do I have to solve this case *for* you?"

Mickey cut and speared a bite of pancake and waved it on the end of his fork at Samuel. "Your mother adored him and was not the least bit afraid of him. She insisted that we not go near him, in fact. We never saw him with her in the last week. Never saw him at all, in fact." He deposited the pancake in his mouth and chewed while keeping eye contact with Samuel.

"Oh, of *course* she loved him. He's a manipulator. Had my mother thinking he was the most charming guy you'd ever hope to shake hands with. He convinced her to cut me off. Told her it would be good for me." He grabbed my water and slugged it down, then wiped his face with his hand. "Anyway," he pointed at me, "I kind of wish you *had* killed Gregory. "Are you two going to help me or not?"

Mickey squinted at him. "The kind of help you need, we aren't capable of giving."

"Call a lawyer, Samuel, and good riddance," I added.

"Fuck you. Fuck both of you. And take some advice from this guy," he pointed at himself. "Gregory has a side darker than, uh, the Joker, and you," he pointed at me, "pissed him off, pointing your stupid gun at him. Don't say I didn't warn you assholes."

Samuel shoved his way out of the booth and scooted out the door quickly, since Omar was close behind him.

"Nice fellow," Mickey mused.

"Dirt wad," I mumbled, since a fresh bite of my veggie burger had just made its way into my mouth.

"We have to follow him." Mickey pulled out his wallet and laid some cash on the table. "He's too nervous. I think he

knows more than he's telling us. Hell, he could even be our murderer. Let's go."

"Should we wait to hear from Kermit? I mean, he's all over this just like I'm all over this veggie burger." I took another bite.

Mickey stood up and raised his eyebrows at me. "Samuel just intimated that Wilcox is a threat to you, and Samuel himself is a loose cannon. I want this ended." He flicked his head toward the door and waited to make sure I was sliding out of the booth before he headed out.

I grabbed the burger and my purse and ran after Mickey, waving goodbye to Omar with my elbow, bowled over for the thousandth time by Mickey's vigilance, glad that I was wearing my favorite running shoes, and sorry only to have missed out on the cole slaw.

Chapter Eight

Samuel hustled south on Sixth Avenue to the West Fourth Street subway station. For a large, sloppy man, he moved fast. I had to ditch my burger into a trash can as Mickey and I trotted along behind him. We kept our distance once we descended into the station, and as soon as he got on the C Train, we sped down to the next car and rushed on, just as the doors were closing. Monday rush hour was a couple of hours away, so the train wasn't crowded. We walked to the front of the car where we could see into the one where Samuel sat. He was sprawled out, taking up at least two or three seats, his legs sticking far out into the aisle, his arms stretched wide on either side. I couldn't help but wonder if he would have made room for a pregnant woman or an old man with a cane.

We kept watch until we saw Samuel stand and move toward the doors before the train was to stop at Seventy-Second Street. We waited until the last second to get off, and followed him at a safe distance.

We didn't have to go far. Samuel walked in the front door of a swish building on Central Park West and greeted the doorman, who welcomed him with a friendly handshake.

Mickey and I raised our eyebrows at each other.

This was where Oliver lived, in the penthouse on the top three floors.

“I don’t get it, Mickey. Is Samuel coming here to kill Oliver, or what?”

“I don’t think he’s a killer. I think he’s a liar.”

“Should we go up? Pay them a visit?”

“I’d rather have more information before confronting them. They could have colluded, and we’ve got no real evidence.” He took my hand and led me into the building’s front door. The doorman was on the phone and nodded to us. Mickey gave him a little wave and steered me to the left, through a door that led into a restaurant, *Per Favore*.

“These people live large, huh Mickey? I mean, the building has its own restaurant?”

Mickey pointed across the room, where I could see a second door leading to the street. “This might have been something else, with easy access to the apartment building. Turned into a restaurant.”

It was of medium size, with about thirty tables, and everything was white. White walls, white tile floor, white tablecloths, white flowers—even the flatware on the tables had white handles.

“I bet their laundry bill is astronomical,” I said, imagining myself flinging marinara sauce all over the place. “I’d hate to see a mob shooting go down in here.”

Mickey laughed. “You’re the only person I know who would enter a clean, beautiful room and immediately think of *The Godfather*.”

I picked up a menu—yup, it was white, with a gold metallic hard-to-read font—and scanned the list. “Looks like a lot of standard Italian fare . . . Oops.”

“What?”

“Two typos. They left an ‘i’ out of eggplant parmigiana and I bet they don’t charge fifty-one dollars for the caesar salad. Numbers transposed.”

I can't help myself. Like I already said, I used to work in publishing, and although I was a publicist, not an editor, the experience trained me to have an eagle eye for proofreading.

Mickey took the menu from me and flipped it over. I peered over his arm. "Um, Mickey, what are we doing here?" I glanced at my watch. "We need to get home, if we're not going to pay the liar and the ex a visit. Mom wants to make plans for checking out caterers tomorrow, and we need to make sure Grams got home okay, and . . ."

"Yeah, we have to go. I was killing time, thinking what we might do about Oliver and Samuel, but you just gave me an idea." He pointed to the bottom of the menu where it said, "Per Favore would be pleased to host your private party," along with a phone number. "We could kill two birds with one stone. Come here tomorrow, talk about the reception being here, see if we can find out more about our friends upstairs. Get to know the doorman. Luis can be the lookout."

I shrugged. "I guess. I really don't want to have the reception here. It's too white."

"I agree. But let's pretend we like it. Just for tomorrow."

A guy who I figured was the maitre d' approached us. "*Buon giorno. Mi dispiace*, we are closed on Mondays." He gave us a big smile.

Mickey smiled back, got his card, and made an appointment with Paolo, who turned out to be the owner, to meet tomorrow afternoon.

We left through the street-access door and jogged down the subway station stairs to catch the C down to Twenty-third Street. We walked the few blocks to our building, holding hands and silently enjoying the sunny, mildly breezy day. We stopped briefly in the office, quickly sizing up that Luis was not there. Mickey called him to get filled in on his meeting with Kermit. Turned out that Kermit was on his way out on

another case, so Luis spoke with him only briefly and left the phone with the desk sergeant. Mickey said he'd try to reach Kermit later, and then we hustled up the stairs to our flat.

I had the key out, but paused before opening the door. "Mickey, is there a party going on in our house?"

Mickey's face broke into a wide grin. "Surprise, babe. Open up!"

I frowned at him, inserted the key, and twisted the handle.

"Darling!"

"Luscious!"

Sal and Drew, my parents' neighbors and business partners, held their arms out to me, and I happily hugged them. "What are you doing here?!"

Sal hugged Mickey while Drew held out a plate of crackers with some creamy spread on top. "Turns out there was a bakers' trade show here over the weekend, so we thought we'd show up to help with your wedding plans!"

Okay. I love Sal and Drew. They were a big help to me and Mickey when our escapade in Portland got hairy. And they're great friends to Mom and Dad, which is why my parents invested in their bakery. But holy moly. Now we had enough consultants for our wedding to field a basketball team.

My frozen smile and silent response was enough for Sal to intercede with, "But, my sweets, don't you worry. We'll only make suggestions. Keep Sylvia in line. We'll be out of your hair most of the time we're here this week, and no, we won't sleep on the floor, though thank you very much indeed for the offer."

Mickey meanwhile was hugging Drew. "Thanks, you guys. It's great to have you here."

Then I noticed Grams standing in the kitchen, hunting

through the kitchen cabinets, and my mother gesticulating to me, pointing at Grams and twisting her hands upward as if to say, “Oh no! What should we do? She’s looking for her glass!”

But really, since it was Mom, she was probably saying, “What the fuck! It’s only four o’clock and she’s already looking for her goddamn bourbon glass!”

I regained my composure and clapped my hands together like little Shirley Temple used to do. “Isn’t this great! Hey, Grams, how was your day? Where did you go?”

Grams turned and scowled at me. “I walked the High Line. Up and back. Where do you keep the pistachios?”

Crisis averted.

Chapter Nine

As it turned out, Grams didn't have the opportunity to wonder about her bourbon glass later either, since Mickey decided we'd all have an early dinner at Il Punto, a small Italian place on Ninth Avenue at Thirty-Eighth. Mickey also told everyone about our Per Favore plan, at which point Mom opened her laptop to check out more restaurants with private-party options. "I didn't know you were thinking about renting out a whole restaurant, Bea, I mean, won't that be too big?"

I only said "maybe." She mumbled that she'd hold off on meeting any caterers.

Drew and Sal left to freshen up at their hotel, and Mickey, Grams, and Dad decided to play poker. I lied that I needed to take care of a few things in the office and skipped out and down the stairs. "Nickel ante," I heard Grams announce as I left.

I didn't go to the office. Instead I jogged east to Broadway and Nineteenth Street to one of my favorite stores, Fishes Eddy. It's filled with retro dishes and tableware and linens and quirky cool household stuff. I scanned the shelves for a glass to match Grams', but I couldn't exactly remember it in detail. I mean, it was just a glass.

But then I saw a slightly pink old-fashioned-looking glass

that seemed like something people who lived their whole life in Maine might stock. No, I can't explain why I thought that. Sometimes you have to trust your gut. The little sign on the shelf described it as "Inverted Thistle Rose Tumbler 8 oz. \$19.95." Grams' glass probably was a cheap jam jar, but what the hell, I needed the replacement to be special. So I bought it and jogged home again.

Just as I reached our front door, my ringtone sounded—it's the theme song to *The Pink Panther*, because I think Peter Sellers' Chief Inspector Jacques Clouseau is a genius character and every time I hear that music, I remember him saying in his silly French accent "peup" for "pope" and "reum" for "room." I checked the screen to see that it was Luis calling.

"Helleu, Luis."

"Annabelle. Perhaps you should change your ringtone, *amiga*. *Escucha*, Mickey has told me about the excursion tomorrow. I am going to stay home tonight, however."

"No Il Punto?"

"No, *gracias*. I am too distracted. Ruby told me to get some rest and to stop worrying about her. I am going to try. But this is only one reason why I am calling you. When I left Beverly Musgrave's phone with Kermit, we had a conversation."

"Yes?"

"He is worried that you are not keeping him informed."

"Why? Mickey called him and told him all about meeting Samuel, and now he has the phone, so what's the problem?"

"*Amiga*, Mickey left out the part about you pulling your Beretta in the White Horse. Did you know Kermit frequents that bar? And he is friends with . . ."

"Say no more. Fenn. What are they, buddies since junior high? Fellow members of the Teenagers for Hitchcock Society? Guinness record holders, and I don't mean the book?"

Dammit, Luis. Is Kermit pissed?”

“I told him not to worry about this, but that you would call him tomorrow and fill him in.”

I swallowed hard. “Thank you, Luis. Did you tell Mickey?”

“No.”

“Okay, thank you again, *compadre*. See you tomorrow.”

“Have fun tonight.”

We hung up. *Friggin’ gun. Friggin’ me.*



Il Punto is one of our favorite haunts. Even when it’s crowded we can talk without shouting and the service is always impeccable. Mom, Dad, Grams, Mickey, and I walked the eighteen blocks from home and met Sal and Drew there. It was cool enough that I didn’t break a sweat and end up looking like Lee Remick or Joanne Woodward walking out of *A Long Hot Summer*. Okay, I look nothing like Lee Remick or Joanne Woodward anyway, and only the men actually sweat in that movie. I’m still in love with Paul Newman, ever since I saw him shirtless and dripping in that film.

But, I digress. Our party of seven was seated and we placed our orders for drinks and food. Sal and Drew showed me pictures of cakes from the baking show, wondering if I liked any of the designs. “We’ll make your cake, honey.” Drew kissed me on the cheek.

“Where, in my kitchen? Will that work?”

“If you’ve got the oven, we’ve got the time.”

I pointed to a three decker constructed and decorated like the Eiffel Tower. “I want that one.”

A glance passed between them, and they put their phones away. “We’ll talk, sweetheart,” Sal demurred.

“Chocolate or vanilla, Belle?” Grams asked.

“We haven’t talked about it, Grams. I haven’t thought about it.”

“Darling, it has to be vanilla! Perhaps with lemon frosting?” Mom piped in.

“Why does it have to be vanilla?”

“Because it’s white!”

I pursed my lips, appealing first to Dad and then to Mickey, hoping my expression read as “help.”

Dad patted Mom’s hand. “Sylvia, of course it doesn’t have to be vanilla, or white. Bea, are you going to wear a white dress?”

I closed my eyes. “Here’s the thing. I don’t know about any of this. We haven’t even set a date yet! Let’s do that first, okay? Tomorrow. One thing at a time.” I opened my eyes. “Okay with you, Mickey?”

He gave me one of his sweep-you-off-your-feet looks, with his brown eyes shining and his mouth showing a mere hint of a smile, a hint of gray showing in his thick, black hair—which always seemed to have the right proportion of casual to cosmopolitan, a la Richard Gere—his head cocked a tad to the side, as though he was seeing me for the first time, and as if I was sweeping him off *his* feet. In that moment, it was just us two at the table. The rest had disappeared, out of my peripheral vision, and I could have walked out of there with him right then and married him on a street corner with loud traffic racing by and some passerby with an internet license pronouncing us husband and wife, and then ducking into a seedy alley and having hot sex in the back seat of a stranger’s unlocked car, preferably an older model, maybe a GTO. Take that, Paul Newman.

“It’s all okay with me, babe.”

Grams was sitting next to me. She whispered in my ear, “Get a room.”



After dinner, we strolled home, and Mickey suggested we have a nightcap. It was still early, eight-thirty. Sal and Drew begged off, as did Mom and Dad. Mickey and I settled in with Grams.

“A bourbon, Mick, please. My glass should be there somewhere.”

Mickey played it cool. “What is it about that glass, Grams?”

Grams asked. “You know the story, dear.”

“Yes, but Annabelle doesn’t.”

“Um, Grams, I need to tell you . . .”

“Babe, hear the story first.” He put his finger to his lips to shush me.

Grams sighed. “Bud gave it to me. Said I should always drink out of it no matter where I was, so I’d think about him. Sentimental crap. I don’t even like the damn glass. It’s too heavy and ugly.”

I plopped myself down on the couch. “Well, that’s the best news I’ve had all day.” I told her Mom broke it, and then I got the new glass from the bedroom where I had stashed it and handed it to her. “You don’t have to carry this with you everywhere.”

Grams eyed it, took it from me, and then eyed me. “Kind of frilly, isn’t it?”

“Oh. Um. We have other glasses, and . . .”

Grams winked at me. “It’ll do.” She held the glass up high. “Mickey, fill her up, if you please.”

Chapter Ten

Dad called me the next morning to say that he and Mom and Sal and Drew were going to the Metropolitan Museum and would meet up with us in time to have lunch at Per Favore.

Mickey and Grams headed to Central Park to enjoy the perfect June weather. I had told Mickey about Kermit and the White Horse Tavern, and he apologized for not telling Kermit the whole story and putting me in the position of explaining myself. I knew he had only been trying to protect me, like always. He said not to worry, to just reach out to Kermit and “come clean.” That expression made me feel like I was dirty in some way, but he meant well.

The silence in the flat was a relief. I sipped my third cup of coffee and stared at the phone, summoning my nerve to call Kermit. Then it rang.

It was him. My psychic powers are extraordinary.

“Annabelle, want to fill me in on the mishap on Sunday?”

I didn’t particularly want to, but went ahead and gave him the details and apologized about fifty times, for pulling my gun and for not telling him. Or someone. “I guess I shouldn’t go there ever again, huh?”

I could envision Kermit leaning back in his chair at his desk, unsmiling, irritated, and tired. “Oh, I don’t know. Fenn

has a soft spot for slightly unglued females.” I could hear his chair squeak and imagined him sitting up straight and leaning on the desk while I tried to think of a response to that jibe.

“But I told him you were solid.”

“Wow, thanks, really, I . . .”

“Iris Henderson.”

“Who?”

“*The Lady Vanishes*. Don’t tell me you haven’t seen it.”

“Hitchcock. Sorry to say, no.”

He sighed. “Two things. Be careful with the Beretta, and see that movie. Iris is a strong role. You’ll like her.”

“Will do, um, really, thanks . . .”

“One more thing. When’s the wedding?”

I started laughing. “I don’t know! We haven’t figured much of anything out.”

“Who’s officiating?”

I paused. “I have no idea.”

“Well, if you need a recommendation, call me.”

This conversation had gone a lot better than I had expected. “Will do, Kermit, and like I said, I am really sorry and . . .”

“Later.” He hung up.

After heaving a huge sigh of relief, I took a shower and got dressed in my black jeans, the gray and blue cowboy boots my mother bought for me in Portland, and a black cotton short-sleeved pullover sweater. I pulled my hair into a clip, and grabbed my San Francisco Giants ball cap. Then I trotted downstairs to the Asta Investigations office, where I found Luis, sound asleep on the floor. Someone else might have worried that he was dead, but I had found him like this before. It was a weird thing about Luis. He was comfortable sleeping on floors. The last time I saw him in such a position—on the very same floor—I let out a scream jarring him

awake so suddenly that he banged his head on the desk leg while Mickey flew out of his chair, gun drawn. This time, I squatted down beside him and lightly shook his shoulder. "Luis."

He groaned. "*Amiga*."

"Did you sleep here all night?"

"I do not like the bed without my Ruby." He rolled over onto his back and rubbed his eyes. "What is the time?"

"Eleven. You want to get ready for our espionage?"

He groaned again. "I believe you have been watching too many movies."

"Our caper? Our stake out?"

Luis sat up. "It is nothing more than a fact-finding mission."

"Roger that, *compadre*." I stood up. "We'll meet everyone there. Want to walk or take the subway?"

"If we have time, the long walk will do me good." Luis tucked his hands behind his head and started doing ab crunches. Believe me, he's done a lot of them. He's got a body built of iron.

Instead of watching him like a perv, I pulled my phone out to check for emails, and realized my Beretta was still in my purse. I pulled that out, too, and waved it at Luis. "Should I bring this?"

He paused his crunching and focused on the ceiling, "You are not at ease with the gun. Perhaps you need more practice at the range. It is up to you, but I am not certain you need to have it with you at all times." He resumed his ab work, not waiting for a response from me.

I hesitated before I tucked it back in my purse, ignoring Luis' advice. He wasn't wrong, necessarily. But I was doubtful that I could get used to carrying if I refused to carry.

After Luis finished his fifty crunches, he got up, smoothed

his hands over his buzz-cut, pulled on his Merrills, strapped on his shoulder holster complete with his Glock, and slipped into a black cotton jacket.

“I am ready, Annabelle.” He gave me a weak smile. “But I need some coffee, so I suggest we get some at Bean & Bean on Eighth and then take the subway.”

“Sure thing.” I lightly slapped his back affectionately and we headed out to the street.

Where I came to a dead stop.

A dog was sitting in front of us, its leash looped around a bicycle stand. White with one black ear. Panting. Tail wagging, dusting the sidewalk.

I leaned over and held out my hand, which received a big, sloppy lick.

“Fargo?”

He barked. I took that as a yes.

Luis had started walking but whirled around when he heard Fargo and realized I wasn't with him. “*Amiga?*”

I pointed at Fargo. “I saw this lost dog a couple of days ago and called the owner, and now here he is.” I squatted down to pet him, and he licked my face. That's when I saw the note stuck in his collar.

I didn't want to read it. I knew what it was going to say. And I was right.

Kathleen left him for me. She couldn't take care of him. In fact, her note said she was leaving New York and not to look for her.

I showed the note to Luis. “Crap. What shall we do?”

Luis gave the note back to me and ruffled Fargo's ears. “There is only one thing to do. We will bring him with us.”

“No can do, Luis. Too much of a disruption.” I thought for a few seconds. “We can't leave him in the flat with Bonkers. I'll put him in the office. Will you go buy some food

for him, um, there's a pet store nearby somewhere . . ."

"There is a place, on Twenty-Third. I will get coffee for me and food for him."

Luis saluted me and took off while I untied Fargo and brought him inside.

It wasn't until he was eating the food that Luis brought that I read the note again and noticed two weird things.

First, the dog's name was spelled wrong.

"Fargoe."

I don't know about you, but as a pet parent, I would never spell "Bonkers" any other way.

Second, the note wasn't signed with Kathleen's name. Maybe that wasn't a big deal, but it made me wonder: did she really leave me this note and this irresistible four-legged wagger?

Chapter Eleven

Luis and I settled Fargo in as best we could by leaving him in Asta Investigation's bathroom with a blanket, food, and water. He seemed tired, so I wasn't too worried about him barking or causing a fuss while we were gone. I still felt uneasy about how he came to us, but we had to join everyone at Per Favore, and we were already running late. We took a cab.

They were all waiting for us inside the restaurant. Mom, Sal and Drew were checking out the room like they were preparing for a mob leader's arrival—pulling back the curtains, peering around a large floral arrangement, making notes about the liquor brands behind the bar. I wondered if they had checked the toilet tanks for pistols. Mickey, Grams and Dad were seated at a table, chatting with Paolo. Dad was chuckling, Mickey was smiling, and Grams was devouring breadsticks like they were an elixir for eternal youth.

I couldn't wait to get out of there and I had just arrived.

Mickey saw us and came over. "Hey, everything okay? You both look, well, not good."

"We have a dog."

"And I slept on the floor."

Before Mickey could respond, Mom sidled up to me and whispered in my ear, "Darling, I think you're right. This place

has possibilities, but it's awfully stiff and formal, don't you think?"

I nodded at her pensively. Then Sal came along the other side of me and quietly held out the tip of his finger for my inspection. "Dust, on the windowsill."

I opened my eyes wide, trying to appear shocked, and then turned to appeal to Mickey. "We should at least eat, yes?" "A dog?"

Dad interjected, "Grams is starved, and the menu looks great. By all means, let's have lunch."

We sat, all except Luis, who, by previous arrangement, pretended to have eaten a huge breakfast and said he would meander around outside for a bit, to walk it off. We knew he would be in the foyer, checking out the doorman and whoever else might show up, like Samuel or Oliver.

We ordered from Paolo, who insisted that we pass a binder around the table showing pictures of other weddings the restaurant had hosted. By the time it got to Grams, she was shoveling some penne with bolognese sauce in her mouth, and managed to drip red stuff nicely onto a bride's portrait, adding what appeared to be drops of blood to her white bodice. I grabbed the book and wiped it off as best I could then slammed it shut.

I told everyone about Fargo, and the misspelled name, and wondered aloud if he had been stolen from Kathleen. "Maybe a bad husband who hates dogs and knows I found him when he was missing and got rid of him by leaving him with me."

"I bet you're right, Bea. What a dirtbag! What will you do?" Mom was swirling wine around in a glass and sniffing it and sipping it like her last name was Mondavi. It occurred to me that I hadn't heard her swear since I got to Per Favore.

She was clearly stressed.

Mickey cautioned Mom not to jump to conclusions, and asked me, “If we keep Fargo, won’t that be hard on Bonkers?”

But I could see his mouth twisting, trying not to smile, and I knew he couldn’t wait to get home and meet Fargo. Mickey loves dogs. Bonkers has been a challenge for him.

So, I knew right then and there that unless Fargo was stolen and we’d have to return him, we had a new member of the family.

I just gave him a peck on the cheek and said we’d figure it out.

I had ordered the penne with salmon, with vodka cream sauce, which wasn’t the greatest I’d ever had, but I was hungry enough not to care.

Drew took a bite of chicken marsala. “Hmm. Not, uh, bad, really.”

Sal told him he was a terrible liar. Drew shrugged, and they both put their forks down. Apparently the food was not up to their standards, although you wouldn’t have been able to convince Grams of that, who asked Paolo for the dessert menu.

My phone dinged at the same time that Mickey’s vibrated. A text from Luis to both of us:

Tony White is the doorman. Oliver out of building.

Mickey and I shoved our phones in our pockets and stood, our movements in synch. “We’ve got to step out for a minute or two. Please, you all enjoy the rest of your meals.” Mickey gave Grams’ shoulder a squeeze and we squirmed our way from the table and hustled into the foyer of the apartment building.

We could see Luis outside, talking animatedly with someone we figured was Tony, who had his back to us. Luis saw us through the glass doors and managed to motion us toward the three elevators behind us. One had a metal plaque affixed

to the wall next to it, etched with the word "Penthouse." Its doors were open, and we popped in.

I started pushing the "P" button as soon as the doors slid shut. "How does this thing work?"

"Move over, Annabelle. See the key? That will give us access."

I backed up as Mickey turned the key and punched our destination button. "Just one more of your many talents, wonder man?"

"NYPD. Been in a ton of high rises, all types of elevators. Stick with me, babe. I'll take you to heights you've never imagined."

We didn't have time for any fooling around in this elevator, but he kissed me anyway.

The doors opened onto the foyer leading into the penthouse living room. Mickey sent it back down to the ground floor. It took us a minute to take it all in. We got off on the twenty-seventh floor, but there was a staircase and another private elevator that went up another two floors. The living room was vast, with a dining room and a study on either side. Large windows provided a fantastic view of the city. Plush carpet, leather furniture, tall bookcases, marble floors in the entryway, brass fixtures on the windows.

I whistled. "Oliver is rich, or at least he used to be."

"Indeed. Let's get started."

Mickey went right to the study to rummage around in the desk. I hopped up the stairs to the second level, which featured a large terrace outside a set of French doors. The two bedrooms on that floor were small. I went ahead on up to the top floor, where I found the master suite. Talk about closets. This guy had room for the entire inventory of the Saks men's department.

A large mahogany bureau sat at one end. I investigated

each drawer, but found nothing but clothes, belts, cufflinks. The bedside tables produced an assortment of receipts, pens, cough drops and other junk. I took a quick look under the bed and in the closet, but I didn't want to linger.

I rushed downstairs to the middle floor and peeked again into one bedroom, which seemed untouched by human hands, and then entered the other. Someone had been living here. The bed was unmade, and clothes littered a chair in the corner.

I was about to exit when I saw a messenger bag stuck behind the chair. I pulled it open and yelled. "MICKEY!"

He bounded up the stairs and found me holding a fistful of jewels, suspiciously similar to the ones Beverly had insisted Oliver had stolen from her.

Before either of us could speak, our phones got text messages again. Mickey checked his quickly. "It's Luis. Someone is on their way up. Not Oliver, he says." He pressed his finger to his lips and pointed to the stairs leading down to the main floor. I dropped the jewels in the bag and replaced it behind the chair. I edged next to Mickey as we peeked down to the front door. The man entered and said thanks and "Ciao" to Tony, who was operating the elevator.

I gasped and slapped my hand against my mouth. Mickey mouthed, "What?"

"Gregory Wilcox," I whispered.

Wilcox headed for the kitchen, and I turned, ready to sprint upstairs until Mickey grabbed my wrist to stop me. "What are you doing?"

"We'll hide in Oliver's huge department-store closet!"

"Oh, until, when, tomorrow morning? C'mon, we'll get out by the terrace."

Mickey is my hero. But he's not a superhero. He can't fly, he can't jump three hundred feet and land softly, and I'm

pretty sure he can't scale a vertical plane, either up or down. I wasn't crazy about the terrace-exit idea. But it's hard to say no to Mickey. He wears authority like a favorite sweater. He takes charge like Benicio del Toro in *Traffic*, who I would follow into a burning building if he told me to. Mickey's not loud and bossy, but firm and clear. He's a guy you could trust with your deepest darkest secret (like the time you walked down Fifth Avenue with your skirt hiked up into your tights so that everyone could watch your ass sashaying . . . Okay, that was me, and I still haven't told Mickey), let alone your life.

So we ran out the French doors and onto the terrace, which was surrounded by small trees in big pots. Mickey peered over the front edge and then to the north side. "Here." He reached out his hand to me, while I was cowering to the side of the doors, my back against the wall. "Annabelle! Let's get out of here before he sees us!"

"Um, Mickey, there's something you don't know about me." I was starting to hyperventilate. "I'm afraid of heights."

"What?! We just had champagne very high in the air at the top of the Mandarin, and you were fine!"

"Inside. I was inside. Outside, like this? Unh-unh."

Mickey came to me and took both my hands. "I'll go first, you follow."

"Are we jumping?" I imagined another terrace below, or the rooftop of a neighboring building, as our landing pad.

Mickey looked at me, astonished. "Are you out of your mind? There's a fire escape. We're climbing down. But we have to hurry because it hangs right outside the kitchen window on the floor below. Now, Annabelle, we have to go now. Wilcox could walk out here any second."

I let him lead me to the edge. He backed down the metal ladder far enough to give me room to follow. I straddled the low wall and inched my feet over the edge. Mickey guided

them to a step and I held on to the railings.

“Step by step, babe, one step at a time.” He stayed close behind me with his arms surrounding me. We gradually descended, me trying to control my breathing while he urged me on. It felt like we had been on that contraption for at least an hour when Mickey abruptly stopped. “We’re at the kitchen window,” he whispered.

Really? I thought. *We’ve gone ONE floor?*

“Don’t move. I’m going to check it out.” He left me hanging on while he leaned over to check the window. “Damn.”

“What?”

“He’s still in the kitchen.” Mickey righted himself against me and there we stood, silently.

“Mickey . . .”

“Sshhh.”

“I feel a little sick.”

“Breathe. Count your breaths, in for three, out for five.”

I hadn’t heard of that before, but I tried it. It didn’t help my rising nausea.

“Mickey, really, I think I’m going to barf.”

Just then the window slid open and we heard Gregory cough. We were frozen to our spot until we heard him walk out of the kitchen and shut the door.

“Okay, babe, now, let’s up our pace and get down from here.”

Mickey urged me along a few steps and then it happened.

I lost my penne salmon, right in front of the open window, where it hurled onto Oliver’s pristine travertine tile floor.

Mickey, my hero, only asked me if I was okay to keep going. I told him yes, and we finally made it to the bottom, where we made a last jump to the sidewalk. A couple of New Yorkers regarded us warily, but otherwise, we were ignored.

I was shaking, and Mickey took me in his arms. "Let's try not to do that ever again."

"What is Oliver going to think when he . . ."

Mickey started laughing, just a little, and then he threw his head back and roared. "I have no idea," he choked on his words. "But I don't think we should have our wedding reception at Per Favore."

And then I had to laugh, too.

Chapter Twelve

Grams was standing in front of Per Favore when we came around the corner. She espied us and gave a quick wave. “Delicious food.”

Mickey smiled. “You’ve always had an iron stomach, Grams. Where are the others?”

She indicated inside with a toss of her head. “Drinking some fancy coffee. I already had my double espresso. Where’ve you two gadabouts been?”

“Exploring heights beyond our wildest imagination.” I wiped my mouth with my hand and rubbed it on my jeans.

Grams raised her eyebrows. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

Mickey burst out laughing again and turned Grams toward the restaurant and I followed them inside. Luis had joined my parents and Sal and Drew and was listening intently to Drew’s explanation of the difference between a cabernet and a zinfandel. Well, he was pretending to listen. Luis doesn’t drink except for beers now and then. He leaped up when he saw us. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes, fine,” Mickey answered.

“What do you mean? Did something happen?” Mom was alarmed.

“Nope. We had a little business to deal with regarding

the case we're on. But it's all sorted out." I readjusted the clip holding my hair, brushed a remaining bit of vomity pasta off my chest, and plastered a smile on my face.

"You look weird, sweetheart, like you've got the flu or something. Oh no, was it the crappy food here?" Mom came over to me and felt my forehead.

"I'm fine, Mom. But Mickey and I have decided not to have the reception here."

"Well thank the goddess of good sense for that!" exclaimed Sal.

"Friggin foodies," muttered Grams.

Mickey paid the bill, thanked Paolo for his hospitality, and suggested that we all get together later to dream up a new reception plan. Grams was ready for a nap, and Dad wanted to check out The Strand Book Store—he loves browsing—as well as The Mysterious Bookshop, having become a recent fan of Donna Leon's Guido Brunetti series. Mom, on the other hand, suggested that she and I should go shopping for wedding dresses, and Sal and Drew thought that was a splendid idea. "Let's go to VeKa in Brooklyn. It's got everything you could hope to wear!" Sal was a little giddy.

But Drew brought him down to earth. "Can't. Appointments only."

Thank goodness.

"Oooohhhhhh, too bad. Gee, thanks, all of you, but I'm not sure I'm up for trying on clothes right now, and I should probably go with Mickey and Luis to figure out our next moves in our case, and . . ."

"Nonsense, darling," Mom interrupted. "We're here to help you. Let's go to a couple of department stores. How 'bout Saks and Barneys . . ."

"And Henri Bendel for your accessories!" Sal was pumped again.

I turned to Mickey for help, but my hero only aided and abetted the onslaught. “Have fun, babe. See you at home. Jeff, come with us and we’ll get you pointed on the right subways.” He kissed me, Luis gave me a quick hug, Dad kissed Mom, and the three most important men in my life left me with a tickled-to-pieces trio of wedding planners.

I sighed. “Okay, let’s go. But Mom, tell me something. Why are you so gung-ho about this wedding stuff?”

She looked at me like I was crazy. “Why the hell aren’t you, dear? You want to get married, don’t you?”

“Yes! Of course! But all this hubbub is making me, well, creeped out.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Annabelle, you’ll only do this once. I’ll only get to do it with you once. Sal and Drew have the best taste in the world. Have some goddamn fun! Let’s go shopping!”

Mom’s stress had abated, as evidenced by her language, and I couldn’t argue with her. I wasn’t sure why I had been resistant to all of the help. Perhaps I had never been the center of so much attention before—except from bad guys.

I hugged her. “I’m sorry. You’re right. Let’s go. But one thing: I know what shoes I’m going to wear.”

Drew clapped his hands together but before he could speak, I held my hand up to him. “Not Guccis or Miu Mius or any of those fancy shmancy brands.”

“At least you know what those are,” Sal mused. “So, we’re all ears. Nikes?”

“What do you take me for, a rube? Nikes. Hah. I’m talking cowboy boots. White ones.”

Mom laughed, Sal shrugged, Drew frowned. I linked arms with them and off we went, south on Central Park West, like Dorothy and her pals in search of the wizard—for a block, anyway, at which point we had to make room for other peds.

But thinking about the yellow brick road made me think of Toto, which made me think of Fargo, which made me happy, imagining Mickey meeting him at the office, and seeing our life together, married, with pets.

I was going to get a kick-ass dress.



We didn't go to Saks. We didn't go to Barneys either. We went to Lord & Taylor, and I found my dress. Lace covered, tight fit at top, with a skirt that billowed out—but not too much—starting at mid thigh. The back was bare to my waist. The only problem my advisors saw with it was that it wasn't white. It was silver.

“So what?” was my response. “It's not like I'm lily white, after all.”

I bought it and hustled over to the shoe department, where I found a pair of Marc Jacobs boots with a thin little one-inch heel, white with silver stars and stitching. They weren't strictly cowboy boots, but damn, they were cute as hell.

“They don't match the dress, exactly,” Sal pointed out.

“So what?” said Drew, who had somehow embraced my fashion sense.

We were out of the store in ninety minutes. I was gleeful. Energized. Ready to get married. Forgetting that we still hadn't set a date or a place.

Sal and Drew had plans with other friends for the night, so they said goodbye with hugs and kisses, and Mom and I walked the twenty-plus blocks home. I carried the dress on its hanger in its bag over my shoulder, and she took the shoes. We were eager to get home and kept up a brisk walk, until Mom came to a sudden stop. “Ugh.”

“What is it? Are you okay?”

“I think my eggplant parmesan is arguing with my caesar salad.”

Since we were near the Eventi, I walked her there and made sure she was settled in her room, where she could rest. Then I headed home, laden with my packages.

The light was on in the Asta Investigations office. I walked in and was enthusiastically greeted by Fargo, who bounded up to me and just about knocked me over. Mickey and Luis were both at their computers and barely acknowledged me.

“Hi!”

“Hey.”

“I bought a dress, and shoes!”

“Good.”

I put the packages down and petted Fargo. He licked my face, maybe tasting residue of vodka cream sauce.

“What are you guys doing? Did something happen with the case?” They both were intent on their screens, very serious.

Luis looked up. “I am searching for places for your reception.”

Mickey added, “And I’m trying to figure out what date would work best for Madison Square Park, and what we have to do if we have to book our wedding there, and I’m also checking out who might marry us, and if maybe your dad or Luis or someone could get a license, and then we wouldn’t have to talk to a stranger, because . . .”

“HOLD IT! Both of you, STOP!” They did. “Mickey, what the hell?”

He rubbed his eyes. “Luis and I figured we should help with the planning. Then the family can relax and we three can get back to the case and doing our work.”

I plopped down on the couch. “Okay. Date. When?”

Mickey stretched. “A Saturday.” He swiveled in his chair to the calendar on the wall and thumbed a couple of pages

forward. "How about October twenty-second?"

"Great. We're not going to worry about a place. We'll just go to the park. What are they going to do, arrest us?"

He grinned. "Probably not."

"Good. Mickey, ask Kermit. He said he could recommend someone to marry us. Next, the after party."

"*Amiga*, there are too many choices and to tell you the truth, this is not my specialty."

"Then stop, Luis. We have a date. Maybe we should just leave the party to Mom. It will make her happy, if she's not too sick."

"Sick?"

"Yep. She's at the hotel trying to regain her equilibrium following what I believe became an eggplant explosion episode. Speaking of which, what are we going to do about my spilling my guts, literally, all over Oliver's kitchen floor?"

Mickey stood up and stretched again. "Not a thing. But we are going to visit him tomorrow and find out more about Gregory Wilcox, and see if we can get Oliver to fess up to the jewelry heist. I called him. Explained that Beverly had hired us and we were following up with the NYPD's blessing. We'll be there at eleven o'clock."

"Okay."

"Babe, Luis and I can go if you need to be with the 'rents. Grams is going to stay home most of tomorrow, but she doesn't require company."

"Nope. I'm with you, *compadres*. I'll give Mom her assignment, and then she and Dad can work their magic, or whatever."

I stood and picked up my packages. Mickey came over to me and leaned over my shoulder. "Can I see?"

"Absolutely not. Prepare to be dazzled."

He wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed my neck.

Luis got up and passed us on the way to the door. "I love you both but these displays of wanton affection make me very lonely, so I am going to call Ruby and then I am going to watch a baseball game and go to bed." He left.

Mickey nuzzled me. "That will be, I think, the fourth time he will have called her this afternoon."

I put the packages down and swiveled in his arms to hug him. "Lock the door and pull the shades and take your clothes off."

"In front of my best pal, Fargo?"

I looked down at the dog, panting at Mickey's feet and wagging his tail across the floor. "Who knows what sorts of depravity he's already witnessed?"

That made me worry again that Fargo was stolen, but I undid Mickey's belt anyway.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, after I told Mom that we had chosen a date and a place for the ceremony, I suggested that she and Dad scope out some reception venues while Mickey, Luis, and I followed up with Oliver.

“But darling, I don’t understand why you are working when you should be helping us with your wedding plans.”

“I know, Mom. But like Susan Sarandon said in *Thelma and Louise*, ‘we’ve got some kind of snowball effect happening here or something.’ Now that we’re in it this far, we need to see it through. And you’re so good at being in charge.” As soon as I said that, Mom folded her arms across her chest—a clear sign that I had annoyed her.

“One doesn’t just get married, Bea. It takes planning. Don’t you want everything to be perfect?”

“No matter what, it will be perfect! Even if a hurricane whirls in and blows my dress sky high and the cake falls over onto the floor, and the preacher turns up drunk! We’ll get married just fine and dandy, okay?” I turned away from her and started emptying the dishwasher.

Dad was reading the *Times*, and Grams was working on a Sudoku in her puzzle book. They were intently ignoring us.

“Do you want our help or not?”

Before I could reply, Grams piped up. “She does.”

“Thank you, Dorothy. Jesus, Bea, a little appreciation?”

I was being a little jerk and I knew it. But the more we talked about the wedding, the less I wanted to do so. It all felt too vogue and bridey. I like people, I love my family, but I’m not a big party person. And I still hardly knew anyone in New York besides Mickey and Luis and Ruby, so I was imagining myself at a party of relative strangers . . . Mickey’s NYPD pals. Don’t get me wrong: I love living here and I love New Yorkers. They’ve got a reputation as being fast and hard and cold, but when there’s trouble, believe you me, you want a New Yorker around. I once stepped off a curb at Union Square and fell to my knees. Five people ran into the intersection to help me up, brush me off, pick up all the stuff that had flown out of my purse, and ask me if I needed a cab. Mickey and I had only been living in New York for about a month when that happened, but it’s when I decided New York was definitely my city and my home. Now, I just didn’t want to feel like a stranger at my own wedding bash.

I gave Mom a hug. “I’m sorry. I am grateful, really, for your help. How about we meet you back here around four?”

Dad folded the paper and came into the kitchen.

“Sweetheart, we’d like to see some theater tonight. How about you and Mick?”

I hesitated. “You know, thanks, Dad, but I think we should leave our plans casual, what with this case . . . But you should definitely go.” I felt guilty saying no, but I was out of sorts, and not really understanding why.

“All right, then. I’ll get tickets for *The Book of Mormon*—I think you and Mick have already seen it? Grams, are you in?” He patted my arm while asking Grams.

“I could use a dose of Broadway, Jeff, thank you muchly,” she answered.

I was relieved. “You can get tickets?”

“Already checked it out online. Yes, I can.”

“Are you sure that it’s okay if . . .”

“We’ll see you tomorrow.” He gave me his Gregory Peck face, all fatherly and understanding and all-knowing. He made plans to meet up with Grams for dinner, and then he and Mom left. She was still irritated with me but gave me a quick hug anyway.

Grams stood and yawned. “Well, I have an appointment to get to.”

“You do?”

“Mmm hmm. Pedicure. A couple of blocks away.” She slung her crocheted, multi-colored, tasseled backpack over her shoulder, and left.

Now I could get to work. Just as soon as I took Fargo for another walk, of course.



Mickey, Luis and I arrived at Oliver’s right on time. Tony the doorman was a little surprised to see Luis, but he didn’t press for an explanation. One look from Luis could make anyone go mute. Luis introduced us, and Tony took us up in the elevator. Oliver admitted us graciously. He was not particularly handsome, but he had a suave style about him, in spite of his crooked nose, which appeared to have been broken at some point and reset badly, like he did it himself a la Javier Bardem’s shoulder move in *No Country for Old Men*. I could only hope he wasn’t a comparable psycho.

He had set a silver coffee pot and four cups and saucers out on the dining room table, along with some madeleines and little square white paper napkins, edged with paper lace. He poured each of us a cup. I sipped from mine and couldn’t help but stick out my pinkie finger.

Oliver leaned forward, his forearms on the table, and addressed Mickey. “So, you’re working with the police on Bev’s murder. I understand she hired you to find out who was harassing her, if you can believe that anyone was, really. What brings you here today?”

I didn’t give Mickey a chance to answer. “Clearly, she was being harassed, wouldn’t you say, Oliver? Since now she’s dead and all?”

Mickey passed the plate of madeleines to me. Subtle hint. I shoved one in my mouth.

“We’d like to learn more about Gregory, your son, for starters,” said Mickey. “Why does he have a different last name?”

Oliver smiled amiably. “Oh, well, Gregory, yes, from an affair I had years ago. Took his mother’s name, since in the beginning I wasn’t around. Didn’t find out about him, in fact, until about ten years ago. He reached out to me when his mother died. Car accident, poor thing. Gregory moved in here and has been under my care ever since. He’s a fine young man. I’m very proud of him.”

“How come?” I asked, having swallowed the cookie.

Oliver kept his smarmy smile rigid. “Well, first off, he’s my son, of course! And he’s studying very hard to get his MBA at NYU.”

Luis took out his notebook and scribbled in it. I knew he’d follow up on that tidbit later.

“Is he a little, um, on edge, would you say?” I grabbed another madeleine to waylay another Mickey hint.

Still smiling, Oliver shifted his weight and crossed one leg over the other. “Not any more than any young man of his age, I would say. I mean, he’s gotten tattoos and piercings, like they all do these days. He wears a ridiculous pair of earrings all the time that look like the heads of Phillips screwdrivers,

but his head is screwed on straight—no pun intended. What is this all about?”

I thought the pun was definitely intended, and I wasn't trusting anything out of Oliver's mouth since I could recall that Gregory was not wearing earrings when I saw him, but my mouth was full, so Mickey took over. “He had an altercation with Samuel earlier this week. How do they get along?”

Smile gone, Oliver sighed. “Samuel, poor Samuel. He's had a hard time, no father growing up. He was very *very* attached to his mother, and frankly, I think Beverly treated him terribly, just terribly. For a time she gave him lots of money, anything he asked for, but never really loved him, I don't think. She didn't encourage him, other than to make him completely dependent on her. He wanted to be an actor at one point, took classes, tried singing, and I don't know if he was any good or not, but his mother poo-pooed the whole idea right from the beginning. Samuel told me she cut him off completely several months ago, insisting that he make his own way. Now he's bitter and alone and I try to help him as I can, you know, to *find* himself. But I'm not sure he's redeemable.” He rubbed his forehead and grimaced like he had migraine.

This was some performance. Oliver was his own form of bad actor.

“Mr. Musgrave, do Samuel and Gregory behave well together?” Luis asked.

Oliver chuckled condescendingly. “Nice turn of phrase, uh, Mr. . . ? Sorry, I didn't catch your name.”

“Maldonado. Luis Maldonado.”

“Yes, well, no, they don't *behave* well together at all, as you put it. Never have. I think Samuel is jealous of Gregory's relationship with me. He acts out all the time.”

Luis scribbled some more.

I was about to ask Oliver if he had ever invited a Latino

for coffee before, but Mickey spoke quickly, perhaps anticipating a quip from me. “Mr. Musgrave, you must know that you’re a suspect in Beverly’s murder, even though you were out of town. We now have to consider both Gregory and Samuel. I have to say, you and Gregory have the strongest motive, and that’s money: you’re in trouble from the Ponzi scheme you got involved in, and Gregory is too, by default. Samuel gets none of his mother’s estate because, as we’ve learned, it goes to you, by the terms of your divorce agreement. And as you just told us, Samuel was dependent on his mother and is probably devastated by her death. Anything you’d like to add?”

Oliver rubbed his chin and nodded thoughtfully during Mickey’s summary. “Unfortunately, yes. First of all, let me say I would never, ever, ever do anything to harm Beverly. It’s true we divorced, but I bore her no ill will and loved her like a friend.”

I believed him as much as Obi-Wan Kenobi believed that Darth Vader actually murdered Luke Skywalker’s father.

“But what you don’t know about Samuel is this,” Oliver continued. “He is unstable. He has been upset with his mother for a long time. Now, it’s true about my money problems. But I’m a veteran businessman. This will pass. I will survive. Samuel, though, is hopeless and rash. I’m sorry to admit that I have evidence implicating him in his mother’s murder. Please wait here.”

He got up and went upstairs, while Mickey, Luis and I traded bewildered looks. I shoved the madeleines away from me.

Oliver trotted back downstairs and deposited on the table the handful of Beverly’s jewels that I had discovered in the messenger bag the day before. “I found these, after he visited me two days ago.” That would be Monday, the day Mickey

and I followed him to Oliver's. I didn't recall that Samuel had been carrying anything. "He stops by now and then, and I usually take him out for a meal when he does." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Before you say a word, I know how it appears. You think I could have taken them. But I didn't. He did. That young man does strange and terrible things!"

This dramatic line was a cue for me. "My heavens, terrible things? Such as?"

Oliver sat down and spoke to us like he was imparting a big secret. "He vomited in my kitchen and left the mess all over the floor."

Speechless, I reached for a third madeleine.

Luis coughed into his sleeve, hiding a laugh, I could tell.

Mickey didn't change his expression one iota. He's such a pro. "You need to turn this jewelry over to the police. As soon as we leave here, I will call Detective Calhoun and apprise him of the jewelry. It will not benefit you to keep it hidden, do you understand? And we will need to be in touch with Gregory directly."

"Yes, yes, of course." Oliver pulled a handkerchief out of his pants pocket and wiped his face, though I hadn't noticed a bead of sweat on it. He jotted Gregory's phone number on one of the frilly napkins and handed it to Mickey. "Please do what you can to solve this murder. I do hope Samuel's not involved, I can't imagine him a killer, really, he's, well . . ." He wiped his face again.

"It seems he does not have the stomach for it." Luis stuck his notebook in his pocket.

With that, we left.

Chapter Fourteen

Mickey checked in with Kermit after we descended from the penthouse—in the elevator this time—and thanked Tony the doorman for the ride. Turned out that Oliver had called Kermit as soon as we had stepped out the door and was going to bring the jewelry to the station immediately. This was a good sign, but it didn't erase anyone from our suspect list.

“Kermit said it would be fine for us to go over Beverly's apartment once more, in case we see anything the police might have missed. Let's get a cab.” Mickey took my hand and the three of us walked south to Sixty-Fifth where we could hail a taxi to take us across Central Park.

Beverly's apartment was in a twenty-story building at Seventy-Fifth and Park Avenue. We had already met Mr. Robert Parker, the doorman, when we had interviewed Beverly initially. He didn't seem happy to see us, but then he was a dour doorman overall and probably even glummer since Beverly had been murdered in his building. I wondered if he felt responsible somehow, even guilty. Then I wondered if he killed her. I mean, why not? She wasn't the nicest person in the world. She probably was as much fun to be around as Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*, bossing everyone around like she was the It Woman.

Mickey held out his hand to Mr. Parker and explained that Detective Kermit Calhoun had asked us to come. He shook Mickey's hand as briefly as possible and confirmed that Kermit had called him, telling him we were on our way. He gave Mickey the keys and turned away from us, but not before Mickey handed him a business card. "You think of anything that might help, don't hesitate to call us, or Detective Calhoun, of course." Parker took the card without reading it and stuck it in his pocket.

"You have a famous name, did you know that?" I gave Parker my most winning smile.

"The Spenser mysteries writer, yes."

"I bet you have people thinking you're him, all the time."

"He's dead."

"Yes, well, not everyone knows that, probably, and . . ."

"You can go on up now." He left us.

I whispered to Mickey. "He's cold and unpleasant, don't you think?"

We got on the elevator and Mickey answered me. "Kermit has checked him out. Nothing there so far."

I leaned against the elevator wall while Mickey punched "20." "So, how come this is news to me? Luis, did you know this?"

Luis looked up from his phone, where he was checking for messages from Ruby. I assumed this because that was all he seemed to be doing these days.

"Yes, *amiga*."

"And I'm not up to date because . . .?"

"Because you are dealing with mother wedding stuff," Mickey answered.

"WHAT?!"

My yell startled Luis and he dropped his phone as the elevator doors opened.

“Babe! Quiet down, will you?” Mickey left the elevator and I followed, jaw clenched, with Luis behind me.

We entered Beverly’s apartment, a corner location with two balconies and lots of windows. As soon as Luis shut the door behind us, I let go.

“Look, you guys, I know I’m not very good at detecting yet, I mean, you can make a very solid case for my mishandling a gun and jumping to conclusions and not knowing how to operate elevators. I get it. But this case was supposed to be mine, you know? I was supposed to be the lead, and I know our client is dead, but maybe that’s my fault after all, I mean, maybe I should have researched more about her life. So now I really want to figure this out, and that means you have to clue me in, like a partner. Like a newbie partner. Like a plebe. Or a rookie. Or a greenhorn. I don’t want to be a secretary or a dog sitter.” I stopped, thinking of Fargo and remembering that we’d need to get home to walk him.

Mickey read my mind. “Grams is going to walk him after her pedicure. Look, we just got the information about Parker this morning, while you were duking it out with Sylvia. A simple omission. That’s all. We’re not shutting you out.”

I had irritated Mickey, it was clear from his measured tone. Luis was giving me a sympathetic but avuncular smile, like, you screwed up, but it’s okay, we still love you.

“Crap. I’m sorry. I’m tense, I admit it. Who knew that weddings were anything but fun?” I set my purse down on the hall table. “Let’s get to work.”

I walked past Mickey and patted his arm, but he took me by the waist and hugged me. “My fault. Should have told you right away. And we’ll make sure our wedding is nothing but fun. I promise. I can do more to help with the plans.”

I kissed his cheek. “We’ll sit down with Mom and Dad and Grams and figure it all out.”

Luis stepped away from the wall he was leaning on and added, “Too many cooks can spoil the *molotes*.”

“Will you make us some for the wedding?” I teased him as I disengaged from Mickey. I had no idea what *molotes* were

“That would not be a good idea, *amiga*, especially since I am not a cook and you are not a stranger to *vómito*.”

I groaned and we started our search.

The apartment had three bedrooms, but Beverly had used one as a dressing room. It had a couch and lots of shelves and drawers, along with a walk-in closet and a dressing table topped with combs, brushes, powders, lotions, and make-up—and about fifteen different lipsticks, which is exactly fourteen more than I have. The place had already been dusted for prints, but we were still careful not to leave too much of our own behind. We checked out both balconies and each room, opened every drawer, looked under every piece of furniture. We didn’t know what we were looking for. Sometimes, it’s important just to look, and not only for the small things. The big picture is just as important. We ended up in the living room, noting the blood on the carpet, trying to determine if anything struck us as wrong, out of place.

Then I saw it. A thick-spined book on the top shelf of the built-ins. There weren’t a lot of books on those shelves—they were mostly filled with expensive knick-knacks, like glass vases and silver candlesticks—but they were all slight volumes—no *War and Peace*, no *David Copperfield*—except for that one. On closer inspection, I read the spine: “Les Meserables.” Couldn’t anyone spell anymore? I reached up on tiptoe and pulled it down, opened it, and emitted an “Aha!”

It was a fake book, a box really, holding a small pearl-handled gun—undoubtedly the one Beverly told us she had bought. Mickey lifted it out and examined it. “Brand spanking new. I don’t think it’s ever been fired, though I suppose we

can't be sure." He showed it to Luis. "Smith and Wesson 38, with custom grips."

"Beverly was hit with something much heavier than this revolver, yes?" Luis noted.

Mickey agreed. "I'll let Kermit know that we found it, but I'll leave it here. If he thinks it's important, the police can pick it up." But he emptied the gun's five bullets and stashed them in a drawer in the kitchen. "Might as well be safe." He replaced the gun and left the fake book on the coffee table.

As we were leaving, a young woman about my age met us in the hallway. She was a dark-haired, slightly plump beauty. Huge eyes and glowing skin. Lots of eye make-up, but she knew how to apply it. She greeted Luis first. "Hello, are you the detectives?"

"Yes, we are, from Asta Investigations. Luis Maldonado, Mickey Paxton and Annabelle Starkey." We all shook hands. "And you are . . .?"

"Jojo Parker. My dad's the doorman. Keeps a watch on everything, including me, in fact."

Her broad smile made me like her instantly. "Did you know Beverly well?"

"Pretty well. I'm going to miss her. I enjoyed my chats with her. Poor Dad is distraught. I mean, he feels responsible. I keep telling him, he can't be on watch twenty-four hours a day, and he's not. And the tenants know that. But he's very upset anyway."

"That's understandable," said Mickey. He handed her a card. "If you think of anything that might help us find her killer, anything you haven't already told the police, or even if you want to talk to us for whatever reason, please call."

I jumped in. "What are you doing this evening?"

Jojo started, a little taken aback. "Well, nothing. I have no plans. Why?"

“Wanna get a drink later?” I flashed what I hoped was a smile to match hers. “I’m pretty new to New York, and Mickey and Luis have other plans tonight. Maybe you could turn me on to your favorite bar, or restaurant, or . . .”

Mickey and Luis had made no plans, but they didn’t let on. I wanted to see Jojo on my own for two reasons: One, she might open up about the Beverly murder if men weren’t around, and two, I liked her, plain and simple, and I didn’t have friends in New York besides Ruby and Luis, and my instincts told me that she and I would hit it off.

She hesitated, but then bit. “Sure. Why not?”

We arranged to meet at six at the Landmark Tavern in Hell’s Kitchen. Her choice of venue made me happy: the Landmark is old-fashioned New York, not a hipster hang-out. It would be perfect for a heart-to-heart.

Back on the street, Mickey didn’t have to ask before I told him, “You and Luis, check out Gregory Wilcox tonight.”

Mickey grinned. “Yes, Captain.”

Luis was checking his phone. “Why has Ruby not texted me? I have not heard from her for an hour.”

I took him by the arm. “Because you are driving her loco. *Vamanos*, Luis, let’s go home, eat some molotovs, and say hello to Fargo.”

“*Molotes*, Annabelle. However, for you, they might act like molotovs, as we have already discussed.”

I was never going to live down The Great Starkey Hurl.

Chapter Fifteen

Fargo seemed happy to see us when we opened the door to the office bathroom. That is, if wiggling all over and falling over onto his back so that we could rub his stomach counts. He had shown up only the morning before, but it already seemed he had decided to belong to us. Mickey took him out briefly while I changed his water. Fargo settled at my feet when they got back.

Luis called Gregory Wilcox, while I tried Kathleen's number again. There was no answer. I sent a text, confirming we had Fargo and that I wanted to make sure she had left him for us, and that he hadn't been stolen. I knew that whoever gave us Fargo was connected with Kathleen, because she knew I was with Asta Investigations, which is what I had told her in my first voicemail message. We're listed, easy to find if you're looking. So it was either her, or someone who knew her. And maybe someone who did her harm.

I didn't know her full name. I only had her phone number. Her text message to me had showed only her number as the sender.

Mickey and Luis raided the office refrigerator to make sandwiches while I sat down at my computer to see if I could trace the number to anyone in particular.

No dice. Nothing showed up.

“Mickey, I think Kathleen was using a prepaid cellphone.”

“Okay. No phone number to trace, no answer, no name. You’ve done due diligence. Fargo is ours.”

“You don’t get it. I think something bad might have happened to her.”

“You are making huge leaps with no evidence.” His mouth was full of a chicken salad sandwich. I got up and took the half sandwich he was handing to me and took a large bite.

Luis poured us each a glass of cold Pellegrino, which was always well stocked in our office mini fridge. “I do not know what else you can do at this point. We have no other clues.”

I shrugged. “I’ll keep calling and texting the number now and then, just in case.”

Mickey chugged down his water. “I’m going upstairs to check on Grams. Have you heard from the ’rents?”

“Nope. They’re out and about today. We’ll make things right tomorrow, with the wedding stuff. Meanwhile, I need to get ready for my meet-up with Jojo, so I’ll come with you. What’s the plan with Wilcox, Luis?”

“He suggested the White Horse, which seems to be his favorite place, but we will see him at the Bleecker Street Bar instead.” He reached down to stroke Fargo’s head. “I will take him out before we go.”

If you didn’t know Luis beyond his iron-clad body and penetrating eyes and heard him say that without realizing there was a dog lying at his feet, I tell you what: you’d run for your life.



After Grams showed off her bright green toenails and then scolded us—it was fine and well that we had a dog but we should make a proper home for it, with more than a blanket

on the floor—I assured her that purchasing the proper canine accoutrements would be my first order of business tomorrow. “No need. I stopped at a pet store and ordered everything. They’ll deliver tomorrow morning.” She put her socks back on.

“Wow. That’s very generous of you, Grams. Thank you, a lot, I mean, tons, really,” I gushed, slightly terrified that more scolding was forthcoming.

“We’ll bring Fargo with us on our next visit,” Mickey added.

That’s when I remembered: Grams’ own pooch had died just last year, fourteen years old. So I leaned over and hugged her, fell into her lap, and scrambled to my feet awkwardly. “Sorry.”

“I’ve told Mickey many times, one of your best features is your grace.” Then she cracked a devilish grin.



We were experiencing a blessedly mild June, rainy days notwithstanding, with the early evenings hovering in the low seventies with remarkably low humidity. Not that I had a ton of New York–June experience, but that’s what I kept hearing from natives and TV meteorologists. I rummaged through my closet, wanting to dress at least a little bit hip for my meeting with Jojo. I chose my skinny jeans and knee boots, with a loose, light blue, short-sleeve silk top. I combed my hair and swore when I realized I was missing an earring, and this pair was one of my favorites. Mickey had given them to me on the one-year anniversary of our meeting. They were oval, blue enamel, each with a tiny blue crystal in the middle and surrounded with a delicate gold gossamer border. Sal told me that they were Edwardian in style, but they always struck me as French, and I was still hankering to go to Paris someday. I could have lost it anywhere I had been that day, and it was

probably gone forever. I put on another pair, silver hoops, and elicited help from Mickey and Grams. We searched all over the apartment, me on my knees with a flashlight, scanning the floor under the furniture and in every nook and cranny we had, but the earring was nowhere to be found. "Damn!" I yelled. Grams frowned, Mickey told me we'd find another pair somewhere, and I left, my black jean jacket over my shoulder. I told Mickey I'd meet him at the Topsy Parson at eight o'clock for dinner.

I walked to the Landmark Tavern and got there right at six. Jojo was already at the bar, laughing with the bartender. I hopped onto the stool next to her. "Hi!"

"Hi yourself! What are you drinking?"

I checked out what *she* was drinking, to suss out if this was a beer meeting, a wine fest, or a cocktail klatch. It was something pink, in a martini glass.

"Is that a cosmo?"

"Yes. Samir here makes the best cosmos ever."

The bartender held out his hand. "Nice to meet you. Want one?"

I don't drink cosmos. I don't trust drinks with too many ingredients with the majority based in sugar. I was tempted, to form a bond with Jojo, but my smarter self prevailed. "No, thanks. How about martini? Bombay Sapphire, just a whiff of vermouth, two olives."

I rarely drink martinis, but at least Jojo and I would have the same style glass.

We clinked our glasses and I took a sip. "Samir, I have to say, this is maybe the best goddamn martini I've ever had."

"My specialty." He smiled and left us to wait on other customers.

Jojo and I started gabbing like we were long lost friends from high school. She never knew her mother, who died

giving birth to her. She grew up in New York and had completed a little bit of college, but dropped out. “Studying wasn’t for me, which didn’t make Dad happy, but I wanted to work in the real world, make some money, which was tight for him anyway. I waited tables for a few years, and then I took a job working for the same property management company that Dad works for.”

“Lots of buildings?”

“Oh yeah, about thirty. It’s okay work.” She finished off her cosmo and signaled Samir for another. I was only halfway through my martini and feeling very lightheaded.

“What do you do for fun?”

She laughed. “This, I guess!”

“Boyfriend?”

She hesitated. “No. Not recently. The last one, well, let’s just say he wasn’t good for me.”

Her second cosmo arrived and she took a sizable swallow. This girl could drink. “So, you’re getting married!”

“Yup. I’m lucky. I met my match. Well, actually, he challenges me to be *his* match, and that’s a good thing.”

“Well, he sure is a looker.” Jojo fiddled with the pendant hanging on her neck. It made me take notice. It was in the shape of the numeral 2, studded with diamonds. Very glittery, quite unusual.

“Nice necklace! Why a ‘2’?”

She held it away from her and gazed at it. Another hesitation. “Dad. He gave it to me. The 2 represents us, means we’ll always be close to each other.” She nestled the pendant back under her blouse and took another large swig of her drink. Then she blew her nose into a bar napkin. “He’s sweet at his core. Not a people person exactly. He loves animals though, even contributes to wildlife conservation organizations.”

“I’m glad you’ve got a caring father, and I’m sorry about

your mother.” As soon as I said that, I felt bad about my own mother, who was trying to help me make a beautiful wedding, which, for an accomplished doctor was certainly not at the top of her list of things to do. I would have to resolve the wedding issues.

“Yeah, well, it was a long time ago. Dad and me, we’re, well, we’re as tight as two balls on a chicken!” She tossed back the rest of her drink.

I’m used to profanity, being my mother’s daughter and all, but that rubbed me the wrong way. I figured Jojo was drunk. “You want some water?”

She shook her head. “No. Sorry. It’s just that Dad is upset about Beverly being murdered, and things are, well, unpleasant these days. I guess he really liked her. I did, too. Like I already told you.” She paused. “You want another martini?”

I checked my watch. “Have to go. But listen, Beverly never struck me and Mickey as a nice person. But you thought she was, and so did your dad?”

She looked like she was going to cry. “Well, we’ve been lonely, you know, and she used to talk with us . . .” She trailed off.

She was lit and unhappy, but I still felt a connection with her. “Why don’t you come to our wedding? October twenty-second in Madison Square Park. I’ll send you the particulars as soon as we’ve settled them. Will you?”

She gave me another one of her huge smiles. “You bet I will. Thanks.” I stood up to leave, thinking she’d do the same, but she motioned to Samir for another cocktail. Then she wrote her phone number on a bar napkin and gave it to me. “This was fun, sort of! I mean, except for me.” She hopped down and gave me a hug. “I haven’t always been like this.”

“That’s a great line from *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*. And now I can say, ‘Well, I haven’t always been like this, either.’”

“Huh?”

“Johnny Depp, Juliette Lewis? And Darlene Cates. Brave role for her, as the obese mother.”

“Sorry, I don’t know what . . .”

“Never mind. Next time we’ll go for coffee and a walk, maybe watch that movie together.”

“Uh, okay. Sounds great.”

I left the bar, not convinced that she meant that, but still confident that it was a good thing to befriend strangers.

Sometimes I can be so wrong.

Chapter Sixteen

I joined Mickey and Luis at the Tippy Parson on Ninth Avenue in Chelsea, another one of our go-to restaurants. It's homey with bookshelf wallpaper, a hexagonal-tile floor, and a white marble bar. They serve Bloody Marys in mason jars, and their business card is designed like a luggage tag, affirming the place as a worthy destination. The bar could get body-to-body crowded on any given night, but somehow we lucked out. My partners were waiting there, saving a spot for me. Mickey gave me a kiss and Luis patted the stool between them.

Marcus, the bartender, reached out for my hand, which he promptly smooched. "Hey, princess, what's your pleasure this fine evening?"

"Oh, Marcus, I've predrunk some pleasure and am not ready for anything but a soda water with lime. I have no idea how people can slurp more than one of those James Bond signature hootches." I laid my jacket across the stool and sat down.

"You got it, kid."

"Hootches?" Mickey leaned away from me and studied me with a smirk.

"Mine was a martini. Jojo's quite a drinker. I left her at the Landmark ordering at least her third, if not her fourth or fifth

cosmo. I don't know what time she started."

Marcus deposited my soda in front of me and winked. "Not shaken, not stirred."

I clinked my glass with Mickey's and Luis' beers, took a couple of big gulps, and burped.

Mickey congratulated me. "Good one. So, tell us about Jojo."

"You first. I need to regain my equilibrium."

They took turns bringing me up to speed on their meeting with Gregory, who claimed more than once that Samuel had to be the murderer, since he was "completely unhinged," was furious that his mother cut him out of any inheritance, and was unable to hold a job. Gregory claimed that he himself had been home, at Oliver's, when the murder happened, and Tony the doorman could vouch for him. Mickey explained to him that I was the trigger-happy woman he encountered at the White Horse, and that we were all partners. Apparently, this information bolstered Gregory's conviction that Samuel was the killer, since he was trying to "influence" me.

"It sounds to me like Samuel is a *perezoso*, but that does not make him a murderer," offered Luis.

"What does a para-so-so make him?" I asked.

"Deadbeat. Lazy."

"Gregory also told us that Oliver is sick to death of Samuel and his whining," Mickey added.

"That's a different impression from the one Oliver left us with. It sounded like he wanted to help Samuel and cares about him." I drank some more soda. "I need some food."

We decided on a bunch of small plates—cornbread, brussels sprouts, fries, apple salad, and hummus, two of each. While we were chowing down, I filled them in on Jojo and how upset she seemed by Beverly's murder, and how her father was devastated, too. "Surprising, given everything we've

heard about Beverly, let alone our own experience with her, that these two seemed to think she was so nice. I'm wondering if Jojo's father might have been in love with her, even. I mean, love can be blind, and all that."

"You think he is probably not a suspect," Luis noted.

Mickey popped a fry into his mouth. "Big leap, there, babe. Lovers are often the killers. But what about Jojo?"

"Well, she's just kind of a mess. I think she's still trying to find her place in the world, you know? Anyway, I invited her to the wedding."

"WHAT?" Mickey swiveled on his stool to face me.

"What's the big deal? I like her, and she seems lonely, and ..."

"She's a complete stranger, not to mention a suspect!"

"Now she's an acquaintance of mine, Mickey, and I can't believe she killed Beverly. And why shouldn't I get to invite whoever I want to our wedding? I mean, it's going to be over-run by NYPD cops and you don't hear me griping about that, do you?" I shoved a fry into my mouth, and then another.

"I know them."

"I don't."

"*Amigos*, it is too early for you to be arguing about the guest list when you still have so many things to figure out, *si?*"

That shut us up for a few moments, until I suddenly blurted out, "I don't want to get married in a wedding-type wedding. All the fuss and planning and people and jeez, I mean, getting the dress and boots was enough excitement for me. Can't we elope, Mickey?"

Mickey put his fork down, stood up, and wrapped his arms around me. "That is an excellent idea. But I have a better one. City Hall. This Friday. While the family's in town, and Ruby will be back."

I threw my arms around his neck. "Yes! It'll be done done done!" Then I shrank back. "I'll have to tell Mom."

Mickey laughed. "Maybe she will be relieved."

We kissed.

Then I noticed Luis was being very quiet. "What is it? You don't believe in quick weddings? You want us to plan something more elaborate? You're religious and you never told us? You . . ."

Luis held up his hand. "*Basta*, Bella. I support this decision one hundred percent. It means I will not have to listen to more wedding talk." He winked at me and hopped off his stool. "I am remembering my own wedding day, which makes me both very happy and very lonely. But soon all will be well." He gave Mickey a man hug, pounded his back, and then hugged me, picking me up and setting me down again. "Friday you will be Mrs. Paxton."

"Um, that's something we haven't talked about yet . . ."

Mickey smiled. "No need, babe. You can't give up a last name like Starkey. What would Ringo think?"

We sat, finished our food, and gave Marcus the good news. "You know, Marcus, Mickey and I were kidnapped at gunpoint on our first date, and that was about two years ago. And look at us now! We're as tight as Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall." I slung my arm around Mickey's waist and gave him a big grin. He rolled his eyes.

"You want to celebrate here afterward? Champagne will be on me."

I grabbed a cocktail napkin and leaned over the bar to get a pen. I knew this place as well as my own kitchen, but don't get the wrong idea. I'm not a problem drinker. I just enjoy sitting at bars, especially this one. I scribbled down Mom's, Dad's, Sal's and Drew's names and pushed it across the bar to Marcus. "You might hear from any of these people, if they want to plan any sort of party. Otherwise, we'll just show up! Thank you, Marcus. You are the best, better than Miss Kitty,

even!” All three men pondered that for a beat. “*Gunsmoke!* I watch the reruns.”

Marcus laughed. “She wasn’t the bartender.”

I smiled. “Yeah, but she was the heart and soul.”

We paid our tab and floated home.

Floated, that is, until we got there.

The door to Asta Investigations was wide open, and Fargo was barking his head off.

Chapter Seventeen

There are lots of things I'm not good at, like keeping my mouth shut, or knowing when to pull a gun, or drinking martinis. But like I've already said, I'm a damn good runner, even when I'm wearing my knee boots. At least they have low heels.

So as the three of us picked up our pace for the last few yards to our office door, and we saw someone tear out of it, I took off after him. Or her. I couldn't tell through the hoodie and loose jeans. Mickey was following us. Luis grabbed Fargo.

Mickey is really good at lots of things. He's an athlete. He's tough. But he's not as fast a runner as I am, and he was falling behind a bit.

Whoever I was chasing was fast, though. I was working hard to keep up, heading west on Twentieth toward the metal stairs to the High Line. "Hoodie" sprinted up the steps and ran south, and I did the same, cursing my boots, in spite of their low heels. There weren't very many people out—it was after ten o'clock, and the park would close at eleven.

I heard Mickey behind me, yelling my name, but I wasn't going to stop. Whoever this hoodie was had no right to bust into our place, and I intended to make that very clear. We maintained our pace for a good distance. I estimated we

had gone at least five blocks south when I saw my runner scramble through the vegetation on the east side of the park. As I approached, he took one look at me—which is when I saw the beard and knew it was a he, or a lady from a freak show—before he swung himself over the railing. I reached the railing just as he dropped down to the roof of Hector's Cafe & Diner, which peeks out from under the railroad tracks that form the basis of the High Line. Then he dropped to his stomach and inched along the roof, back under the tracks.

Okay, so there's another thing I'm not good at, as you already know. Heights. I got ready to haul myself over the railing, but I couldn't do it. So I raced to the other side of the High Line and saw the jerk speed down Twelfth Street. He must have jumped from Hector's roof or shimmied down somehow.

"Crap crap crap!" I yelled as Mickey pulled up next to me, panting. He leaned over, his hands on his thighs. "He got away, Mickey! I couldn't jump!"

Mickey straightened up and walked around in a circle, catching his breath. "Did you get a good look at him?"

"Beard. Blondish. I think his hair was pretty long. That's it. Crapola." I leaned against the railing and crossed my arms.

Mickey joined me. "How are your feet?"

"Angry."

"Let's get back, see what Luis has uncovered, if anything." He eased me away from the rail. "How about our dog, eh? Made a lot of noise! Good watchdog!"

"That's the silver lining, I suppose."

We walked north to join Luis and Fargo the Wonder Dog. We were descending the Twentieth Street stairs when honest to cripe, Hoodie walked right in front of us. "That's him!" I yelled, which wasn't the smartest thing I've done, since it alerted him.

But he didn't run this time.

Instead he pulled a pistol out of his pocket and pointed it at us.

Mickey and I were stopped two steps up from the street and we both put our arms in the air. "Easy, pal," Mickey said. He slowly moved to the street. I stayed put.

"Not your pal, and don't get any closer to me."

I reached into my purse, which was still slung across my body and over my shoulder. It's the best purse *ever* for a sprinting P. I. I felt the handle of my Beretta.

"What's happening? Why were you in our office? You have a problem with us?" Mickey was keeping his voice even.

"Not you. Your partner."

"Annabelle? Why?" Now Mickey didn't sound so calm.

"Luis Maldonado. I'm sure he'll tell you all about it. Right now, I'm going to watch you and your lady walk away from me and not look back. You're not going to call the police, and you're not going to shoot me. Take your hand out of your purse, missy."

I did.

"What's your name? So we can tell Luis we've had the pleasure." Mickey motioned for me to come down the stairs.

"Chacho Salcedo. Now get out of here."

Mickey took my hand and we did what he asked. "Should we turn the corner up ahead and then try to follow him?" I whispered.

Mickey shook his head. "No. We talk to Luis. This is bad."

"How bad?"

"Salcedo? That used to be Ruby's last name."

"You mean, Chacho is her brother?"

"No. I think he's her first husband."

When we reached Ninth Avenue, Mickey took a quick

peek over his shoulder. Chacho was gone.

“Ruby was MARRIED before? Why don’t I know these things?” I wasn’t whispering anymore.

“I don’t know much, but we’re about to find out a lot more. C’mon.”

We trotted the last half block home, holding hands. My dogs were barking—and I don’t mean Fargo—but I didn’t care.

Luis was in trouble.

Chapter Eighteen

Mickey and I got back to a weird scene of chaos and calm. Chacho Salcedo had busted into Asta Investigations by swinging a sledgehammer against the lock. Said sledgehammer was lying on the floor. The door was a mess.

The inside was reasonably intact except for our three computers, which had met the end of the same sledgehammer it seemed.

The calm part was that Luis was sitting on the couch, joined by Mom and Dad and Grams, who had returned from the theater while Mickey and I were chasing Salcedo.

No one was talking much. Grams had invited Fargo next to her on the couch, his head in her lap, where he was gratefully receiving unceasing pets.

Dad stood up. "You two all right?"

"He got away. It was Chacho, Luis." Mickey brushed computer debris from his desk chair and sat.

Mom leaned forward. "Who the fuck is Chacho, and why did he do this?" Fargo barked, either offended by Mom's language or in support of it.

Luis rubbed his face. "*Dios mio*," he muttered. "I thought he was out of our lives."

"Chacho Salcedo is Ruby's first husband," I explained, like

I knew all about him. “Has he always been violent, Luis?” I sat on the floor by Grams and stroked Fargo’s front paw.

Luis proceeded to tell us that Chacho had never been violent that he knew of, but that Chacho had recently reached out to Ruby and asked her for money. “He has never been a good one to hold a job.” Ruby apparently told Chacho something along the lines of “in your dreams, pal,” and that was about a month ago. “When I was on the force in Las Vegas, he could be a problem. Misdemeanors, drugs. We bailed him out once. I told him, not again.”

“He came all the way to New York to smash your offices?” Dad asked.

Luis shifted his jaw back and forth, an indication of his stress. “No, Jeff, he lives in Brooklyn now. He moved there before we moved here. *Dios mio*.” Luis rubbed his face again. “It is too late to call Ruby now. I will tell her tomorrow.”

“He had a gun, Luis. We should notify the police.” I looked to Mickey for his agreement.

“That’s up to Luis, babe. We’ll handle this however he sees fit.”

“You should kick his dickbrain ass, is what I think,” offered Mom. Fargo barked again. It appeared they had solidified a kind of weird bond in a matter of minutes.

“Dickbrain ass doesn’t even make sense, Mom.” But then I started laughing. Then I stopped. “Sorry, I know, nothing about this is funny.” I paused. “Except for ‘dickbrain ass.’” And I started laughing again.

I guess it was the stress.

But then Dad chuckled, and Grams snorted, and Mickey grinned large, while Mom walked over to Luis, who had stood up, and gave him a big hug. “We’ll help you clean up.”

“No, Sylvia, there is not much to clean. Our computers are backed up, we need to gather up their remains and we

need to secure the door tonight. Tomorrow we will fix things.” He stepped back. “Please, all of you, please go to bed. It is late. This is my problem. I will take care of things here.”

“What a bunch of bullcrap, Luis. We’ll all help. We’re family.” Mom turned to me. “You got a broom?”



Mom and Dad joined Grams, Mickey and me for a nightcap after we had swept and secured the door by pounding nails into a piece of plywood across the jamb. We brought Fargo upstairs, too, for the first time, along with his water and food dishes. He immediately settled in at Grams’ feet, while Bonkers kept a safe distance. Fargo, it seemed, could care less about cats. Or maybe Bonkers scared him. I was just glad that we didn’t have an eight-legged chase around the flat with fur flying.

We all had bourbon this time, neat. None of us felt like talking about Chacho. I think we were all feeling bad for Luis—who had gone home to bed—and we were all tired, too. But with my great sense of timing, I decided it would be the perfect moment to announce our new wedding plans.

“Mom, Dad, Grams, did you ever see the movie *Rachel Getting Married?*”

They shook their heads.

“Well, it’s about this young woman in rehab, who goes home for her sister’s wedding, and all sorts of past disasters are brought up, and luckily the wedding goes well at the end, but it’s so stressful and upsetting until that point.”

Mom sipped her drink. “And?”

“Well, Mickey and I think that weddings can be stressful.”

Grams piped up. “Did you ever see *Woman of the Year*, with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey? They got married fast, but they didn’t really feel married afterward.”

I sensed that Grams knew where I was going with this conversation and didn't approve.

"How about *Eye of the Needle*, when Kate Nelligan and her husband drive away drunk after their fancy wedding and he ends up paralyzed and they live UN-happily ever after isolated from civilization until she has to kill a Nazi to save the world?" I gulped some bourbon. "Or *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* where everything is really big and loud and seven hundred people dance in circles, and okay, it's funny, but . . ."

"Good lord, Bea, what are you going on about? We're not Greek! And you said there would be forty people at most? Are you and Mickey inviting the entire NYPD? Or, oh holy shit, are you breaking up?" Mom switched her attention to Mickey. "What the hell?"

Mickey swallowed some bourbon himself and gave Mom a reassuring smile. "We are never breaking up, Sylvia. No worries there. What my cinephile fiancée is trying to tell you is simply that . . ."

"We don't want a wedding. We want to get married this Friday at City Hall." I drained my glass.

Dad choked on his bourbon.

Grams sniffed.

Mom scowled at me and said, "What the fuck?"

Fargo barked.

"I'm sorry, Mom, I . . ."

"Sorry my ass." She got up and came over to me, pulled me out of my chair, and hugged me. "This means all I have to do is show up, right?"

"Um, yup, but what about your visions of a fancy wedding and . . ."

"Darling daughter, you are the bees' knees, the sugar in my tea, and the morphine in my IV drip." Mom will always be a doctor. "How you and Mickey tie the knot is your own

beeswax. I was simply doing my best to be a proper mother of the bride, but I'm happy as can be that we're not going to plan some awful party at an awful restaurant."

"Wow. Okay. So this is all good with you?"

"Good? It's the best goddamn news!" She took a sip of bourbon. "But we'll have to do something about the cake."

"We'll have champagne at the Tippy Parson," I murmured.

"Sounds perfectamente." She released me and held my face in her hands and kissed me on my nose.

"Mom, I think you're drunk."

"Tippy, like the restaurant. Not used to this hard stuff."

"What was that about a cake?" Mickey asked.

"There has to be cake, Mick. I'm sure Grams will agree." She swirled around to face Grams, who was studying her empty, pink thistle rose tumbler.

"I've always said a wedding must have dancing," Grams announced.

Mickey held his glass up to her. "Then we shall dance, Grams. I promise."

Grams squinted at him. "May I suggest a song?"

"You bet."

"'I'll Be Your Baby Tonight.' The great Bob Dylan."

"Perfect."

"Damn perfect," Mom echoed.

Dad just laughed.

I retrieved the Bulleit bottle and refilled everyone's glass. Except Mom's.

Chapter Nineteen

I was lying in bed the next morning, with Bonkers purring on my chest and Mickey snoring on my right and Fargo spread out at my feet on the bed, chewing on a hard rubber bone that Grams had got for him. I don't know exactly how Bonkers and Fargo decided to get along, but apparently as long as Bonkers still got my chest, he didn't care where Fargo was.

I considered going for a run, but I was too content to move, surrounded by creatures who loved me. So I decided to mull over everything that was going on before getting up.

First off, Beverly's murder. We hadn't gotten anywhere. It couldn't have been Oliver, since he was out of town, but he could have colluded with someone, like Gregory, or even Samuel. Or maybe one of them did it on their own. Or maybe whoever killed her had no relation to her whatsoever and somehow got into her apartment to steal stuff and killed her.

But how did they get in without the doorman noticing?

That made the doorman another suspect. I hadn't gotten any useful information about him from Jojo, but it sounded to me like the last thing he would do would be to hurt Beverly.

Dead ends, all around.

I thought again about why we shouldn't just walk away from the whole messy case, but that snowball effect was still rolling along, and I was partners with my fiancé ex-cop who hated loose ends. And although Luis was distracted, he was not one to abandon a case, or his friends, for that matter.

I smiled to myself. I wanted to untangle this mess just as much as they did

Then there was Fargo, now a happy dog, a little bit of a watchdog, and Grams' new best friend. Could someone other than Kathleen have dropped him off at our office? Who knew that I had seen him on Saturday, other than Kathleen, whose phone number didn't get answered? And why should I even worry about this? I mean, I already knew there was no way Mickey and I—and even Luis—would want to give him back to anyone.

And now we had Chacho to figure out. Why did he break in and bust things up? Just because Ruby wouldn't give him any money? I figured he must be in some big trouble and had no one else to turn to. He had a gun and seemed ready to use it. For someone who wasn't known to be violent, well, that gun signaled some kind of big, big problem.

All that thinking made me hungry, so I rubbed Bonkers' ears and eased him off of me and rolled out of bed. Fargo jumped down with the bone in his mouth, and Bonkers crawled under the covers.

Grams was up and reading the *Times*. Fargo settled down at her feet as she pointed to the pot of coffee she had made and the box of muffins, scones, and lemon bread she apparently had purchased at Billy's Bakery on Ninth Avenue. "Grams! Wow! Thanks! What time is it, anyway?" I peered at the kit cat clock over the sink, with its tail and eyes swinging back and forth. "Nine o'clock! Jeez. We overslept." I poured some coffee, grabbed a blueberry muffin, and joined Grams at

the table. "How'd you sleep?"

"Not well. I'm worried about Luis." She put the paper down. "I don't think Ruby should come home until this situation with Chacho is resolved."

I nodded while chewing.

"When is she scheduled to arrive?"

I swallowed. "Today." I slurped some coffee.

"Not good. We have very little time to sort this out."

Grams took off her reading glasses and leaned over to pet Fargo.

"Um, 'we'? Grams, are you joining Asta Investigations?"

I smiled.

She didn't.

"Of course not. But I want to help as I can. I think you and I should go talk to Luis now and get some more information." She stood up.

"Grams, wait a minute. I'm not dressed. I was going to go for a run and then take a shower, and Mickey's still asleep . . ."

"You have your pajamas on. I'm sure Luis won't mind."

She walked toward the door. "C'mon, Fargo, let's go downstairs. You coming, Annabelle?"

What was I going to say? I grabbed my bathrobe from the bedroom and hustled out after Grams and her faithful sidekick.

Grams knew that Luis was in the office because she saw him on her way back from the bakery. We found him sitting on the couch, talking to Ruby on his phone. He acknowledged us with a quick wave and held up one finger to indicate he'd just be a minute. We sat at the conference table while Fargo settled down again with his rubber bone.

"*Querida*, do not worry. I will find Chacho and I will make sure he understands that he is to leave us alone. I . . ."

He stopped to listen. "I will not hurt him, unless the situation

calls for me to do so. Do not come home today. . . I miss you, too, but . . . Yes, maybe tomorrow.” He stopped again. “*Ś. Comprendo. Yo tampoco. Te amo.*” He hung up.

Grams held out something wrapped in a napkin. “Have a scone, Luis.”

“*Gracias*, Mrs. Paxton.”

“Grams, Luis.”

He acknowledged that with a nod and took a bite of the scone.

“What did Ruby tell you, Luis?” I asked.

He looked at me like he hadn’t realized I was there. “Nice clothes, Annabelle.”

“Pajamas. Slept late. What did she say?”

“She gave me his address. He lives in a large apartment complex. She does not know what trouble he is in. I told her maybe to come home tomorrow, not today. I must first confront Chacho.”

“You mean ‘we’, Luis,” I said.

Grams slapped her hands on her knees and stood up. “Let’s go.”

Luis was startled. “Mrs., I mean Grams, this would not be a good idea for you to come with us. And Annabelle needs to put real clothes on. Where is Mickey anyway?”

“I’ll go wake him up right now. I’ll get dressed. Grams, you stay here with Luis.”

Luis took a big bite of the scone and flashed a wide-eyed grimace at me that I took to mean, please handle Grams!

I patted him on the shoulder as I left and hustled upstairs.

Mickey was up, eating a muffin and staring at the front page of the paper. “Hi, babe,” he garbled as he chewed. “Did you know that Bonkers likes to nibble on toes? These are good. Did you go to Billy’s or . . .”

“Mickey. Get dressed. Luis has Chacho’s address. We’re

all going to talk to him.” I started to go into the bedroom and then swirled around. “Well, maybe just me and Luis. You might have to stay here with Grams.”

He frowned. “Why? Is she okay?”

“Oh yeah, she’s okay all right. She wants to go meet Chacho with us. We can’t let that happen, so hop to it, Mick.”

He slugged down some coffee. “We might have to let her.”

I was in the bathroom pulling off my pajamas. “What did you say?”

He came in. “Maybe Grams should come with us.”

I dropped my PJs and my jaw. “He had a GUN, remember? We can’t put Grams in danger!”

“We won’t. We’ll make sure she’s safe. In fact, I’ll get the Mustang from the garage and we’ll drive. She can stay in the car. It’ll be easier than talking her out of this. Trust me.” He took off his bathrobe and hung it on the back of the door.

Mickey loves his Mustang. We don’t use it much in New York, except for airport runs, but it’s parked in a garage a few blocks away and it’s a good thing for private eyes to always have available wheels.

I pulled on my underwear and sat down to yank on my jeans. “Top will be up, right? It just started raining.”

“Oh, okay, if you insist.”



I called Mom and Dad to let them know we’d be out for the morning and would check in later. Mom told me they were going to buy a cake with Sal and Drew. “Vanilla or chocolate, dear? Have you decided?”

“I dunno, Mom. How about both? Switch the layers? Whatever you guys think. You’re the experts. Gotta go.” I hung up.

“Wedding cakes should be white cakes, dear,” admonished Grams.

“And grandmothers shouldn’t be joining a P.I. firm,” I retorted.

She grinned. “Touché.”

We situated Fargo in the office with the rubber bone and waited with Luis for Mickey to bring the car around. We all piled in and headed north.

Chacho lived in a *huge* apartment complex, and I mean huge, in Morningside Heights on La Salle Street. Mickey found a parking place miraculously. He told Grams to wait in the car, but she had to get out of the front seat to let Luis and me out, and she continued on, leading the way. We had no choice but to catch up.

“I told you so, Mickey,” I grumbled.

“Told you what?” Grams asked. But Mickey forged ahead, ignoring us.

Now we had to find the right building among the seven, which Mickey told us contained about eighteen hundred apartments. “I dated a woman who lived here. Nice place, once you get used to the close quarters.”

“How long did you date her?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Long enough. She broke it off. Didn’t want to get too serious with a cop. That was okay with me. I didn’t want to get too serious with a lawyer.”

We went into the foyer of the first building and checked the names on the mailboxes, and then repeated that for three more buildings. At the fifth, we found Chacho.

And not because of the mailboxes.

A group of people had gathered by the corner of the building. We made our way through and saw him, lying face-up in the grass, covered in blood.

Chacho Salcedo was dead.

It didn't take a trained detective to ascertain that he had been shot in the chest.

I immediately felt a little queasy and worried that my recent vomiting episode might have given my stomach muscle memory and I'd be upchucking blueberry muffin mush any second. I turned to walk away, which seemed to be what Luis wanted me and Mickey and Grams to do, as he whispered, "We should leave here now, *amigos*."

"But Luis, shouldn't we wait for the police and . . ."

He cut me off. "Now, Annabelle. *Basta*."

The four of us headed back to La Salle Street, all of us soaked, as the rain was not letting up. "Luis, why are we . . .?"

This time Mickey cut me off. "They'll suspect Luis. Second husband, now at the murder scene. We need to split, babe."

"Ye gods and little fishes," exclaimed Grams.

That summed it up.

Chapter Twenty

After Mickey dropped us off and returned the car, we hung our jackets on the coat rack by the door. I ran upstairs to fetch some towels, while Luis poured four glasses of Pellegrino. Mickey reappeared, and we all dried off, sat and sipped. No one was talking. Until I was.

“Luis, what’s the big deal? The police are not going to suspect you. Chacho couldn’t have been killed that long ago, since people had just found him, and you were here this morning. Grams and I can attest to that.”

Mickey and Luis exchanged looks while Luis tilted his head toward me like, go ahead, you tell her.

“Chacho wasn’t killed there.”

“HUH?”

“There wasn’t enough blood.”

“There was enough to make me want to hurl!”

“If he had been shot there, we would have seen a lot more blood.”

“You figured that out from a quick minute?” Grams asked.

“I’ve seen too many dead bodies,” Mickey muttered. He switched to a relaxed tone. “And maybe I’m wrong. But Luis wants to play it this way, so we will.”

I shot to my feet. “You would never tell someone to do this in any other situation, Mickey.” I turned to Luis. “Why are you so afraid? You didn’t kill him, and aren’t we

professionals who *help* the police, not obstruct justice?”

Luis set his glass on his desk. “I need to think only of Ruby and the baby now. I cannot be sitting in a police station as a suspect while she is away. I cannot be causing her worry and stress. The news that Chacho is dead will be upsetting enough.”

I sat back down. “She still cares about him?”

“He is an addict. She knew him before. She loved him before. She knows what he could have been. She did not want him in her life any longer, but she cared about him, *sí*. She hoped for him to be a better man.”

In spite of the mood and the sadness in the room, that last remark of Luis’ led me right to Jack Nicholson saying to Helen Hunt in *As Good As It Gets*, “You make me want to be a better man.” Mickey and I looked at each other and smiled. It’s one of our favorite movies, and I knew he had had the same thought.

Grams was petting Fargo. “Aren’t you two supposed to be getting a marriage license today? Have you forgotten that tomorrow is Friday, the biggest day of your lives? Shouldn’t you change your clothes?”

Mickey stood. “Indeed. Let’s leave Luis to call Ruby. Grams, do you want to come with us, or . . .”

Grams chuckled. “Getting a marriage license does not require a third wheel. No, I think I’ll lie down for a bit. This detective work has worn me out.”

I gave Luis a peck on the cheek and the three of us went upstairs.



“Mickey, I don’t like this one bit. Not one iota. Not one teeny tiny little spec of dust. Not even the smallest grain of salt. Not . . .”

“Stop. Please. I get it.” He pulled me to him in a hug. “I don’t like it either, but we have to follow Luis’ lead on this. We’re partners, this is his mess, and we need to support and help him, just like he’s helped us countless times.”

I kissed him. “Well, probably not countless, I mean I could count them, but I take your point.”

We pulled away from each other and he looked me up and down. “You’re naked.”

“Like you didn’t notice before! So are you, by the way.”

He reached for me, but I pulled back. “Grams, in the next room. Not asleep yet.”

He grinned. “The shower is big enough for both of us and it’s across the hall. We can do stand-up things.”

“Like, tell each other jokes.” I grinned back.

“Right, that’s what I meant. C’mon.” This time I gave him my hand and we darted into the bathroom, ready to wash the morning off of us and, well, start over on the day, if you know what I mean.

When we were dressed and getting ready to head to see the City Clerk, there was a knock at the door, which was a little odd, since we hadn’t buzzed anyone up, but we figured it was Luis.

It wasn’t. It was Kermit. Luis had let him in downstairs.

“You two are looking happy today.” He hung his umbrella on our doorknob. “Still pouring out there.”

“It’s the rain. Makes us deliriously joyful,” Mickey replied as they shook hands. “What’s up, Kerm?”

We all sat at the same time, like some choreographer told us to do so. “A break in the case. We found the murder weapon.”

“Wow! That’s fantastic!” I held out my hand for a high five, but he ignored it, so I put it down. “Um, what and where and how?”

“You left out ‘when.’ Sunday, the day after the murder. It was at the bottom of the apartment building’s dumpster.” He paused. “We didn’t know then if it had anything to do with the case or not.”

“What is it?” Mickey asked.

“A bookend. A marble replica of one of the public library lion statues. It has a trace of Beverly’s blood on it and a partial print, a palm print.” He looked at me. “Could I have a glass of water?”

“No! Not until you tell us if you identified the print!”

Kermit squinted at me and then at Mickey, who shrugged. “Better keep talking.”

Kermit stood up and walked to the kitchen while he filled us in. “It’s a close match to a ‘Queenie McMillan,’ who’s in the DCJS files.” He opened a couple of cabinets and found the one with glasses on the third try. He picked one and filled it with water from the tap.

“Washington DC, um, Joint, uh, Chiefs of Staff?”

Kermit gulped some water and stared at me. Mickey answered. “Division of Criminal Justice Services.”

Kermit sat back down. “She was arrested several years ago on an assault charge. The description portrays her as blond, five feet five inches, thin. Born in 1985. She did three years. Just the one offense. I’m waiting on more information. Could take some time.”

“I bet she’s not listed in the white pages or on Facebook.”

Kermit nodded. “Copy that.” He turned to Mickey. “You uncover any leads on this ‘Queenie,’ you’ll let me know.”

“Of course.” Mickey’s eyes flickered toward mine. The assumption that we would always share all knowledge with the police was no longer true, and his glance suggested to me that he was feeling the same twinge of guilt that I was.

“Kermit, big news!” I felt the need to change the subject.

“Change of plans! Mickey and I are going to be married at the City Clerk’s office tomorrow afternoon! Will you come?”

Kermit cracked the subtlest of smiles. “What time?”

“We’re going to gather there at three o’clock. We’ll have to wait our turn.”

Mickey stood. “We need to get over there and get our license, babe. We can’t get married for twenty-four hours after we get it, and it’s one-thirty now.”

Kermit stood and fist-bumped with Mickey. “I’ll be there. Congrats.” Then he walked over to me and in a move that surprised me as much as Ben Affleck’s performance in *The Town*—I mean, he was really good!—Kermit held out his hands to me. I put mine in his and he pulled me to my feet and kissed me on the cheek. “You’re okay, Annabelle. Mickey’s a lucky man.”

“Even though I go a little mad sometimes?”

Kermit contemplated me. “Anthony Perkins said that in *Psycho*.”

“Yup.” I held up my hand again for a high five.

This time he slapped it. “Damn, Paxton, she’s good.”

“Yeah, well if the two of you are finished falling love over there, the two of us really do have somewhere to go.” He picked up Kermit’s umbrella and tossed it to him. “Later.”

After Kermit left, Mickey called a taxi and we skipped downstairs to wait for it in the building’s entrance alcove. We held hands and stood silently, while I decided to forget about the NYPD for a while and savor all that was right and true: Mickey’s touch, the heavy rain, and the information that we had a lead in Beverly’s case. Oh yeah, and that I was getting married the next day.

The stars were aligning perfectly, right down to the ones on my wedding boots.

Chapter Twenty-One

At twoish on a Thursday afternoon, there weren't a lot of people filling out marriage license applications, so Mickey and I sailed through the process quickly. I paid the thirty-five bucks (I told Mickey he could cover the marriage ceremony fee tomorrow), we filled out the application, waited for it to be processed, then jaunted down the steps at 141 Worth Street, hand in hand, like we were Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck about to take off on a Roman holiday in *Roman Holiday*. I mean, we were *that* happy.

Mickey picked me up—his arms around my waist—and swung me around in a couple of circles, planted me back on the sidewalk, and planted a big kiss on my laughing mouth. We were sickeningly happy. Like in a Jimmy Stewart movie. Name one. Doesn't matter.

Oh yeah. And we were soaking wet. Like in *Sweet Home Alabama* when Reese Witherspoon finds Josh Lucas on the beach and they kiss and they're still married even though they thought they were divorced. I've had a crush on Josh Lucas ever since.

"Where to now?" He brushed my hair away from my face.

"It's three. I haven't heard from Mom and Dad. We should go home and call them and Sal and Drew and maybe

cook something at home? Grams will be up from her nap. Luis . . ." I stopped.

"Yeah, Luis." Mickey kissed me again. "Let's check on him first. You can talk to the 'rents on the way home."

Mickey flagged down a taxi, and I speed dialed Dad while we sat in traffic. "We should have walked. We're already soaked." Mickey grabbed my knee. "Damn, I love you."

I leaned over to kiss him right when Dad answered. "Bea? We were just going to call."

"Mm! Hi, Dad. Where are you?"

"At the hotel, drying off. We found you a cake, though I'm not sure I was supposed to tell you that. And we had lunch with Sal and Drew at the Tippy Parson. We met the bartenders and checked out the place. Great spot, by the way. It'll be fun. Not too much room for dancing, but maybe we can move a table or two so that Grams will have her wish, and . . ."

"Dad! You're excited!"

He laughed. "Oh honey, you bet I am. We've only been here since Sunday, and now—can you believe it's only Thursday?—we're already putting together a slapdash wedding party for tomorrow! Now, as for our plans tonight . . ."

"Well, how about we all meet at our place, and . . ."

"Oh, no, that won't do."

I frowned and Mickey mouthed "What?" at me.

"That won't do?"

"No, dear. It's the night before your wedding, which means we men go out without you women."

I snorted. "You're kidding right? A stag party?"

Mickey's eyes got wide and he mouthed "Wow!"

"Well, no strippers or anything like that, muffinhead."

"Nice of you to explain . . ."

"But, I'm not kidding. It's a good tradition. So it'll be me and Sal and Drew and Mickey and Luis and anyone else Mick

wants to invite. And you and Grams and Syl can do your own thing.”

What in the world would that be, I thought. But I know when my father is certain about something, and this was one of those times.

“All right, Dad. Where and when is this testosterone troop getting together?”

“I’ll text Mick.”

“It’s a SECRET?”

Dad laughed again. “See you tomorrow, darling.” He hung up.

I dropped my phone in my purse. “Can we run away to a hotel right now and stay there until we get married tomorrow?”

Mickey’s phone buzzed and he checked it out. “Aah.”

“AAH?”

“From your Dad.” He stuck his phone in his pocket and kissed me. “Can’t tell.”

“Did you know this was being cooked up?”

“Jeff hinted at it last night when I walked them down to the corner with Fargo. Wasn’t sure he would pull it off.” He smiled and put his arm around me. “I like it. I like it that he likes me and wants to do this.”

I snuggled against his wet jacket. “Me, too. But now I’ve got to figure out what to do with Grams and Mom.”

He squeezed me. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry. It’s my guess they’ve cooked up their own surprise.”

Which made me worry.



We found Luis in Asta Investigations’ office, which had a brand spanking new door, installed while we were out. Fargo was lying at Luis’ feet, and it occurred to me that the mystery

dog might best belong with Luis, until I realized I wasn't sure if Fargo would be good to have around a newborn, and if Ruby even liked dogs. Maybe Fargo simply belonged to all of us. The agency should have a mascot dog anyway. Maybe we could teach Fargo to sniff out evidence. All of this thinking led me to remember I still didn't know what happened to Kathleen.

But right now we had to concern ourselves with Luis, who looked miserable.

"Have you eaten?" Mickey asked him.

"Sandwich. A beer. I slept here. Fargo kept me company."

He paused. "Kermit was here this morning. I let him in to see you."

"Yup. They found Beverly's murder weapon. A bookend replica of a New York Public Library lion."

"Prints?"

"Partial," said Mickey. "Someone named Queenie McMillan. Still checking that out."

"We do not know who this is, right?"

"Right," I confirmed. "Luis, we did not reveal anything about your, um, situation to Kermit."

"I thank you for that, *amiga*. I am aware this is uncomfortable."

"Have you uncovered anything about Chacho?"

He sighed. "No. He has not been arrested since he moved to Brooklyn. It is my guess he was killed over drug money, but I have no evidence of that. I only hope the police will solve this without involving any of us."

"Is Ruby okay?" I asked.

"She wants to come home today as planned, but I insisted that she stay in Boston until I know she will be safe here. The police might want to talk to her and I would rather they have a chance to solve this before she comes home."

Mickey rubbed his face. "That's a lot of ifs, Luis. I think you could save yourself a lot of grief if you came clean with the police now. We could talk to Kermit. It's not his case, but he could help."

"I will consider that. But for now . . ."

I frowned. "We should postpone the wedding. Even if she leaves Boston tomorrow morning, it would be too tight a schedule for her, pregnant and all, to celebrate with us."

"You're right, babe. We can do this whenever it makes sense for everyone, and . . ."

"No, my friends, thank you, but I already talked to Ruby about this. She would feel terrible if she disrupted your plans. So we will not speak of this anymore. We will simply have a second celebration once she is home, and once we have a baby in our arms."

Mickey and I knew Luis well enough to understand that he was firm in this decision. After a beat of silent agreement, I wanted to lighten the mood. "Luis, guess what! You're going to a stag party tonight! All the men in my life are going out WITHOUT me! What fun, right?!"

"Oh, *amiga*, I do not think I am up for celebrating."

Luis sounded exhausted. Mickey patted him on the shoulder. "You're my best man, like it or not, and you'll join us, like it or not. Take a shower, put on some nice clothes. We're meeting Jeff at five-thirty."

Luis sighed. "*Dios mio. Bueno*. I will get ready. For you, my friend." He got up and stretched. Fargo did the same. "This is a good dog. Ruby will be happy he is here."

I smiled. "Maybe we should change our name to Fargo Investigations."

"But then people would think we're in North Dakota," Mickey interjected.

And that made me wonder if that's where Fargo, our

wonder dog, was from. I had figured he was named after the movie, of course.



Mickey and I found Grams working on a crossword puzzle and eating pistachios. Most of the shells had made it into the bowl. I swept up the others with my hands and dropped them in.

“I would have gotten those, Belle.”

“I know, Grams. It’s no problem. Do you need anything else to eat?”

“No, I’m fine. Had some crackers with ketchup earlier.”

I decided to let that one slide. “Have you heard from Mom?”

“Yes. Five-thirty. She’ll be here. But we haven’t heard from the pet store. I called them this morning, telling them we’d be out. The stuff was supposed to be here by now.”

“I’m sure they’ll show up. Hey, do you know if we’re supposed to dress up for this party of Mom’s?”

Grams gave me a look like I was out of my mind before she refocused on her pistachios and crossword puzzle.

I took that as a “no.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mom showed up as the men were leaving. Mickey winked at me and told me to watch out for big cakes that could hold naked men. I told him to stay away from anything with fish-net stockings, male or female.

Mom had two shopping bags with her. She deposited them on the kitchen counter and started unloading. “Okay. I’ve got wine, good cheeses, lovely crackers, some guacamole, cashews, grapes, and ice cream. Salted caramel.” She put that in the freezer. “Now, the two of you need to get dressed.”

“Huh? It sounds like we’re eating in.”

Mom’s eyes flashed, like she was going to reveal a big secret. “We are. And we’re going to watch movies. But in our pajamas.”

Grams damn near choked on a pistachio. “I don’t have any. I sleep in a T-shirt and underpants.”

I didn’t need to know this about Grams.

“Annabelle, give Grams your lightweight robe. And some socks. You put on PJs, and look,” she opened her jacket, “I’m wearing mine, well, the top anyway. My slippers and bottoms are in my tote bag here.” She dug around in it and showed them to us. Her pajamas were covered in a pattern of paw prints. “Right? We’re going to have ourselves one fucking great slumber party.”

“Are we going to sleep in sleeping bags, too?” Grams asked before I could.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, no, Dorothy, we’ll do everything but sleep. Okay, chop chop, you too. We’re going to be girls together!”

“I have to admit, I think this is a good idea, Mom.” I held out my hand to Grams. “C’mon, I’ll get the robe and socks for you.”

“No socks. I just got a pedi. Might as well show it off. And I have one other condition.”

“What.”

“My girlfriends and I always danced to our favorite music when we had sleepovers.”

“You want to dance?” Mom said.

Grams seemed to be dance crazy these days. “That’s what I said, Sylvia.”

“Well then, we will fucking dance! Annabelle, hook up your iPod and find some oldies that we can jump around to.”

“Doesn’t have to be oldies,” Grams said as she followed me to my room. “I like the young man who sings with Maroon 5 very much.”

“Adam Levine. You’re full of surprises, Grams.”

I gave her the robe and she went into her room to change. I put on my Eiffel Tower cropped-legs-and-short-sleeves PJs and slippers and put my hair in little pigtails that stuck out behind each ear since my hair isn’t very long. I figured if I was going to dance to Maroon 5, I should look like a groupie. No offense to Maroon 5 groupies. Pigtails are cute on me, honest.

We gathered in the living room where Mom had put out the spread of food and had poured us some wine, until she remembered that Grams preferred bourbon, and poured her a couple of fingers in the pink rose glass. We clinked glasses as Mom asked, “What’s first? Eats and a movie or dancing?”

“I’m hungry. Let’s eat and watch and get a little drunk before we dance.” I wasn’t sure how much I wanted to dance with Mom and Grams.

We gathered around the coffee table, me cross-legged on the floor next to Fargo, and started munching away. Bonkers was curled up on the couch next to Mom, who hit the Play button on the remote. I didn’t know which movie she had chosen, but I was glad when *Spy* came on. “Yay, Mom! I love this film! Melissa McCarthy is my favorite comic actress.”

Grams shoved a grape in her mouth and mumbled, “Sure, but it’s Jason Statham who does it for me.”

Mom laughed. “I told you this would be fun.”

The door buzzer buzzed. I pushed the intercom button and just as we thought, the supplies for Fargo had arrived. The young woman who was delivering them walked up our two flights of stairs carrying two big shopping bags and a dog bed under her arm. “Lucky pooch.” I thanked her and tipped her and deposited the stash by the door.

Fargo immediately took residence in the bed along with his rubber bone—until a few minutes later when he sprang to his feet and ran to the door, barking like mad. Bonkers darted out of the room.

“What the hell?” Mom put her wine glass down.

I went to the door and checked the peephole. Nothing.

I kneeled next to Fargo and rested my hand on his back. “What is it, boy?” Like he would tell me. But there was no calming him down.

I told Mom to mute the movie and ssshed both her and Grams. Grams came over and put her arms around Fargo and told him to sit. He did.

I opened the door a crack, not enough to let Fargo out, but enough to listen. I heard footsteps on the stairs.

Fargo whimpered.

“Who’s there?” No one answered me, but the footsteps continued.

“Mom. Grams. Both of you, go into our bedroom and shut the door.”

“Bea, holy shit, is it that Chacho guy?”

I realized I hadn’t told Mom and Dad about finding Chacho. But Grams took care of that.

“He’s dead, Sylvia.”

“WHAT?”

“I don’t know who it is. I think they got in when the pet store delivery woman left. Just do it, now. Take Fargo with you. If you hear anything bad, call nine-one-one.”

“I’m not waiting for anything bad to happen!” Mom was readying her phone as Grams hustled her and Fargo to the bedroom. As they were shutting the door I could hear Mom hollering at the emergency operator that we were being “invaded” and giving the address.

I got my Beretta out of my purse and stood by the door. I thought about calling Mickey, but I didn’t know where he was, and I figured the police could get to us fast.

I cracked the door again.

That was a mistake.

It flung open and hit me in the face and I fell to the floor. A man with a knit beanie and sunglasses stood over me.

“Where is it?”

“Get out.”

“Give it to me, and I’ll go.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I sat up and felt for my gun, which had slid under the chair near the door when I fell. I closed my left hand around it, which felt weird, since I’m right-handed.

He appeared to be left-handed— I noticed when he pulled his own gun out of his pocket and aimed it at me.

“Chacho was here. He must have hid the stash here. Give it to me now and we’ll forget this ever happened.”

Fargo was still barking and growling. I imagined Grams holding him tight, to keep him from busting through the door of the bedroom.

I didn’t know how I was going to pull my gun without being shot first. So I sat there and kept my eyes on his, not wavering, not showing fear, I hoped, even though I was sitting on my right hand to keep it from shaking. “Chacho broke in downstairs and ransacked the place. He didn’t stash anything.”

The guy gave me a nasty smirk. “So you *do* know Chacho. You glad he’s dead, too?”

“I don’t *know* him. Just chased him after that. He pointed a gun at me, too.”

The creepoid squatted down in front of me and leered. “What’d you do for him, so he wouldn’t shoot, eh?” He traced my chin with the barrel of his gun.

That scared the shit out of me. But it also pissed me off. Big time.

My hand stopped shaking.

I flung my Beretta’d left hand up and hit him across the face and yelled “Fargo! Come!” trusting that Grams would let him out.

And before this guy could regain any balance, he not only had a crazed dog clamping his teeth down on his leg, he had an old lady in a bathrobe and acid green toenails wielding a hardcover edition of Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*, which she promptly used to bean him, and my mother in her pawprint PJs rushing out holding one of my four-inch Badgley Mischka black satin pumps, with which she pummeled his back. I winced, not worried about any pain he might be experiencing, but concerned that she might break the heel. Mickey bought those for me, having learned my actual shoe size, and

I had only worn them once. Well, outside of the flat, that is. I had modeled them around inside for him several times . . . but that's another story.

I was able to scramble to my feet, regrip my gun with both hands, point it at the intruder, and kick his away from him.

I didn't say a word. Mom was taking care of the talking as she beat on him with my shoe. "You goddamn prick asshole deadbeat son-of-a-bitch fucker, who do you think you are, you slimebag shit-throwing inbred. Dickbrain."

"Mom. Stop it with the shoe. I've got him. Grams, take it easy. Don't hit him again. Fargo, good dog. You hang on there."

Whatshisname was holding his hand to his bleeding head and yelling at me. "Get that goddamn dog off of me!"

But I let Fargo hang on. "What's your name, assprick?" I am my mother's daughter, after all.

"Fuck you."

That's when we heard the police sirens.

"Mom, yell for them. Buzz the buzzer for them just in case."

She did, screaming that we were on the top floor and there was a "fuckhead intruder" on the ground and he had a gun.

Two officers scrambled up the stairs guns drawn, saw me, and told me to drop it.

I did.

Mom freaked out. "She's not the bad guy! She's a detective, for chrissakes! He's the one who was going to kill us!"

I knelt down and pulled Fargo off of Assprick. "Mom, they'll figure it out. Calm down."

Grams sat down on the couch and gulped the rest of the bourbon. Mom stood next to me and stared at the cops.

I hugged Fargo and told him what a good dog he was.
And then I fainted.

Sometimes it's true that a black-and-blue face is caused by
a door.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was a long night, and not even close to what any of us had in mind for a prenuptial binge. When I came to, I was lying on the couch and Mom was pressing a cold washcloth against my head. The police were getting Grams' statement, while she kept Fargo close to her. He seemed ready to attack the creeper again.

“Did you call Dad?” I asked Mom.

“They're on their way.”

The EMTs showed up. I heard one of the officers tell them that our intruder's name was Webster Young. Apparently this lowlife was named after a dictionary. Go figure.

The EMTs advised me to go to the hospital, too, but I implored Mom to let me stay, and she did, explaining to them that she was a doctor. They left with Webster, who was writhing in pain and whimpering like a kitten, while Fargo continued growling like the super dog he was.

The police asked more questions. Mom and Grams told them about Chacho's break-in. I couldn't stop them, even if I wanted to, and I didn't. My allegiance to Luis was solid, but withholding anything from the NYPD at this point would have been just plain stupid.

Mickey burst through the door and would have screeched to a halt, if his shoes could actually screech. He saw me on

the couch and squatted next to me and took my hand in his. “You okay?”

I could tell from the concern on his face that my face looked anything but okay. Mickey was trying to smile but he was nibbling on his lower lip like he does when he’s nervous. His grip on my hand was lovingly painful. “Don’t talk, babe.” Mom handed Mickey the compress and left her position perched next to me on the couch so that Mickey could take over. He leaned over and pressed the cloth against my forehead. I teared up and gulped some breath.

Dad studied me from the end of the couch and nodded reassuringly. “You’re all right, muffinhead. You’re all right.” I believe he was convincing himself as much as me.

“How did he get through the door downstairs?” Dad asked the room, wanting anyone to answer, and Grams told him about the pet store delivery.

Luis was pacing and muttering. The officers asked him his name, and told him to come to the station with them, to further discuss the Chacho situation. Luis agreed, then came to me and squeezed my foot. “*Te amo, amiga.*” He exited with one of the cops. Dad was shaking hands with the other, who asked us to come to their station tomorrow. Mom said, “That’s impossible. We’re all going to get married tomorrow,” which wasn’t exactly what she meant, of course, but everyone seemed to understand.

Grams piped up that we could see the police in first thing in the morning and get any other questioning over then. That seemed to satisfy everyone. The officers left, and Fargo slid his front legs out in front of him, emitted a big doggy sigh, and rested his head on his paws.

Sal and Drew, meanwhile, had gone right into the kitchen and were pulling out more glasses and pouring beverages.

Spy was still playing, though someone had muted the

sound. I glanced at the screen just as Melissa McCarthy jumped on the motorcycle and it fell over on its side, and I laughed.

It felt good to laugh.

Mom started filling the men in on the whole scene, and Grams added her touches, and pretty soon we were all laughing as some sort of weird release. As Grams went into the kitchen to refill her glass, she caught my eye. She gave me her customary wink and asked, “Time to dance?”

I was sitting up at this point and had taken some Tylenol. I wasn’t sure I could dance, and I was quite sure that Mom and Mickey wouldn’t think I should. But I said, “You bet your grassy green toes, it is,” and stood up. “Mickey, put on some Maroon 5.”

And the next thing I knew, Grams was shimmying across our apartment floor to “Moves Like Jagger,” Mom and Dad were twirling each other around, and Sal and Drew were holding hands and shuffling their feet out of time—clearly not dancers. Mickey and I held on to each other and swayed as if this was a slow dance and nothing bad had happened, and nothing bad ever could.



I woke at eight the next morning, with Bonkers on my chest and Fargo next to me on the bed. This was becoming routine. I petted their ears, one hand each. Bonkers licked my cheek with his sandpapery tongue. Fargo licked my hand.

Mickey opened the door and poked his head in. He held out a mug of coffee. “Want some?”

“Were you standing watch outside the bedroom, waiting to hear me wake up?” I shifted to sitting, rearranged the pillows behind me, and took the mug.

“No. Well, sort of. It’s eight and I knew I had to wake

you. Good timing.” He kissed me.

“Do I look awful?”

“You look beautiful.”

I slurped my coffee. “Cut it out, Mickey. I need the truth. I’m sure my face is black and blue.”

He tilted his head, as though he were assessing my condition, but I figured he was trying to find the right words so that I wouldn’t be upset. “You look like you just lost to Edward Norton in *Fight Club*.”

I dropped my jaw, which caused me to wince. “Wow. Not the words I was expecting.”

Mickey laughed. “Now you have an idea of how awful you look, and now I’m going to give you this mirror,” he pulled out his phone and punched something in, “so that you will be very happy to see that you look nowhere near that bad.” He held the phone in front of me.

“I don’t have my contacts in. Glasses.” I pointed to the bedside table and Mickey handed them to me.

It was a brilliant move. I had a not-so-black black eye, and a bruise along my right cheek that I could easily cover with make-up.

“You’re a genius, sweetie.” I handed the phone back. “But one question. Why the hell do *you* have a mirror app on your phone?”

He smirked. “I downloaded it this morning. Couldn’t find your hand mirror.” He kissed me again. “Get up, gorgeous. Time to visit the NYPD and then get married.”

I grabbed his arm. “You amaze me.”

“Well, you’re the one who makes me amazing.” He patted my leg and stood up. “I want to marry you today, and there’s lots to do. It’ll take you hours to fix that face of yours, so you’d better . . .”

I threw a pillow at him as he hustled out of the room.



Dad and Mickey came with us three generations of women to give formal statements to the police. We went over the entire evening in detail, even talking about the bourbon and the wine and the food. Webster Young was now in jail. He had been in the hospital overnight, with a concussion and a bad dog bite. The police asked us if Fargo had had his shots.

“We don’t know,” I replied. “He was left for us on the sidewalk by a stranger earlier this week. We haven’t had time to have him checked out.”

The officer grinned. “Young probably will have the pleasure of getting the rabies shots.”

It wasn’t nice, but we all grinned. It seemed like fitting retribution.

Mickey asked what they had learned about him. “He’s a drug dealer. Been arrested twice before. Never for assault, though. We are still investigating his association with Chacho Salcedo.” The officer paused. “Which brings me to ask all of you, why didn’t you report the incident with Salcedo when it happened? You must have known we’d find our way to Luis Maldonado, once we identified Chacho and checked out his history.”

Before Mickey could answer, I piped up. “It was my fault. Luis is like family to us and I was worried for him and Ruby. She’s pregnant and everything, and I made him and Mickey promise not to call, which was dumb, of me and of them, but I’m new to this, and Mickey loves me, and Luis does, too, and we were all upset and I guess they figured that they’d go along with me because I was more upset than anyone and I wanted to give Luis a chance to see what he could find out from Ruby, and then there was the whole thing of getting our office fixed up, and . . .”

The cop held up his hand to stop me, which was what I was hoping he would do.

“We’ve gotten thorough information from Luis. He has taken responsibility for the, uh, oversight on all of your parts.” He stood up. “That’s all for now, folks. We’ll keep you posted on any developments.”

Out on the street, on a perfect New York City day—seventy-two degrees, fluffy-clouded blue sky, gentle breeze—we started to walk home.

“Oh! I almost forgot!” I pulled out my phone. “Jojo. She doesn’t know we’re getting married today. I’ve already invited her. I need to give her the update.”

I left her a message. Mickey was silent. He probably still didn’t think it was a good idea to invite her, but we’d already argued about that.

In any relationship, it’s important to pick your battles.

Then again, some battles give you no choice. I had no idea that some of our hardest were still to come. At least we’d be on the same side.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I love my wedding dress. I loved it the day we got married, and I still do. I hope I wear it many times, to fancy holiday parties or gala openings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Never been to any of those before, but with this dress, anything might be possible.

It fit me perfectly that day. Snug but not too snug so I didn't look cheap and I could breathe. Elegant. I felt elegant. I felt like Rosamund Pike on the red carpet at the Oscars, even though I wasn't crazy about the movie *Gone Girl*, but I became a fan when she played Jane in *Pride and Prejudice* and then saw her in *Barney's Version*, which if you haven't seen, you've missed out, believe me. Anyway, I was gazing at myself in our full-length mirror, while Mom was trying to do something fancy with my hair, and, I assumed, failing, for two reasons: one, she knows nothing about hair, having been blessed with a thick mop that has just the right amount of bounce and curl, even as it has turned gray, and two, my hair is not fancy. Doesn't want to be fancy. Does not conjure any images of fancy whatsoever.

"Mom. Stop. Are you trying to do some French braid? It's not long enough."

Mom's mouth was full of bobby pins. "A little twisty

something down the side . . .” At least I think that’s what she said.

I let her fuss some more while I rotated my ring around my finger and kept shifting to get a better view of the back of my dress.

“Stop moving, Bea, I’m almost finished.”

And then she was, and I have to say, I was impressed. She made a sweet little inverted French braid across my forehead and down the side and finished it off with a tiny white ribbon. Not too cute. “Mom! How did you . . .?”

“You’re not the only one who knows how to google, dear.” She kissed my cheek. “Can’t even see the bruising. Well, maybe a little, but it gives you an air of mystery.” She stood back and scrutinized me. “Damn, I’m good.”

I laughed. “Thank you. Now I need to put on my boots and then everyone should be ready for us. I wonder if the limo is here yet.”

Mom gave her lips another swish of lipstick and stuck her hair behind her ears. “Don’t know, but if not, it will be soon. Don’t dawdle, Bea.” She left me and closed the door behind her.

Mickey was getting dressed at Luis and Ruby’s flat, so that we could surprise each other at first sight when we were getting ready to go. I put on a little bit more mascara, refreshed my own lipstick, and pulled on my wedding boots. Sal and Drew had surprised me with a sweet, beaded white evening bag, just big enough for my lipstick, phone, coin purse—and my gun, as it turned out. I meant to leave the Beretta at home, but as I was switching contents from my everyday bag, Mom called out to me that the limo was parked outside, so I dumped the gun in, clasped the bag under my arm, and went to meet her.

Grams and Dad were already downstairs. Sal and Drew

would meet us at the City Clerk's office. As Mom and I made our way down, I got a sudden chill. "Ooooooh." I stopped before we reached the bottom.

"What is it, honey?"

"Got a few butterflies there for a minute." I took a deep breath and exhaled. "Jitters. Normal, right?"

"Of course." She hooked her arm in mine. "You'll see, as soon as you lay your eyes on that beautiful soon-to-be-son-in-law of mine, those jitters will be gone."

She was right. Mickey was standing on the sidewalk with Dad and Luis flanking him. He was wearing a gray pinstripe three-piece suit, which I later learned was a Brioni that he bought quickly that morning after our police meeting—which meant he spent a lot more on his suit than I did on my dress. But that was the last thing I was thinking when we met by the limo. "Damn, you're beautiful."

He held out a bouquet of gardenias to me. "You stole my line. Just as well, because I'm speechless." We weren't even smiling. We were in some sort of surreal daze.

I took the flowers as the limo driver, whose nametag read "Pete," opened the door for us and we all piled in. Mickey and I sat next to each other and held hands. That's when I noticed that he, Dad, and Luis were wearing identical light blue ties, and Grams was wearing a light blue long dress with white sneakers, and Mom had on a light blue scarf. "You all look wonderful!" I gushed.

"Bea, do you have the something old, new, borrowed, blue . . . ?" Dad asked.

"I have on many new things. My ring is old, and Grams loaned me her bracelet." I dangled the slim silver bangle in front of me. "As for something blue, that could be my face, but I am wearing something else, which I will not disclose at this time."

Everyone tittered politely, but I sensed that no one wanted to talk much, including me. It was as though we were overcome by the sheer joy of the day and wanted to savor it.

The limo pulled up in front of the city building. Mickey hopped out and extended his hand to me, but then dropped it. “Your purse,” he whispered.

“Huh?”

“Did you bring your gun?”

“Um, yup,” I whispered.

“Can’t take it inside. Leave it in the limo with Pete. He’s already got Luis’ and mine.”

That made sense, so I left my pretty beaded purse on the seat and got out.

We found Sal and Drew right away, who were also wearing light blue ties. I gave them each a peck on the cheek, and then Mickey and I signed in after several couples in front of us. We knew we were in for a wait, as we had expected.

Grams and Mom found chairs while the men leaned against walls and talked animatedly about inconsequential things. Mickey joined in with them, but I wandered the hallway, smiling at the other couples when I made eye contact. I parked myself along a corner and took a deep whiff of my flowers. My reverie was interrupted, however, by a couple arguing a stone’s throw away from me. They were applying for their license.

“I don’t care what your mother thinks. We should have teleprompters, not only for our vows, but for the speeches at the reception. I don’t want to mess this up, in front of three hundred guests.” That was the man talking.

“It seems so tacky. Can’t we memorize what we’ll say? For each other, to show how important it is . . .”

“Oh, cut it out! We know it’s important, we don’t have to prove that to ourselves at this point, right? C’mon, it’s an easy

thing to do. I'll order the Script-Q."

"Are you sure that's the best software to use?"

"Really? You're going to doubt what I know about software now? This will work. We can set up the computer screen and the teleprompter will be our saving grace, trust me."

"I only was asking if . . ."

But she was cut off when their number came up and they moved away from me.

A teleprompter at your wedding? That IS tacky, I thought. Scriptkew. Odd name. Maybe Script Q. I'll have to ask Mickey if he's heard of it, in case we ever need a teleprompter. I snorted. I'm so glad we're not having a big wedding.

I peered down the hall and saw my family. Mickey saw me and came over. "Luis and I are going to get some air. Looks like it will still be another twenty minutes, at least, and he needs to walk off some anxiety. I can tell because he's working his jaw like a jigsaw. He told Ruby to stay put until Sunday. You okay?" He touched my shoulder.

I smiled. "I'm fine. Just don't want to be making small talk on such a big day. You go on. If things move quickly, we'll find you, so don't hop a bus to Tijuana."

"Damn. You always see right through me." He squeezed my shoulder and then joined Luis as they left the building. As I watched them, I realized Kermit and Jojo hadn't shown up yet. I hoped they both would.

Jojo. I wondered what she would wear. Maybe something low cut to show off her diamond pendant.

The pendant.

Maybe it wasn't a numeral 2 like she said.

Maybe it was a Script Q.

Cursive Q's can look exactly like numeral 2s.

And someone named Queenie had left a palm print on Beverly Musgrave's murder weapon.

I hustled down the hall, depositing my gardenias with Mom and telling her I'd be right back. I skipped down the outside stairs to find Mickey and Luis.

I scurried around the building and back again.

I saw the limo parked down the street, but they weren't hanging out with Pete.

I was about to go back inside when someone else caught my eye.

It was a woman, dressed to the nines, with a necklace so glittery I could see it sparkle from where I stood.

Jojo was walking toward me and waving.

Or was she Queenie McMillan?

"Sorry I'm late!" she called out. "Is it over? Or are you still waiting?"

I waved back tentatively. "You made it!" I made my way toward her. I didn't want her to come inside. I didn't want her at my wedding.

I was very sorry I had invited her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I quickened my pace so that I could stop Jojo as far away as possible from the marriage bureau and my family. I plastered on a smile and reached out to hug her. “You’re here! I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

She returned my hug. “What are you doing out here? Did Mickey dump you at the altar?” She laughed.

“No. We’re just waiting for our place in line. Mickey and Luis, our best man, are going for a stroll and I came out for some air, and, well, here we are!”

I swiveled around, hoping to see my partners, but they were nowhere in sight. “Let’s walk toward Foley Square. The fountain is so pretty.”

Pete saw me and waved, which gave me an idea. “And let’s stop at the limo. My purse is there, and I need to refresh my lipstick.”

“Sure thing,” Jojo said.

When we got to Pete, I walked to the far side of the stretchmobile and told him I needed my purse. As he opened the door for me, I told him quietly to call Mickey and tell him to find me at the fountain. Then I pulled my Beretta from my bag and stuffed it in the white wedding cowgirl boot on my right foot. My dress covered the handle sticking out of the top.

My wedding was the last thing on my mind. I was certain that I had found Beverly's killer, and I was nervous.

Armed—or rather, legged—I joined Jojo with another fake smile and we got to the fountain. She was saying how pretty I looked, how much she loved my dress, and what a darling bracelet I had on, jabbering away as fast as my heart was pounding in my chest like the bass drum stomped on by the lead singer of Mumford & Sons. Right when Jojo said, “So, what do you think? Will being married feel different?” I stopped and said, “No, Queenie, I don't think so.”

We faced each other silently, until she spoke in a soft, measured tone. “Why. Did. You. Call. Me. That.”

“I know about the pendant. It's not a “2” for you and your father. It's a Q, for Queenie.”

“Really. And so you think I stole it, right?”

“Nope. I think you killed Beverly Musgrave.”

What happened next had not been in any slapdash scenario that my head had concocted in the last few minutes. And if it had, perhaps I wouldn't have been quite so direct. But, you know what they say about hindsight.

Jojo pulled a gun out of her snazzy linen jacket and pointed it at me. “Walk.” She motioned to the other side of the fountain.

“Looks like I'm right, Jojo. This isn't going to help you. Mickey and Luis will be here any minute, and . . .”

“Be quiet, and walk.” She stuck her gun against the small of my back.

“You always bring a firearm to weddings?”

“These days, I take it with me everywhere. You think I don't know why we had a fun boozy girl date the other night? I know I'm one of your suspects, especially because of the bracelet. I'd be an idiot to think you weren't tracking down Beverly's missing jewels.”

“What bracelet?” I walked a little faster, to make her keep up, hoping to throw her off balance somehow.

But she was as steady as a good boyfriend and talked nonstop. “Beverly, that evil, evil woman, was supposed to marry Dad. Then he and I would have been rich. But just when it was supposedly all set, she dumped him.”

I stopped. “So you killed her?”

“NO! Keep walking.” We did. “Dad gave her a beautiful diamond bracelet, and I decided she should pay for hurting us. So I was in her apartment one day looking for the bracelet while she was out. I found it all right, but I got out before that witch got home.”

“Where is it now? You’re not wearing it.”

“I don’t wear it. I don’t want Dad to see it. Stop here.” We were on the far side of the fountain now, gazing at it, standing side by side. “I’m not going to jail for robbery, you can forget about that, Miss Private Eye. I’ll shoot you if I have to, but you and your sidekicks are not going to turn me in.”

“You think going to jail for murder is the better option?”

“We’ll get your limo driver to get us out of here.”

“He won’t do it, Queenie.”

“That is not my name, and I don’t know anyone named Queenie.” Her eyes were darting around as her nerves were getting the best of her.

“What about the necklace? C’mon, Jojo, tell me the truth.” I tried to sound sympathetic.

“I HAVE TOLD YOU THE TRUTH!” she screamed. “Dad gave it to me, and I don’t know anyone named Queenie!”

Her outburst disrupted her focus and I saw my chance. I shifted my hips hard to bump hers. She lost her balance and dropped her gun. While she rushed to retrieve it, I pulled my own pink lifesaver out of my boot.

Now it was a standoff.

Talk about a shotgun—I mean, pistol—wedding.

A woman screamed. Other pedestrians got out of our way.

Then the band of Starkey/Paxton guests showed up.

Mom—still holding my gardenias—Dad, Grams, Sal, Drew, Luis, Mickey, and even Kermit. Running down the street like the last thing anyone wanted to do was get married.

“Annabelle!” Mickey yelled.

I didn’t move.

My posse slowed down and Mickey motioned for them to stay back, while he, Luis, and Kermit slowly approached.

“ALL OF YOU!” Jojo called. “YOU STAY AWAY FROM ME!”

“Jojo,” Mickey said calmly. “Put the gun down, and Annabelle will do the same. We can sort all of this out.”

I saw Luis dart behind me and circle around to the other side of Jojo, still at a good distance. Mickey got closer to me.

“Stop.” Jojo’s hand was shaking a bit, I noticed.

That’s when I noticed something else.

The gun had a pearl handle.

It looked exactly like Beverly’s, last seen tucked inside the fake Victor Hugo book and left on her coffee table.

I kept my gun aimed at Jojo and took a step toward her. Mickey touched my arm but I ignored him. “Drop it, Jojo,” I said as sternly as I could.

“Annabelle. Babe. Don’t.” Mickey didn’t sound quite so calm anymore.

I knew I didn’t want to shoot Jojo. And I figured she probably would shoot me, no problem.

But I was laying odds she couldn’t.

Mickey had emptied that gun.

So when she pulled the trigger and I heard my mother yell “Holy Shit!” and nothing happened, I kept walking toward

her and she kept squeezing the trigger until Kermit and Luis came around either side of her and took her down to her knees.

I lowered my Beretta right into Mickey's palm.

"I figured it was empty."

He stuck my gun in his pocket. "Good eyes. You want to tell me what happened?"

I met his eyes. "Hugs first."

We embraced and Mickey whispered in my ear, "Your parents."

I let him go and Mom and Dad took over in the hugs department, while Mickey squatted on his lovely haunches and breathed deeply.

We had just missed our own wedding.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“If Hitchcock ever included a wedding scene in a movie, this could have been it.” Kermit and I were sitting on the rim of the Foley Square Fountain, staring at the county supreme court building. More police had shown up, witnesses had been questioned. It was clear that Jojo had pulled her weapon first, confirming everything I told Kermit. We were taking a breather, at Kermit’s suggestion. He wanted to ask me “just a few more questions.” I was exhausted and ready to go home, but I didn’t want to appear anything but cooperative.

“How did you happen to have your gun with you on your wedding day? Should Mickey be worried?”

“Oh, well, he probably should be worried about a lot of things, but not that. I’ve been trying to get used to having it with me. I switched it from my other purse when I was in a hurry. Didn’t want to leave it unattended at home, I guess, especially since the break-in last night . . .” I trailed off.

“Mick filled me in on that. Sorry that I missed the stag party.” He paused. “The true administration of justice is the firmest pillar of good government.”

Jeez, I thought. Now I’m going to get a lecture? “Kermit, if you think I acted wrongly, just say so, because this was supposed to be the happiest day of my life, and now I . . .”

“The building.”

“What?”

“See, on the court building, across the street? The quote along the top? Got nothing to do with you at this moment, except that it has everything to do with all of us all the time.”

I looked up. “Oh. Right.”

“So, you think Jojo is our killer?”

“I do. She stole a bracelet from Beverly, by her own admission. We know she was in the apartment with criminal intent.” I took a breath. I usually didn’t say things like “criminal intent.” I suppose I was trying to impress Kermit. “And that pendant. It’s just like a scripty Q, isn’t it?”

Kermit stood up. “It is. We’ll find out. If we’re lucky, we’ll match her print to the bookend.” He held out his hand to me and pulled me up.

I brushed off the seat of my dress. “That bothers me.”

“What.”

“One bookend. Where’s the other one?”

He studied me. “We’re looking.” He held out his elbow to me, like an escort. “Let’s join Mickey and the others. Still want to get married?”

I sighed and took his arm. “We’ll have to wait until Monday since the city clerk is closed on the weekends, but everyone’s flying home this weekend, so, I don’t know. Maybe we should wait until we all can be together again.”

Then he smiled, at least as much as Kermit smiles, which means one corner of his mouth moved slightly upward. “Let’s do it today.”

“How’s that?”

“You already have the license. I can marry you. Did it for a cousin. Got my Universal Life Church license last year. We can make it happen right here, by the fountain.”

I let go of his arm and flung both of mine around him.

“It’s no wonder you and Mickey were partners. Like Starsky and Hutch, or Riggs and Murtaugh, or Crocket and Tubbs, or Agents J and K, or . . .”

“Please do not say Turner and Hooch next.”

I stepped back. “Actually, I was going for Cagney and Lacy.”

He squinted at me. “C’mon. Let’s get you hitched.”



Mickey and I stood facing each other and holding hands by the fountain, and our family and friends—as well as some well-wishing strangers—gathered in a semi circle around us. Kermit stood with us, his back to the fountain. He said a few words, welcoming everyone to the ceremony, talking about what a great friend Mickey was and how I was “one of his favorite new friends,” which made me wonder exactly how many new friends he had and figured the competition was not tough. He talked about the rite of marriage being one of the most important anyone could be honored to engage in, which made me wonder why he wasn’t married. And then he said, “Only one is a wanderer; two together are always going somewhere.”

Which I recognized as a quote from Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, so I winked at him, or tried to. I’ve never figured out how to wink well, and I end up screwing up half of my face like I have palsy. Kermit asked me if I was okay. I nodded, and he told me to proceed.

I had written my vows early that morning, before Mickey woke up. The words were scribbled on a piece of paper stuck in my left boot, but I didn’t need it. I’d been repeating them in my head all day. I started out by ripping off a bunch of quotes from movies, specifically, *On Golden Pond*, *Shall We Dance*, and *The Bridges of Madison County*. “Michael Thomas

Paxton, listen to me, mister. You're my knight in shining armor. Don't forget it. I promise to care about everything. The good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things . . . All of it, all the time, every day. It seems right now that all I've ever done in my life is making my way here to you."

Then I paused, and said my own words.

"I will never betray you, I will never stand in the way of your dreams. I will always respect you and support you. I will not run from the bad times. I will do whatever possible to make sure we have endless good times. I love you like I have never loved anyone and like I will never love anyone else. You are my heart."

And then, my closer. I coopted Clint Eastwood.

"Now, go ahead, make my day."

Everyone laughed at that, even Kermit.

Mickey, well, he was all grace. His vows were short, and exactly what I wanted to hear. "Beatrice Annabelle Starkey, you are my light and my life. I cherish you. I am devoted to you, and I will never let you down."

And then his zinger: "And I will love you forever, for Beretta or worse."

We didn't wait for permission to kiss. Kermit pronounced us married while we were already lip locked.

Everyone clapped and cheered. Mickey and I let go of each other and I tossed my gardenia bouquet over my shoulder, which Grams caught. Dad told me later that she hustled for it. Mom hugged me and said, "That was one badass wedding, my darling." Dad pulled me to him, teary-eyed, and kissed my forehead. "Bea, you have found your place in the world, and not everyone does. I'm happy for you, muffin-head." Luis was next, then Sal and Drew, and finally Grams.

She took one hand in hers. "Belle, this has been a most

unusual wedding. In all the excitement, I neglected to tell you something about Mickey. I was going to at the courthouse but then you went outside and I couldn't find you."

I beamed at her. "What is it, Grams?"

"Have the two of you ever gone dancing?"

"Um, no . . ."

She moved closer to me and whispered. "Mickey is a *terrible* dancer."

I laughed. "Well, thank heavens you didn't tell me this before the ceremony. I might have called the whole thing off."

"For good reason, too." Then she kissed my cheek. "You're a pip, Annabelle. Be careful, and take care of my grandson."

Then she left me to take Luis' arm as we all headed to the limo.

Mickey grabbed me, took my face in his hands, and kissed me hard. "God, I'm floating. I'm ecstatic. I'm so fucking happy, as your mother would say!"

"Don't take after her." I kissed him back. "You know, my darling husband, I love all of these people who are here for us, but let's bag the party and catch a plane to Rio or Antarctica or somewhere far, far, away, in another galaxy, perhaps, because right now I want to be with you and only you."

He kissed me again. "I appreciate that, but no. Honeymoon will have to wait. Right now, the rite of passage continues, with cake and champagne and goodies at the Tipsy Parson. We're later than we thought, but Pete called to let them know." He took my hand. "Let's go! Time to eat, drink, dance, and be merry!"

I chuckled, imagining Mickey dancing badly with Grams tsk-tsking on the sidelines. "For Beretta or worse, Mickey, and that includes dancing."

"You don't dance?" he asked.

I didn't answer as I pulled on his hand. We trotted to the limo, our feet as light as Fred and Ginger's.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Marcus should get the Bartender of the Year Award from the National Association of Cool Bartenders. When we got to the Tippy Parson at about six o'clock, he had not only reserved the back room for us, he had decorated it with tea lights all over and white crepe paper draped over the tables and along the windows. The cake—oh, the cake! It was centered on a round table in the middle of the room, and if I had been five years old I would have jumped up and down and squealed as soon as I saw it.

But I was thirty-four.

The cake was appallingly ugly. It had two round tiers with frosting in colored stripes of bright green, bright pink, purple, white, and chocolate. There were yellow beads in a string around the bottom of each layer. A tangerine French poodle dog with the word “Cheri” scripted on it graced the side of the bottom layer, and a silver Eiffel Tower stood on top, which could have been made of sugar or plastic, I couldn't tell. I took a closer look, and found next to it the words, “Happy Fourty Years!”

Sal, Drew and Mom were gathered around me, all smiling and proud.

“Wow!” That was all I could think to say.

“Darling.” Mom was pumped. “We had precious little time to find you a cake. But what luck! This beauty was . . .”

“Misspelled! A baker friend of ours called this morning!” Sal clasped his hands together. “What luck indeed! A Paris cake made to strict specifications that the client wouldn’t pay for because of the, er, glitch, and wouldn’t wait for it to be fixed. So, voilà!” He beamed.

“Wow!” I repeated, at a loss for words.

“And, as you have probably surmised, the client was celebrating an anniversary, and had a dog named Cheri.” Drew filled in.

“And you may remember, darling, that you asked for the Eiffel Tower.” Mom was beaming, too.

Mickey came up beside me and handed me a glass of champagne while he studied the cake. “Wow!”

Dad joined us with champagne for Mom, and Luis handed glasses to Sal and Drew. “Muffinhead, don’t you love it? We couldn’t believe our . . .”

“Luck? Yup, like Mom said. Well, it’s really great, really, I think you are all amazing, and I can’t thank you enough, I mean Mickey and I can’t thank you enough, and . . . Wow. I mean it. Just a really big wow.”

“Ditto from me,” Mickey added, peering at the orange poodle.

Luis put his hand on my shoulder. “*Amiga*, it is a terrible cake.”

“Bloody awful,” said Sal.

“Hard to look at,” Dad added.

“Probably the ugliest fucking cake I’ve ever seen,” Mom chimed in.

“It could be on the menu at Per Favore, don’t you think?” asked Drew.

They were all laughing now, as were Mickey and I. “You

guys. Actually, I think I really do love this cake. I bet it's delicious."

I picked up the Eiffel Tower and bit the top of it.
It was plastic.



As soon as she had arrived at the restaurant, Grams had been holding court amid a throng of NYPD friends of Mickey's, who he had obviously invited sometime when I wasn't around. I eventually met all six of them and their dates or wives or whatever they were, and they all told me what a great guy Mickey was, and what a great detective he was, and how they missed him on the force. But then they went back to talking with Grams, who was, I hoped, relating stories about herself and Maine and not some private Mickey moments or Mickey and Annabelle moments. But I didn't much care. I was too happy.

We didn't have a first dance. The playlist, put together thoughtfully by Marcus with input from, I guess, everyone except me (a lot got done behind my back), started off with some piano jazz. I recognized Gene Harris and Dave Brubeck tunes. Then when I sat down next to Dad, the volume rose and the Stones' "Let's Spend the Night Together" came on.

And there was Mickey, the guy whose grandmother told me couldn't dance, on the middle of the floor, in front of the gruesome wedding cake, performing a sort of breakdance with splits and pops and locks and just all-around boogying. He could have been Kevin Bacon in *Flashdance*, only with hipper hair. My mouth was wide open as I searched across the room to find Grams, who pointed her finger at me and winked.

The song was over, everyone clapped, and Mickey came to me, breathless and held out his hand. "May I have this dance?"

Bob Dylan's "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" came on, and everyone got up and sailed around the small room, cheek to cheek.

The dancing continued, the cake was cut and eaten and it really was delicious, especially if you ate it with your eyes closed, and at nine o'clock we were spent and tired and sated.

Mickey and I hugged everyone good night, and I took Grams' arm. "We can get a cab together to the flat, with Luis, and then . . ."

"Absolutely not. Luis will walk me home. You're not going home." She patted my hand. "If you think I'm going to sleep in the apartment with newlyweds, well, you are sadly mistaken."

Luis guided Grams away from me as Kermit and Mickey approached. "Kermit has news."

"Good!"

"Not so good. Jojo's prints are not on the bookend. Doesn't look like she ever touched it, unless, of course, she was wearing gloves."

"Damn. You got her prints compared on a Friday evening?"

"A favor I called in. Enough for now. We'll talk more after you descend from your wedding high." He kissed my cheek. "Great party."

"Kermit, how can we thank you for saving the day?"

"My honor. Completely. You two be safe." He hugged Mickey and left.

"Was he just talking about contraception?" I asked.

Mickey chuckled. "Maybe. You ready?"

"For what? Where are we going?"

He didn't answer me but took my hand and led me out to the limo where Pete was holding the door open for me. Mickey slid in beside me and we headed uptown, holding hands.

“It was perfect, right Mickey?”

He squeezed my hand. “Well, except for the gunplay, sure.”

“But that turned out for the best, overall.”

He leaned his head back against the seat. “I’m beat.”

“All of that dancing. You sneak. I didn’t know you could do that!”

“Hadn’t done it in a very long time. Glad I didn’t pull a hammy.”

“I can’t believe you just said that. It’s very dorky.”

“I’m forty-two. I get to be dorky.”

I snuggled up next to him. “Okay. Let’s keep it between us.”

“All right. Can I call you Mrs. Paxton, just between us?”

“I dunno. It makes me sound like your mother.” As soon as I said that, I was sorry. Mickey was only twenty-five when his parents were killed. He was probably missing them like crazy. “But that’s silly of me. You call me whatever you want, within reason, of course.”

Mickey yawned. “No, you’re right. You’re no ‘missus.’ How about I just call you wife-o?”

“You’ve always been good at Spanish.”

Mickey laughed and I hugged him tighter. “I love you, husbando.”

By the time we pulled up in front of the St. Regis hotel, where Mickey had booked us a suite for the night, we had both fallen asleep.

We checked in and got to the room. Mickey undressed and fell into bed. I joined him after I took the bobby pins out of my hair.

We enjoyed one brief kiss before we promptly fell right back to sleep.

I’m not kidding.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Waking up in a suite at a fancy hotel is one of the great pleasures in life. It's even nicer when you wake up with your boyfriend. Or husband.

Mickey ordered room service breakfast, and we ate it while wrapped in plush terry robes. We didn't open the newspaper left at our door, not wanting to hear any bad news in our state of happiness. Instead I flipped through channels and found the movie *Unfaithful*, starring Richard Gere and Diane Lane. "How about this?"

"Inappropriate on our first day of wedded bliss, don't you think?"

I selected the channel with the remote. "I've never seen it. Maybe it will have a happy ending."

We sat and slurped coffee and ate pancakes and eggs, but we only made it as far as the sex scene in the restaurant bathroom, when we went back to bed . . . And did not fall asleep.

We checked out at noon, dressed in our wedding duds since Mickey had forgotten to bring any change of clothes for us. He asked me if he could see whatever it was I had on that was blue, but I told him no. I'd save it for our honeymoon.

It was a gorgeous day, so we opted to walk the forty

blocks home. I called Mom and told her we wanted everyone at our place for dinner, as they all were flying home the next day, Sunday. “We’ll stay out of your hair today, honey. In fact, we got tickets to a matinee. *Hamilton!*”

I stopped dead in my tracks on the sidewalk and someone behind me muttered something under his breath while he just missed walking right into me. “*HAMILTON?* How in the world, Mom? How does Dad do this? Is he a secret agent, or something?”

“Darling, he talks to everyone we meet in New York, and he gets phone numbers, and he follows up, and he has good luck. Don’t worry. He’s exactly who you think he is. How are you anyway? Happy to be married?”

“Um, you think? Hey, thanks for everything you did, and Sal and Drew and Dad . . .”

“Honey, save it for later. We’ll see you after the show. Love to you and Mickey, and Jeff says so, too. Bye now.”

Mickey called Luis to check on him and Fargo, who spent the night in Luis’ and Ruby’s flat. Luis told him that he checked in with Kermit, and Jojo was sticking to her story, that she didn’t kill Beverly, and that she had nothing to do with Samuel or Oliver or Gregory. Kermit had asked her about the missing jewelry Beverly had reported and that had been found at Oliver’s, but she insisted she knew nothing about that either. She even denied taking the diamond bracelet and accused me of lying. At least the police arrested her for pulling a gun on me, and she would be arraigned on Monday.

“Luis, dinner tonight with all of us, yes? Be at our flat at five?” Mickey paused to listen and then said, “good, later,” and hung up. “He sounds better than he has in days. Ruby has her train ticket for tomorrow.”

“Thank goodness. I don’t think Luis could have lasted much beyond that. Mickey, it was an extreme reaction for

Jojo, or Queenie, to pull her gun on me, right? Just because she stole a bracelet? Doesn't that indicate she's at least involved in Beverly's murder, or knows more about it?"

"It doesn't look good for her. Too jumpy, like she has a lot to hide. I wonder if she knew where to find that gun."

I thought about that. "You left it on the coffee table. If Jojo went back to the apartment—it seems like it was easy for her to get in once, so she could be checking it out for more stuff to steal, who knows? Anyway, she would have seen the phony book lying there, got curious, took the gun. Maybe she's in trouble, and not because of the bracelet. Scared of someone? Or she could have just stuck it in her purse without thinking. Kind of like I did, you know?"

"That sounds right. If both of you had thought about it . . ."

"The showdown wouldn't have happened. I knew I had something in common with Jojo!" I poked Mickey in the ribs.

"I'm not sure that's very funny, but I get the irony. Hey, change of subject. Apparently Fargo slept on Luis' bed at his feet all night. We might have lost him to Luis."

"Ruby might have something to say about that." We held hands and strolled the rest of the way home.



Bonkers greeted us with lots of purrs and rubbing against our legs. I undressed and was about to pull on a pair of jeans when I saw a tissue-wrapped bundle on the bed. I picked it up and opened the card attached. It was from Grams and it said, "Welcome to my family. Wear this well." I ripped off the tissue and found a black sweatshirt with these words in white: "Leave the gun, take the cannoli." A classic line from *The Godfather*. I guessed it meant that Grams didn't want me pulling out my Beretta anymore. She must have bought this and left it for me that morning. I loved it and put it on

along with my jeans, sauntered into the living room and gave Bonkers a lap.

Mickey was dressed in sweats and was studying his phone. He looked up and smiled. “Where’d you get that?”

“Your intrepid grandmother. I guess she doesn’t have faith in my P.I. skills.”

“Maybe. But she knows you’re a movie buff, and it’s a great line.” He checked his phone again. “Hey, babe, I know we just got married and all, but I’m itching to go to the gym and work out. I can get stuff for dinner on the way home. Okay with you?”

“Absolutely, husbando. Bring home the bacon.” He kissed me, gave a cautious pet to Bonkers without getting swiped, and left.

I grabbed the paper, somewhat ready to return to real life, and after skimming the news got engrossed in a follow-up article about the Ponzi scheme that left a lot of people broke. I wasn’t sure if this was the same one that Oliver had gotten involved with or not. I wasn’t hip to the details about Bernie Madoff and how he managed to pull off his fraud in the early 2000s, but I knew it was huge and that billions of dollars were lost. In this article, the scope was not as big, but it was devastating to hundreds of people. The reporter interviewed a bunch of the victims. They ranged from seemingly savvy business people, to rich-born socialites, to everyday Joes or Josephines. One was a “building services manager.” He had lost all of his savings, which wasn’t much by comparison to others—\$100,000—but it was a heck lot of money nevertheless and it was all gone. His name was Antonio Blanco. “A rich tenant told me it was a good investment,” he told the reporter. *That poor bastard. An immigrant besides. Can’t get a break.*

I tossed the paper aside and nuzzled with Bonkers while

I put my feet up and relived the wedding and the party, how Kermit had saved the day, and I even laughed out loud when I thought about the cake. We had left its remains for the restaurant staff. Then I thought about the Hitchcock film that Kermit recommended, *The Lady Vanishes*, and turned on the TV to see if it was one I could stream easily. While I was scrolling through movies, I kept thinking about the Blanco guy.

The Spanish name made me think of Luis, and I reached for the phone to see if he wanted to watch the movie with me. He didn't answer.

Then I stopped scrolling and turned the TV off.

Not because I didn't want to watch the movie.

It was the name. Blanco.

It means "white" in Spanish.

And Antonio . . .

Tony White. The doorman at Oliver's.

And Oliver certainly was a rich tenant.

I picked up Bonkers, put him on the couch and pulled on my running shoes. I grabbed my shoulder bag and emptied everything from my wedding purse into it, including my pink Beretta.

On the way out the door, I called Mickey. We have a routine, a protocol for contacting each other in case we ever have to communicate an emergency situation. Once we see it's the other person calling, we take the call, but we don't say anything. We wait for the other person to identify themselves. If that doesn't happen, then it's a clear indication that something's up. The caller then leaves the phone on so that whatever is happening can be heard.

As soon as it was clear he had accepted the call, I said, "Mickey."

He was panting. "Babe?"

“You on the treadmill?”

“Yeah.”

“Meet me at Oliver’s.”

“What? Now? What’s up?”

“I’ll see you there. I’ll take a cab.”

“Babe? Are you okay?” I could tell he had slowed down.

“The doorman. I think he might be involved. He has motive.”

“What?”

I was at the bottom of the stairs now and was heading out to the street. “A hundred thousand dollars.”

“Take Luis with you.”

“He’s not answering his phone. I’ll be fine. We’re just going to talk to Tony.”

“Wait for me.”

“I already have you, silly.”

I hung up and flagged a cab.

The taxi pulled out into traffic and headed north. I was gazing out the window, a little jumpy to be following up on what I hoped was a big lead, when I saw a familiar man walking south on the sidewalk.

My head whipped around to take a second look, because my first look was too hard to believe.

But there he was, no mistake about it.

Webster Young.

I was about to ask the cabbie to pull over, but sat back instead and pulled out my phone and speed dialed Mickey.

“Mickey.”

“Yo,” he answered. “I’m on my way.”

“Me, too. Did you know that Webster Young is out?”

“No. How do you know?”

“Just saw him on Eighth Avenue.” Mickey didn’t answer. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah. I’ll see you at Oliver’s. First things first.”

We hung up, right when the cab reached Fifty-fifth Street. I had spent my wedding night there only hours ago, and now I was going to confront what might be a desperate man— with a nine-millimeter semi-automatic in my purse. Like Mickey said, the honeymoon would have to wait.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I beat Mickey to Oliver's building. I planted a big smile on my face as I entered the foyer. Tony White was sitting behind his desk, his hands behind his head, elbows pointing out sideways, slouched in his chair. I guessed he drew the line at putting his feet up on the desk, but he looked nothing like a proper doorman right then. As soon as he saw me, though, he popped up, smoothed his hair and his jacket, and walked toward me. "Lovely to see you again, Ms. Starkey. Are you here to visit Oliver Musgrave?"

"Well, eventually. I was in the neighborhood and thought I would stop in. Mickey and I have a few remaining questions, you know, to clear up some of the details . . ."

"Have you found out who killed Mrs. Musgrave?"

"Well, now, Tony, I can't go revealing information regarding the case. But I can tell you that we are making great progress, along with the police."

Tony tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. "Well, that's very good news, isn't it?" He reached up to smooth his hair again, and that's when I saw it.

Beverly's watch. The man's Rolex. It was exactly how she had described it to us: steel band with a blue dial surrounded by diamonds. I had googled it before and knew that it was worth about nine thousand bucks.

Unfortunately, I noticed it a second too long, because Tony registered my recognition. He quickly dropped his arm and pulled his sleeve down to cover the watch.

I tried to be nonchalant. “Um, yup, it’s very good news, indeed. We’ll feel a lot better when this case is put to bed.”

We held eye contact for another couple of seconds before he replied. “Why don’t I see if Oliver is available.” He darted over to the penthouse elevator.

“We could just call him, right?”

Tony was already turning the key inside the elevator. “No trouble at all. Sit tight. I’ll be right back.”

The doors closed and up he went.

I didn’t know if he would be right back with a weapon, or if he was going to hide out at Oliver’s or what. But I assumed he was guilty of theft, at least. So I put my expert investigation skills to use while I waited for Mickey to arrive.

I rifled through Tony’s desk, which was an old-style elegant oak number, with a leather inset top and two pedestals of three drawers each, getting gradually taller as they descended. There wasn’t much to rifle: some receipts, pens, paper clips, toothpaste and a toothbrush, a mass-market edition of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—which looked brand new and unread—and a binder that held vital stats for each of the apartments in the building. I thumbed through it to find Oliver’s section, but there wasn’t anything there that I didn’t already know, except that Gregory Wilcox was listed as a co-owner.

More motive for Samuel, I supposed. Number One Son Gregory gets everything, including this penthouse along with Beverly’s money.

I pulled out one of the small top drawers again, but this time, I pulled it all the way out. I deduced that the depth of the drawer was significantly less than the depth of the desk. I

walked around to the rear of the desk and squatted down to inspect it.

Doors. The backs of the pedestals were actual cabinets. I was feeling very Sherlock Holmesy.

I needed a key to open them.

I rifled some more in the drawers, pondering how on earth the word for a firearm came to mean search, but I couldn't find a key.

I stood up, looked around, and saw a door that I hoped led to a storage room. I pulled it open and *voilà*, shelves held various supplies, from a first-aid kit to toilet paper, but best of all, a tool box.

I opened it and found a flat-head screwdriver.

As I was inserting it to force the desk door open, I heard a voice behind me.

"What are you doing?"

I kept at my work, since that voice belonged to Mickey.

"Tony is wearing Beverly's watch. He noticed me noticing it, so he skedaddled up the elevator, to Oliver's." I nodded at the elevator dial above its doors. "It's been resting at the penthouse ever since he left. Anyway, I'm looking for clues. Figured I'd make good use of my time until you got here."

"Babe, you're breaking the law right now."

"Yup."

"You don't even know what you're looking for. Maybe there's nothing in this desk. Let's just go up . . ."

"Bingo!" The door popped open. I reached in and grabbed the only object inside, and held it to Mickey. "It's a Samsung phone."

"I can see that." Mickey knelt down beside me. "What are you going to do with it?"

"See what's on it!"

Mickey sighed. "Password?"

I punched the “home” button and sure enough, it asked for a password. “Okay. Well, let’s figure this out. Something simple.” I punched in 1-2-3-4. That didn’t work. Then I tried 4-3-2-1. That didn’t work, either.

“Annabelle, if we’re going to pursue this and break some more laws, we probably need to get this to someone who can . . .”

“Bingo again!” I held the phone so that he could see I got in.

“Wow. I’m impressed. Who are you, anyway?”

“A married woman, so watch out.”

“What password did you use?”

“8-6-6-9. Or, rather, T-O-N-Y. You know what that tells us?”

“I bet you’re going to illuminate me.”

“Tony is as sneaky as a pop-up fly ball.” I scrolled through the texts.

“Uh, pop-ups are generally not sneaky, but I guess that’s what your convoluted metaphor meant? That he’s not sneaky at all?”

“Holy mother!”

Mickey peered over my shoulder. “Have you turned Catholic all of a sudden?”

“Mickey, I’ve got it!”

“Please don’t say ‘bingo’ again.”

“It’s a text to Jojo. Read it.”

It said:

Sweetie. All will be well soon. Don’t worry.

“He sent this before Beverly was murdered,” Mickey noted.

We both stood up. “He called her ‘Sweetie,’ Mick.”

Mickey high-fived me. “Looks like your hunch paid off. Tony is definitely involved. Now, do you want to fill me in

on how you came to be breaking and entering this man's desk and his cell phone?"

I proceeded to tell Mickey about the newspaper article and the money that Tony lost. "Oliver's fault. Maybe Tony went after Beverly to get some money, or something. I'm not sure. But now we know there's a connection."

"Okay. Are you ready for the fire escape ladder again? The other elevators won't reach the penthouse."

I hadn't thought about that yet, and the idea of being on that metal contraption again was almost enough for me to quit Asta Investigations and take up knitting. But I took a breath and pivoted toward the door. "Hey, if that's what it takes to nab our version of Lars Thorwald, I'm your girl."

Mickey shook his head. "I'm kidding, you maniac. We'd never make it, even given our super-human athletic capabilities. We'll get up to the twenty-sixth and take the inside stairs from there." He nodded toward the regular-people elevators. "Follow me. And who the hell is Lars Thorwald, by the way?"

"Really, Mickey? *Rear Window*. Grace Kelly went up the fire escape to spy on him and got, um, caught, now that I think of it."

"Great movie. Bad name for a bad guy, don't you think?" He pushed the Up button. "I mean, who can remember it, besides you?"

"It's distinctive. At least in America. In Scandinavia, there are probably boatloads of Thorwalds."

The doors opened and we nodded at a young couple exiting as we slid in and pushed the top button. The doors closed. I hugged Mickey. "This could be dangerous."

He kissed me. "I've got your back. And you've got mine, partner."

That might have been the coolest thing he ever said to me. Mickey, being a man who can handle any situation with

grace and courage and balance, called Kermit—while I still had my arms wrapped around him—and left him a message. He spoke softly, explaining that we were about to break into Oliver's, and that he'd appreciate it if Kermit could get there soon, should our guesses be correct and a possible violent confrontation was about to go down.

He punched another number, repositioned the phone at his ear, listened, and then stuck the phone back in his pocket.

"Luis?" I asked.

"Still no answer."

We reached twenty-six, found the sign indicating the stairs, and headed up.

"Almost there, babe." Mickey held out his hand. I grabbed it and followed him, his strength and resolve renewing my own.

Chapter Thirty

The twenty-eighth floor exit door from the stairwell opened to a side hall, which led to the terrace. We could hear an argument, but we couldn't be sure where it was coming from, exactly. We snuck out onto the terrace and crouched around to one side of the sliding glass door so that we could peek inside.

Tony was screaming at Oliver, in one of the smaller bedrooms. "You've ruined me! And now you're going to see me rot in jail? You fucking coward! I can't believe I ever trusted you!"

Oliver's response was mumbled, but the gist was that he was trying to get Tony to calm down. We could tell by his tone of voice, and the fact that he kept pushing his hands down, like he was a symphony conductor indicating "softer, softer."

Then Tony pulled a gun and pointed it at Oliver. "I am not going to fry for this, Ol."

"We shouldn't bust in, right? He might start shooting," I whispered to Mickey.

He nodded and whispered back. "A window in the other bedroom might be open or unlocked."

He started to stand up to investigate, but I grabbed his arm. "Let me go."

I didn't give him time to argue. I slunk away, imagining myself to be as quiet as Daniel Day Lewis in *The Last of the Mohicans*. I was only about ten years old when that movie came out, and it made me want to understand who the Great Spirit was and run like the wind and wear moccasins and buckskin skirts. The running stuck with me. The gear, well, I found out that moccasins—given to me as a Christmas present from Nana, my grandmother—were not such good footwear on asphalt.

But running wasn't required high above New York City. Keeping my cool was.

I was surprised and not exactly relieved to find the other bedroom window unlocked, because this meant I could get inside and take command of the situation, as I've heard countless TV cops say. I signaled Mickey and gently pushed it open.

The base of the window was at my eye level. I wasn't sure I'd have the arm strength to get myself up and over the sill, but adrenalin kicked in—and, okay, the the stone urn that I clambered on top of helped—and I made it. I worried that when I dropped to the floor inside, I made too much noise. But Tony was still screaming, for which I was exceedingly grateful.

I pulled my Beretta out of my purse, held it straight-armed in front of me, and edged my way through the hallway toward the other bedroom. I stopped just inside the door. Oliver had his back to me, and Tony hadn't seen me yet.

I rushed out, pointing my gun at Tony. "Drop it, Tony. Let's all talk about this. No need for anyone else to get murdered."

Mickey immediately came in through the terrace door, which was also unlocked, thanks to the Great Spirit. He kept his aim on Tony, too. "You heard her, put the gun down."

“This maniac killed Beverly!” Oliver panted.

“*He* killed Beverly!” Tony yelled. “Oliver did it! He stole the stuff and gave me that watch, like that would make everything okay! But it doesn’t make anything okay, Oliver! Do you hear me?” Tony was shaking with rage.

“Tony, be reasonable, now. You know I was out of town. I couldn’t have killed Beverly. I would never do anything like that. Look, my friend, I know that you and Jojo had a lot to figure out, and I know that you and I can . . .”

“I am NOT your FUCKING FRIEND! And you leave Jojo out of this. Don’t even say her name. You’re a liar and a cheat! You told me to invest all my savings in that fucked-up deal, and now you say I’m your friend? You killed Beverly because you needed her money, and now you’re trying to set me up. Well, now, asshole, I’m going to kill you.”

It seemed to me that Tony was about to shoot. Mickey slowly inched closer to Tony, his gun hand as still as a yoga pose. “Oliver, move away from him.”

Oliver did, and I stepped closer to him, to urge him to the other side of the room by the bed. He was walking backward, and stumbled a bit when he knocked his foot on an antique telephone table.

It didn’t have a telephone on it.

Only a framed photograph.

I told Oliver to sit down on the bed, and keeping my gun pointed at Tony, I glimpsed at the picture.

It was Beverly Musgrave, and she was dressed in a sparkly evening dress and adorned with a sparkly necklace.

I had seen it before.

It was the same Q pendant that Jojo was wearing these days.

I took a closer look and saw a penned message at the bottom of the photograph. It said, “With love, Queenie.”

I frowned and said to Mickey, "*Beverly* is Queenie."

But as I said it, I couldn't believe it. The police records indicated that Queenie was born in 1985, and Beverly was a lot older than that.

Tony had stopped screaming. His energy was flagging. His gun was still pointed at Oliver, but he seemed more interested in what I was saying than in killing anyone.

I peered at the picture again.

Beverly, or Queenie, was standing in front of a set of bookshelves. One shelf had only a few books on it, compared to the others, and they were propped up in line by a set of bookends.

New York Public Library lions bookends.

I whirled around to look behind me at the bookshelves in Oliver's bedroom, confident that Mickey was keeping his eyes on Tony.

They were the same as the ones in the picture, with one difference.

The bookends were missing.

Chapter Thirty-One

“Where’s your Fortitude, Oliver?” I had shifted the direction of my Beretta to aim at Oliver’s chest. “Because we already know you’re out of Patience.”

Mickey’s voice was quiet but firm. “Annabelle, what?”

“The bookends, Mickey. The Library lions. Their names are Patience and Fortitude. Maybe the murder weapon was Fortitude and now we’re missing Patience. I know I’m running out of patience myself.” I indicated the photo with a jerk of my head. “They were in that picture. They’re not here now.”

I moved closer to Oliver. “Get down on your knees with your hands behind your head.” I had never said that to anyone before, while pointing a gun or not. Apparently I wasn’t very convincing, because Oliver didn’t move.

“You are making a big mistake. This is completely Tony’s doing and that silly girlfriend of his, Jojo. I don’t steal jewelry! And I was out of town when Beverly was killed!”

Mickey poked Tony in the back of his shoulder with his Glock. “Drop it, Tony. Let’s sort this out. Drop it, now.”

Tony did.

The gun slid across the floor, closer to the bed.

“Now, Oliver,” Mickey continued. “What’s with Queenie?”

Was Beverly's real name Queenie McMillan?"

Oliver didn't answer. Mickey kept his gun on Tony. "Babe, I thought she was a young woman."

"Yup. I know. It's confusing. Born in 1985, but . . ."

"Could have been a typo, I suppose."

"Crikey! That's it! Transposed the numbers. 1958 would be about right for Beverly . . ."

But I didn't finish because just then Oliver dove for Tony's gun, whipped it up from the floor and fired at him.

I didn't think. I shot Oliver. In the ass.

Tony stood stock still, mute. He wasn't hurt. Oliver's shot had missed him.

But it had found Mickey's left arm. Blood was pouring down it. "Crap, Mickey!"

"I'm okay. Just nicked me." He couldn't stop the bleeding without letting go of his gun held in his right hand.

Oliver was whimpering. I addressed Tony. "Nice acting chops, Mr. Blanco."

"What are you talking about?"

"You and Oliver were in on killing Beverly together. That's the only way it could have happened. He really was out of town, so he must have promised you some nice payoff to get rid of Beverly, right?"

Okay. I was guessing here, but it was a good guess. The pendant was Beverly's, or Queenie's, or whoever. Jojo had it. The other jewelry was found at Oliver's, and Tony had the watch. And the only way Oliver could get Tony out of his money jam was to get Beverly's money. Voilà.

Tony emitted a dramatic sigh. "I'll tell you the truth. It was all Jojo. Jojo and Oliver."

"He's lying." Oliver's voice was raspy, like he was having trouble breathing.

"You can't believe anything Oliver says! I'm telling you,

they worked it out. Jojo was mad at Beverly for dumping her father, and she and Oliver got talking, and they planned the whole thing . . .”

“Really, you should audition for a bit part on ‘Law and Order,’ or ‘Blue Bloods,’ or ‘Hawaii Five-O.’ I mean, you’ve missed your calling, you dirtbag coward.” I waved my gun at him. “You’re going to put this all on Jojo? Even if she WAS involved, so were you, and now you’re blaming it on her? I hope she dumps you faster than you can say ‘I’m an asshole.’”

I looked at Mickey to see how he was doing. He was forcing the corners of his mouth down, trying not to smile.

But I had made a mistake, taking my focus off of Tony. He lunged and tackled me, and my gun flew out of my hand.

Tony flailed for it, but Mickey kicked it away and then kicked Tony in the ribs, hard. Tony groaned and rolled off of me while I scrambled out from under him.

Mickey gave me his gun and rolled Tony onto his stomach. He straddled his back. I handed his gun back to him so that he could keep it well aimed at Tony’s head.

“Where’s your dental floss, babe?”

The first time Mickey and I found ourselves outsmarting bad guys, we used my floss to tie one up. I always carry it with me.

But not this time.

“Oooohhhh, crap. I didn’t have it in my little wedding purse, and I just transferred everything from there to this one. I mean, I didn’t think I’d need it at our wedding . . .”

Mickey laughed. “You took your gun to the wedding, but not your floss?”

“That’s weird, right?”

“You think?”

“It’s your fault, making me carry a lethal weapon around all the time.” I smiled at him, but then sank to the bed.

“You okay?”

“I just shot someone, Mickey. I’m not okay.” I looked over at Oliver, prone on the floor. He wasn’t moving.

“You’re more than okay, babe. Stick with me, here. I need you to go to the bathroom and find some floss. Take some deep breaths. Good. Now, look at me.”

I did.

“What do you see?”

“You.”

“Well, sure, but what else.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You see your husband who is proud of you, always, every second of every minute of every day.”

“Oh, Mickey . . .” I teared up. “You . . .”

“And you also see your proud husband bleeding, who also needs you to get some gauze or Band-Aids or something when you get the floss.”

“Jeez! Yes! I’m sorry . . .”

I rushed into the bathroom and was happy to see that Oliver was well equipped for first-aid home care. I found some gauze pads, antiseptic cream, and some first-aid tape. Unfortunately, he must have had big dentist bills. No floss anywhere. I grabbed a washcloth and soaked it with cold water. I checked behind the door, remembering the terry-cloth robes we cuddled in at the St. Regis and hoping a robe would be there.

I lucked out. I found one and a pair of pajama bottoms with a string tie at the waist. I pulled out the string and robe’s sash and ran back to Mickey.

Tony had stopped squirming. Mickey’s gun to his head helped. I tied Tony’s feet first, and then Mickey helped me situate his wrists so that I could tie those, too.

I helped Mickey up and used the cloth to clean some of

the blood from his wound, applied the cream, and taped the gauze in place. Then we turned our attention to Oliver, who had passed out. It didn't look like he'd lost a lot of blood, but it was hard to tell.

"I didn't kill him, right?"

Mickey checked Oliver's pulse and his breathing. "No, babe. He's just fainted. Leave him be for now. Kermit should be here any minute."

He put his gun down on the bed and pulled me to him. We stood holding each other, not saying anything for a while, until I broke the spell. "They did it. I'm sure of it. For the money. There's just one thing I don't get."

"Only one?"

"Well, besides you thinking I'm the right girl for you."

"What is it."

"If Beverly was Queenie, why wouldn't the police have figured that out from the print on the weapon? Don't they take fingerprints of murder victims, to distinguish them from any suspects?"

Mickey brushed my hair behind my woofers. "Good question. Here's a possible answer. The print on the bookend was a partial palm print. Depending on who's handling the forensics, palm prints aren't always taken. I guess they could have skipped that step with Beverly's corpse."

I put my hair back where it was. "So Queenie A.K.A. Beverly had handled the bookend from when she lived here with Oliver."

"And if Tony was the killer, he probably used gloves, when he killed her with it."

"I wonder which one it was?"

"Huh?"

"Patience or Fortitude."

"I'd say neither. It was Desperation in a lion suit."

That's when Kermit showed up with a couple of uniforms, bursting in through the entrance on the penthouse's lower level. "Paxton?"

Mickey called down to him but didn't let go of me.

Kermit found us standing in the bedroom, holding each other. He frowned as he surveyed the scene and regarded tied-up Tony and unconscious Oliver. "You two really know how to honeymoon," he grumbled.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Oliver was taken to the hospital in an ambulance. So was Mickey, though he insisted the bullet just grazed him and he was fine. I rode with him and held his hand. The EMT took his vitals. “All good. You’ll be released quickly.”

“Then we have to go talk to Kermit, right Mickey?” I stroked his hand.

“We will. Which is going to take a lot of time.” He sighed. “And we’ve got other issues.”

“Webster Young.”

“Right. And we don’t know where Luis is. Try him again. See if he answers.”

I did, and he didn’t.

“It makes no sense, Mickey. Why is Young even out on the streets?”

“He must have been arraigned awfully quickly and made bail yesterday.”

I squeezed his hand. “Well, at least we solved Beverly’s murder.”

“I hope so.”

“You’re not sure?”

“No confession yet.”

“They’ll spill their beans faster than an avalanche, that’s what I think.”

“You’re probably right. We need to concentrate on Young now anyway.”

Our ambulance arrived at Mt. Sinai at about four o’clock. I sat down in the waiting area while a nurse saw to Mickey. I called Luis again. No answer. I called Dad, figuring they probably weren’t out of the theater yet, but I left a message saying we would not be ready at five and they should probably have a glass of wine somewhere after the show and get to the flat around six thirty. “Try Flute. It’s an old speakeasy. Dark but fun. Have some champagne!” I was making myself sound bubbly—pun intended—not wanting to concern them with the afternoon’s events.

But I wasn’t looking forward to the dinner with everyone. I didn’t want my parents freaking out about my having shot someone, and the sighting of Webster the Wretched was weird and scary.

In fact, I was not completely in touch with my Gracie Hart side, she being the tough-cop-turned-beauty-pageant undercover detective in *Miss Congeniality*. I’ve seen that movie at least four times on TV and I laugh every time while some part of me wishes I had that sort of physical power and confidence. But having shot someone this day, I wasn’t at all sure I wanted to hold a gun in my hand ever again, let alone pull the trigger.

I didn’t have to worry about that for the time being. Kermit had taken my weapon along with Mickey’s and Tony’s. An officer was waiting for us at the hospital. I suppose it was because of Kermit that they let me go with Mickey at all, rather than run me in to the station.



It was wishful thinking on my part that we’d be home at six thirty. It was an hour later when we finally got there. I

had kept Dad abreast of our delay without giving too many details, and he kindly offered to find good take-out and warm it up for us.

When Mickey and I walked into our flat, a party was going on. Mom, Dad, Grams, Sal, and Drew were jabbering away while Ray Charles was singing “I Got a Woman” from our CD player. Fargo and Bonkers were on the couch, curled up with each other. I guessed Luis had let Fargo in earlier.

Mom was the first to see us. “Darlings! Perfect timing! We’re just about to eat. Dinner is warming up. We got Chinese, I hope that’s okay?” She kissed each of us on the cheek. “What are you drinking?”

Then she saw Mickey’s bandage. “What the . . .?”

I butted in and took one of her hands in mine. “A small wound, Mom. Nothing to freak out about. I’ll have a bourbon, neat, please.” I hoped my expression made it clear to her that we didn’t want to talk.

Apparently I don’t project very convincing facial expressions.

“What the hell happened, Mickey?”

Mickey put his arm around her. “Tomorrow, Sylvia, okay? Not now.” He kissed the side of her head.

She frowned. “I’ll get two bourbons.”

“How do you do that, husbando? People simply do what you tell them to do.”

“Not all people. I mean, look who I married.” He smiled. “I’m going to put on a long-sleeve T-shirt to cut short these conversations. Save my drink for me.” He left me in the living room, where everyone had stopped talking and was smiling nervously at me.

“How was *Hamilton*!?”

Mom yelled out from the kitchen. “Fucking awesome, honey, just fucking awesome.”

Dad—who was always good at reading my face—came to me and put his arms around me. “You okay, muffinhead?”

I hugged him back. “I am. So is Mickey. Looks like we probably solved the case, in fact. Now, I’m just tired, but I’m happy to be home with all of you.”

We let go of each other and Mom handed me my glass. I raised it as if to toast them, and the party got going again.

“Where’s Luis?” Mom asked.

“I wish I knew. You haven’t seen him?”

“No, but he left a note. We got here around six and Fargo was inside. Luis asked us to walk him, and we did. He said he had to do something and would return shortly. Anything wrong?”

I forced a smile. “Probably not. C’mon, let’s check on that veggie chow mein.”

“Your favorite.”

Fargo jumped down from the couch and approached me, tail wagging. I squatted down to pet him and he licked my face. “What do you know, Fargo? Where’s Luis?”

But he wasn’t Lassie, and I wasn’t Timmy, and Fargo’s secrets stayed with him.



Mickey and I were able to relax after a bit and enjoy our family and friends. But the soiree didn’t last long. We were all pretty beat. Sal and Drew had an early morning flight, so they said goodbye to us and told us we’d better get back to Portland for another visit so that they could make us a “proper” wedding cake. Since Mom and Dad weren’t leaving until later in the day, we made plans to see them in the morning. As for Grams, she was dozing in the recliner, with Bonkers on her lap. She was some kind of shaman, I figured, the way animals gravitated to her.

“Mickey, I’m going to take Fargo for another walk.”

“You sure? I can do it.”

“I need the air, I think. I’m fine. You should be here when Grams wakes up.” I got Fargo’s leash, hooked him up, and blew my husband a kiss.

The night was still, even for New York. Not much traffic, and clear night skies. You can’t see stars, really, in New York, because of so many city lights. But the moon was bright, and the temperature was refreshing, right around sixty-five degrees.

Fargo and I started to walk east on Twentieth, when I pulled him to a sudden halt.

Webster Young was walking toward us.

Fargo growled as I called out to Young. “You should stop right there, Webster. I’m armed and I’ve already shot one person today.” I patted my pocket, knowing I had no gun on me. The police still had my Beretta.

He was close enough to us that I could see him sneer. “I ain’t leaving until I get what I’m due.”

Fargo barked and growled louder. “I’d keep that fucking dog off of me, if I were you . . .”

If he was going to say anything else, he didn’t have a chance, because right then Luis flew out from Asta Investigation’s door and tackled Webster Young to the sidewalk. Fargo and I got out of the way while Luis pulled him up by the collar, half-nelsoned him and shoved him against our building, the left side of Young’s head hard against the wall. Fargo was barking his head off, but I shushed him.

“So, *Señor* Young, I heard today from Detective Calhoun that you made bail quickly yesterday. You must have a fancy lawyer, *sí*? Do you think that makes you a free man? Do you feel free at this moment?” Luis’ voice was soft and gruff, his words punctuated with fury.

“I want the money. Chacho told me it was here, with his ex.” He sneered at me. “I didn’t know about no fucking dog.”

I kept my hand gripped on Fargo’s leash. “You made an appointment for your rabies shots yet?” I asked.

“She is not his ex-wife, *señor*. And she does not have your money in any case. Chacho lied to you.” Luis leaned in. “What is this money? What was your deal with Chacho?”

“Why should I tell you, asshole?”

Luis laughed. “You see this beautiful woman here with her ferocious canine? You should be very afraid of her. She is very experienced and she does not like you very much.” He gave Chacho’s arm a little yank.

“Actually, Luis, I don’t like him one little itty bitty bit. And I think Fargo would enjoy taking another bite out of his leg.”

The look in Young’s eyes changed from confident to worry. “We had a thing, me and Chacho. His supplier wouldn’t sell to him anymore. Chacho was a fuck-up. But Chacho had good customers, rich. He could dress up good. I got the smack, he sold it, and we split the bank. Only I didn’t get my half, last time.” He spit. “Always hated that cocksucker.”

Luis jerked Young’s arm up a notch. “And yet you were his partner.”

“Hey, yo, business is business. And we agreed.”

A jolt ran up my spine. *We agreed. Two guys who hated each other, but who were criminals together. Who “agreed” to work together.* I’d heard that before, and it wasn’t from Tony or Oliver.

Luis put his mouth right next to Webster’s ear. “You are going to leave us alone now. We do not have your money. If you come back here, if I see you walking within two blocks of any direction of this building, I will make sure you do not walk again. Do you understand me, *señor*?”

As best he could, Webster Young nodded. "You calling the heat?"

"You did not commit any crime here tonight." Luis eased him away from the wall and let go. Fargo growled.

Young glowered. "Seems like I'm always getting fucked."

Luis pointed down the street. "Go, now. Quickly. Our dog is hungry."

With that, Webster left us and headed west.

Luis put his arm around me. "Are you all right, *amiga*?"

"Yes and no, Luis. We've been worrying about you today. Where have you been?"

"*Lo siento*. I got your messages. As soon as I heard that Mr. Young made bail, I stayed at the office with the lights off, keeping an eye on the street. I didn't want to be distracted. And I didn't want to alarm you or Mickey on your first day of marriage."

I laughed. "Oh, Luis, if you only knew! The problem is, we solved the case, or at least I thought we did, but now I'm not sure." I sighed. "Beverly Musgrave's murderer could still be on the loose."

"Really? Then we must find him. Or is it her?"

"I'll fill you in, but first let's take Fargo for a walk."

Which would have been a good idea, had Fargo not jerked so suddenly that I let go of the leash. He bolted, racing east on Twentieth like he was chasing a rabbit, or a bad guy. But New York doesn't have rabbits scampering about, and Webster Young had left in the other direction.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Luis called Mickey while I went running after Fargo, yelling my head off. The dog headed north on Eighth Avenue, his leash flying behind him. Fargo, like I've said, is strong and can look big and scary. He's a couple of feet tall and weighs over sixty pounds, so pedestrians darted out of his way. They got out of mine, too, but not because I look big and scary. Probably just slightly crazed.

I couldn't for the life of me make out who he was chasing. I had only caught a glimpse when the guy started to turn onto Twentieth Street but did a fast one-eighty once Fargo took off. I figured it was a guy, because he was that big, even bigger than most, but he could run pretty well. I finally caught up to Fargo when he skidded to a stop at the entrance of the subway station at Twenty-Third and started barking down the stairs. I grabbed the leash. "What is it? Who are you after?"

He kept barking. He didn't want to go down into the subway, though, so when Luis and then Mickey came running up behind me, I handed the leash to Luis. "I'm going down there to see if I can figure out what's got him so upset."

I didn't wait for an answer and sped down the stairs, with Mickey following.

Mickey's wallet was in his pocket. He pulled it out to retrieve his Metro Card, and we each swiped it to get through

the turnstile. There were only about a dozen people waiting for the next downtown train, which was pulling in. We walked up and back along the platform, both ways. No one appeared particularly suspicious, and no one took particular notice of us.

“Could have been anything, babe. Could have been someone who Fargo thought ran down here, but didn’t.”

“I doubt it. He is a wonder dog, after all.” The subway’s doors closed. “Let’s go. C’mon.”

We started toward the turnstiles, Mickey in front of me. But as the train pulled away I turned around just in time to see the back of the guy trotting away from us.

I sped after him and jumped on his back, like he would be happy to take me for a piggyback ride. He lost his balance and we tumbled to the floor. I held on to his arms to keep him on his stomach, but he was too strong. He wrestled out of my grip and rolled away from me. I scrambled to my feet but the guy had found his footing and quickly grabbed me from behind, one arm around my waist, the other quickly covering my mouth right after I yelled “Mick!”

Mickey had almost reached the stairs. He vaulted back over the turnstile. “Stop right there! Let her go, now!”

My kidnapper pulled me toward the tracks. I tried to dig my feet against the floor to gain traction, but to no avail. I flailed my arms and reached for his head. He was wearing a ski mask. “Not a chance. Not until you pay me.” I didn’t recognize the voice.

“Chacho’s deal? Are you connected to Webster Young?” Mickey was edging closer.

“Stop right there.” I noticed his voice was a little shaky.

“How much?” Mickey asked, not moving closer.

“Two grand for starters.”

“I don’t walk around with that much money on me. Let

her go, and we'll work this out."

Webster's pal coughed. "No. I need it now. What do you have on you that's worth a lot of money? You could give me that instead."

"Not a thing, really. But I'm sure there's an ATM nearby, and I could at least get you a few hundred to last until we get back to the office, where I know I have cash in our safe."

I knew Mickey was lying. Either that, or he had a secret safe I knew nothing about. Then I thought about my ring, Mickey's mother's ring, and I stopped waving my arms around. No way this dirtbag was taking my ring.

Luis was heading to the turnstiles. No Fargo. He pretended to be an innocent passerby and swiped his MetroCard. He stopped when he surveyed the scene and pulled out his phone. "I am calling nine one one. Perhaps you should let her go, *señor*."

"Perhaps you should vaMAYnos yourself back to MEHeeko, amEEgo. Fuck off."

Luis pulled his gun faster than Val Kilmer's Doc Holliday in Tombstone. "It is not polite to insult people of different origins." You couldn't deny it, Luis was our Huckleberry, and if you don't know what I mean, that was one of Kilmer's best lines in the movie.

"Let her go," Mickey repeated. "NOW!" he yelled.

That yell along with Luis' gun did the trick and our masked marauder took off down the platform with Luis and Mickey running after him, and me following, once I regained my footing after being thrown to the ground.

The creep tripped, so my partners caught up with him easily. Mickey grabbed him and threw him to the ground. I ran up as he was pulling off the ski mask.

"Well, well, well, what do you know?" I said, panting.

Luis held his gun steady. "What do we know?"

“We know this guy, Luis,” Mickey said.

“Call him Sammy, he likes that,” I said.

“My name is SAMUEL!” he protested, prone and pathetic on the pavement.

“Police?” I threw the question out to both my partners.

Mickey pulled Samuel to his feet. “Not yet. Let’s spend some time with him first, and then decide.”

Luis stuck his gun in his pocket. He took one of Samuel’s arms and Mickey took the other, and between them they walked him through the turnstiles and upstairs, me following.

“Luis, what did you do with Fargo?”

“Grams. She followed Mickey out of the apartment. I told her to take him and go right home.”

But she was waiting for us on the street, holding tight to Fargo’s leash. “Who’s this clown?”

“Part of a case, Grams. We’re okay,” Mickey replied.

I squatted down and gave Fargo some pets while he licked my face. “How do you know this guy, huh? You sure don’t seem to like him.”

Fargo remained vigilant but calmer, seeing Samuel well contained by Luis and Mickey. We walked to the Asta Investigations office, where Samuel was deposited onto the couch and the rest of us sat in various chairs. Mickey suggested to Grams that she get some rest, that we’d be up soon.

“Hell no, grandson. Carry on. This should be very interesting.” She crossed her legs and her arms and stared at Samuel. Of all of us in the room, Fargo included, it may have been Grams who worried Samuel the most. *Perhaps she would be a good Asta partner.* I let go of that thought quickly.

Luis started. “You have been to our office before, yes?”

Samuel pouted. “No. You would know if I had been, right?”

“Our dog knew you. Saw you from at least a short distance and chased after you. How would our dog know you?” Luis leaned forward, his forearms on his knees, and shortened the space between him and Samuel.

“You might as well tell us, Samuel. If you don’t, I’m going to call the cops right now and press charges.” I reached over and gave Fargo a head pet.

Samuel sighed. “Okay. Tuesday morning. This woman was bringing the dog to you. I told her I’d hand him over for you. She said she had to leave town in a hurry. Sounded like she was in trouble. So I was being a good citizen, see?”

Mickey frowned. “That makes no sense. What were you doing in front of our office? Why wouldn’t she just knock on the door herself?”

Samuel shook his head and looked to his side, away from all of us. “It was really early, like seven or something. I was trying to pick your lock.”

“I was here,” Luis said. “I was asleep on the floor.”

“I remember, Luis,” I said. “You were very asleep. Tell us, Samuel, why you were trying to break in.”

Samuel turned back toward me. “Information. No one tells me anything. I should be the first to know who killed my mother. And I should have her stuff, like her jewels. Oliver told me that you were collecting evidence. I needed to know what you found, and I knew you wouldn’t help me, even though you know I’m her son and I need money.”

“What about her jewels? Did you steal them?” Mickey asked.

Samuel sneered at him indignantly. “No. Oliver told me he found them at his place and accused me, but why would I have left them there, if I stole them? That makes no sense, even to you birdbrains. She was my mother, so her stuff should be my stuff.”

“You ever pick a lock before?”

“No, but I was trying to be respectful of your establishment and not bust a window.”

“Respectful! Right! That must be why you came back to our neighborhood tonight and ended up trying to hold me for ransom!” I stood up. “Did you really think you could get away with robbing us, ski-mask man? Oh, and, by the way, we never had the jewels. Oliver returned them to the police.” I sat back down.

Samuel shook his head and looked away from me.

“Oliver. Trying to set me up again. This shit always happens to me.”

“Back to the dog, *señor*. Continue with your very fascinating story.” Luis seemed to be inching even closer to him.

“Okay okay, so I’m there at your door, and this lady comes along and asks if I’m with you guys and I say yes because what am I going to say, no? I’m trying to break in? So she gives me the dog and tells me her story and I leave it for you.”

“And you wrote the note?”

“Yes.”

Grams narrowed her gaze. “One question, young man. Why doesn’t Fargo like you? He chased you like you’re the enemy.”

We waited for Samuel’s response, which was slow in coming, but no one said a word. Thirty seconds passed, I figure, before he blurted out his answer. “He barked, so I kicked him. He could have been drawing attention to me! Then he barked some more. So I kicked him again. Then he started to go a little crazy so I left.”

Luis stood up. “You are accustomed to kicking dogs?”

Samuel tried to back away, but there’s only so far you can go on a couch. “No, but this one seems mean.”

I thought Luis was going to hit Samuel, but instead he

just kept his eyes on him while he spoke. “Call Kermit, *por favor*, Mickey. Let’s turn this *tonto* in.”

Mickey pulled out his phone. Samuel covered his face with his hands. Luis remained standing over him. Grams reached over and patted Fargo. I got up and went to my desk, where I wrote two notes to myself. One: Samuel sure was good at disguising his voice. His subway bad-guy routine used a much lower register than his whiney, seemingly normal one. How else was he a good actor? Two: Was that really the first time he tried to pick a lock, or was that a lie? Perhaps he was practiced at it. Perhaps he picked the lock to Beverly’s apartment and killed her.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Mickey was able to reach Kermit and he arrived at our office thirty minutes later. Grams didn't take her eyes off of Samuel—who was cuffed to Mickey's desk—while waiting for him. The rest of us gathered around my desk at the back of the room and went over the details of the case, as much as we could figure them. We were talking softly, and I was making a list as we did.

Jojo: in jail, but there was no evidence that she killed Beverly, other than she had her necklace, had stolen her bracelet, and was brandishing her gun.

Oliver and Tony: seemingly could have worked together to kill Beverly. Oliver was in custody in the hospital. Tony was in custody with the police. Both denied involvement. Both blamed the other or Jojo. Beverly's stolen jewels had been in Oliver's apartment. Oliver used to have New York Public Library lion bookends.

Samuel: made a stupid move to get the jewels. Oliver says he stole the jewels. Oliver also lied to him about the jewels, saying we had them, maybe because he didn't want Samuel to know he cooperated with the police, or maybe he figured Samuel would try to get them, and get caught.

Gregory: doesn't seem to have anything to do with

anyone, though Oliver says they are close and that Gregory and Samuel detest each other. Gregory's alibi—that he was at Oliver's when Beverly was murdered—was confirmed by Tony, but Tony could have been lying.

"But, here's the thing, you guys, and this is what I was going to tell you earlier, Luis." I pointed at Gregory's name. "Samuel and Gregory *could* be working together. Samuel took acting lessons, remember? And he wasn't bad at disguising his voice today. They could be faking their contempt for each other. When I encountered Gregory at the White Horse, he said, 'We agreed!' And that's precisely what the scumbag Webster Young said about Chacho. He hated him, but they *agreed* to work together." I paused to let my brilliant assessment sink in. "See? They could totally be in cahoots."

"Maybe, but it's all conjecture, really," Mickey said.

"Do they have keys to the apartment?" Luis asked.

"Dunno. But that takes us back to picking the lock. Samuel told us that when Beverly stopped supporting him, she took his keys."

"No reason he couldn't have made copies," Mickey noted.

I dropped the pen on my desk and sighed. "We've got nothing but a ton of suspects and no real evidence."

Mickey stretched and yawned. "Well, maybe Kermit can make some headway with Simple Samuel now. We should press charges for that subway stunt."

"You betcha."

Luis stood up. "Unfortunately, there were no witnesses other than the three of us, but I am guessing he will not stand up to a Kermit Calhoun interrogation with many guts."

"I like that phrase, 'many guts,' *con mucho gusto*," I said.

We heard the front door open and Mickey got up. "Enough for now. Let's bring Kermit up to speed and go to bed."

That's what we did.



Mom and Dad showed up at our apartment at nine o'clock the next morning. Luis was already there, and Grams had already been out for her morning "constitutional," as she called it, and returned once again with a box of pastries and bagels. Mickey brewed a big pot of coffee, and I set out plates and jams and butter and a bowl of blueberries. I was feeling a little sad, knowing that my parents would be leaving in a few hours and I had spent such a disjointed time with them. But they seemed chipper and ready to go home, and who could blame them? Mickey's and my life always seemed to erupt when they were around, and I wondered briefly if I'd ever see them again. I mean, why push your luck around a couple of bad omens like us?

But those thoughts vanished when Dad suggested that we visit them in Portland in the fall. "Maybe for Thanksgiving?"

Grams piped up. "No can do, Jeff. They come to Maine for Thanksgiving, and that's that."

Dad smiled. "Understood. Well, it doesn't have to be for a holiday. You two figure out a good time, and . . ."

"I've got a big house. You and Sylvia are invited, too. Bring those two fancy neighbors of yours along, if you'd like. Bud would be happy to have a lot of new faces around."

"And you, Grams?" I asked.

"And me, what?"

"You'd be happy for us all to descend on you and wreak havoc?"

"You always need it spelled out, Belle? Of course. Otherwise, I wouldn't have asked." She shoved the rest of her cheese danish in her mouth.

Mickey patted my knee under the table. "We'll figure something out and will fill you in on our plans as soon as we check the calendar."

I knew that we had nothing on the calendar. Mom knew it, too, since she had studied it a few days ago, trying to pinpoint the perfect date for our wedding. She and I traded smiles as she said, “We know how busy you are!”

We finished breakfast and went for a leisurely walk with Fargo over to Madison Park and then to Mom and Dad’s hotel, where we said goodbye, and where I started bawling like Diane Keaton’s playwright character in *Something’s Gotta Give* after Jack Nicholson has dumped her and she’s channeling all of that hurt into a brilliant new play. The only thing I was channeling was tears and snot all over my father’s sport coat.

He hugged me tightly. “Bea, muffinhead, what’s this? All is well. You’re married and happy, and so are we. Stop it, now. We’ll see you soon.”

“You were here for a whole week but I feel like I hardly saw you,” I mumbled.

“Well, we knew you’d be busy. You warned us you had this case, and who knew there’d be a sudden wedding? Which was, I have to say, a wedding for the ages.” He kissed the top of my head. “Stop now, I mean it.”

I let him go and hugged Mom. “Thanks, Mom, for all of your help. You’re the best mom in the whole world.”

“You bet your ass, I am.” She gave me a squeeze and then wiped the tears off my face. “You stay safe now.” Her eyes were a little teary, too.

Mickey gave them each a hug, and damn if Grams didn’t too, of her own volition. They went inside to retrieve their bags, and we headed home, where Grams finished packing her stuff. She was ready to go, and Mickey grabbed his car keys to drive her to LaGuardia to catch her flight.

I handed her the rose glass. “For your bourbon. So you will always think of us when you use it.” I kept a straight face.

“Not on your life. That’s for me to use when I’m here. No more sentimental claptrap for me. Ye gods and little fishes.” She scowled at me and then held out her arms. “Give me a hug, Belle.”

When I did, she whispered in my ear, “You’re a good egg. You take care of Mickey. He needs you more than you know.”

I kissed her cheek, she gave Fargo one last pat, and they were off to the airport.

I was alone in the apartment and while I thought I was ready for the quiet reprieve, I hadn’t felt that lonely in a long, long time.

I found my DVD of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, one of my go-to films for mood enhancement, inserted it, and settled in with Bonkers on the couch.

Chapter Thirty-Five

It was another beautiful June day, so I only watched the first half hour of the movie before I decided to go for a run. I dressed in shorts and a black tee, pulled on sweat socks and my running shoes, and wrapped a scrunchie around my ponytail. I shoved my phone and some cash into my running belt and fastened it around my hips. I still didn't have my Beretta back from the police, so I didn't have to make a decision about taking it with me. It wouldn't have fit in my belt anyway.

I attached the leash to Fargo's collar, and out the door we hustled. I thought about catching a cab to Central Park, but Fargo and I walked instead, up Eighth Avenue to Columbus Circle. Then we took off on an easy jog, looping around the Heckscher Playground, passing over Center Drive, and circling around The Pond to pass by the east side of the zoo and on up to the statue of Balto, where we paused. I love the statue and his story. In case you don't know it, Balto was the lead Husky on one of the sled dog teams that delivered crucial medicine to combat a diphtheria outbreak in Nome, Alaska, in 1925. He guided the other dogs through blizzard conditions, at night, for fifty-three miles. The statue commemorates all of the sled dogs and its text ends with these three words: Endurance, Fidelity, Intelligence.

“See that, Fargo? He can be a role model for you.”

Fargo wagged his tail, and we took off again, north to the Conservatory Water where people sail their model boats by remote control. It’s one of my favorite Central Park places.

Fargo and I found a bench and plopped ourselves down for a welcome rest. He stretched out at my feet. I felt good. I watched the sailboats glide around the glassy water until I was well rested. Then I got up and took my trusty sidekick with me to buy a bottle of water at the Snack Shack. I poured some into a cup for Fargo, and drank the rest, thinking we’d jog a different route south through the park. Two women walked by us, a mother and daughter, I figured, speaking French. I love French. I love watching French movies with subtitles. I cannot speak it worth a Euro, however. Thinking about all things French, I remembered my missing earring. I thought about everywhere I had been on Wednesday, when I lost it.

Beverly Musgrave’s apartment. We searched it that day. And now Fargo and I were only a few blocks away. It would be an easy walk there to ask Mr. Parker if he had found it.

Off we went, up to Seventy-Sixth Street to cross Fifth Avenue, and then east to Park Avenue. We entered the building and I saw Parker right away. “Good afternoon, Mr. Parker.”

He kept his usual stone-face expression. “What do you want?”

“How is Jojo doing?”

“How do you think she’s doing? She’s in jail.”

“She didn’t make bail?”

He scoffed at that with a bit of a snarl. “I haven’t raised the money yet. Some of us don’t have it as easy as some of you.” He still wasn’t smiling.

“Right, well, I just wondered if you had found a blue earring that I might have lost when I was here on Wednesday.”

He didn't hesitate. "No."

I had the feeling that even if he *had* found it, he wouldn't tell me. "Could I take peek in Beverly's apartment?"

"No."

"Look, I'm sorry about everything you're going through, what with your friend being murdered and Jojo being arrested, but the earring means a lot to me, and I don't see why . . ."

"You think my daughter killed Beverly, right?"

His tone was threatening. Fargo stood and the leash went taut, but I kept him near me. "Actually, I'm not sure about that at all anymore. She may have gotten unwittingly involved through her relationship with Tony White and that necklace she has of Beverly's, but that doesn't mean . . ."

"What necklace?" He stepped a little closer to me. Fargo edged closer to my leg.

"The diamond Q? She told me you gave it to her, that it was really a numeral 2 for the two of you, but it's really Beverly's, right? Because I saw it on Beverly in a photograph at Oliver's, and it turns out that Beverly used to be known as Queenie McMillan." This rushed out of me faster than Rosalind Russell read Cary Grant the riot act in *His Girl Friday*, setting the standard for fast-talking dames, I might add.

Mr. Parker stared at me for a long moment and then relaxed a little. "Ah. So that's where she got it." He stuck his hands in his pants pockets. "She must have stolen it at the same time she took that bracelet." He fished in his pocket and pulled out a doggie treat. I knew that's what it was because he squatted down and held it out to Fargo. "Here, boy." Fargo didn't take it until Parker put it on the floor for him. "I love dogs. I keep treats for the ones that live in the neighborhood. Too bad we don't allow them in this building." This time he did smile at me.

“Oh! I’m sorry. I didn’t think. Um . . .”

“You know what. I’ll let you in to Beverly’s apartment, if you can leave Fargo here in the lobby.” Now Fargo was letting Parker pet him. “He’ll be fine. I just don’t want you to be on the elevator and run into another tenant who will end up complaining about your dog, and . . .”

“I understand.” I didn’t want to leave Fargo, but I knew what a bad ass he could be, so I wasn’t particularly worried about his well being. “That’ll work.”

Parker went to his desk and got the keys, and I wrapped Fargo’s leash around the desk leg and told him to stay. He stretched out on the floor and rested his head on his paws. I took the keys, thanked Parker, and took the elevator to the twentieth floor.

Beverly’s apartment looked the same as it did a few days ago, with one glaring difference: the fake book that held her gun was open, on the coffee table—sans gun, of course. I walked around each room, hoping to find my earring, but saw nothing. I got down on my hands and knees and felt around underneath the couch and the bookshelves in the living room, then checked under Beverly’s bed—but no earring. I knelt sitting back on my heels, disappointed, even though I knew it was a long shot, and was about to get up to head into the second bedroom when I heard someone enter the apartment.

I popped up in time to see Parker coming at me, holding something in his hand above his head, ready to strike me with it. I rolled under the bed and yelled, just after I got a clear picture of the weapon.

It looked like a lion.

Chapter Thirty-Six

I plastered myself up against the wall underneath the head of Beverly's bed, trying to make myself as small as possible, lying on my side in a fetal position. I learned this hiding spot from Bonkers, who took this position whenever I had to take him to the vet. He'd hear his carrying cage being unzipped, and off he'd scramble.

I yelled again. "What are you doing! I'm just looking for my earring!"

Parker was silent as he headed back into the living room. I knew where he was because I heard him methodically fasten the deadbolt, the jimmy-proof deadbolt, the hotel-type security guard lock, and the slider thingy lock.

Then he was back, by the bed. I could see his legs. "You're looking for more evidence. I'm no fool." His voice was so calm it was creepy.

Mr. Parker was a tall man, and a little creaky and stiff. Think about Lurch from *The Addams Family*, and you'll get the picture. I didn't think he could fit under the bed, though he was probably strong enough to pull it away from the wall. I pulled out my phone and speed-dialed Mickey.

Mickey's line engaged and he said nothing. I talked to Parker, loudly, positioning the phone on the carpet behind

my bent arms, where I hoped it couldn't be seen from Parker's viewpoint, should he peer under the bed. "Mr. Parker! I am only here in Beverly's apartment to find an earring, *my* earring, really! I mean you no harm, and like I said, I already don't think that Jojo is the killer. Please, if you'll let me go, I'll come out from under this bed and leave you alone."

Parker knelt down and glared at me under the bed. "It's too late for any of that nonsense." He straightened up, stood, and started pulling the bed away from the wall.

That is, he tried to. For some reason, Beverly's headboard was fastened to the wall. The bed was not moving.

Parker grunted. "All I have to do is move the mattress and the box springs. Then what will you do? Face it, you're not getting out of here without dealing with me first."

"Okay, let's deal. What do you want? You need to protect Jojo, right? Your only child. You had to raise her yourself, alone, after your wife died, I get it. Now she's in trouble, and you must protect her. I get it. Please believe me, I don't think she's the murderer, even though you seem to have found Fortitude, or Patience." That wasn't true. I now thought Jojo was definitely the killer, and her Dad was looking out for her, because I remembered that Mickey told me the police had already checked him out. I figured Beverly ended up with the bookends from Oliver, and Jojo beamed her with one, and hid the other with her father. And now he was out of his mind with grief over Beverly and panic over his daughter.

He didn't answer me. He drew back the covers and tossed the pillows on the floor. He started pulling on one side of the king-size mattress. This was his mistake. He temporarily couldn't see me as I rolled out from under the bed on the other side and darted out of the room, slamming the door behind me. I rushed to the front door and managed to unlock all the locks except the slider before he came into the room,

but I was out of time. So I flattened myself against the wall next to the couch and grabbed the first thing I found for a weapon, sorry not to have my gun.

It was the missing bookend. He must have put it down when he was locking all of those friggin locks.

I held it up as if I was going to throw it at him, which I didn't think was a very good idea. He could probably catch it. But I was out of options.

"Don't come near me, Mr. Parker. I'm strong and I can hurt you."

To my surprise, he stopped. "We're going to have to figure out what to do next, aren't we?"

I kept my eyes on him, hoping Mickey would arrive soon, and thinking that he could probably break in with only that one skimpy lock fastened.

"Why don't you simply let me walk out of here?"

"Jojo didn't kill Beverly."

"Fine. So, I'll leave, and this can be the start of a beautiful friendship."

He shook his head. "You have the lion bookend. I'll need it back."

"It's a marble bookend. There are lots of them. I'll buy you a new one. I'd like to keep it with me until I'm out of here. I can leave it downstairs . . ."

"It's mine, and I want it back."

"Actually, I think it was Oliver's, or maybe Beverly's, and . . ."

He took a step toward me, and I pointed the bookend at him, headfirst, like I could stab him with it or something. It was a defensive reflex, but it made all the difference, because I could see the inscription on the bottom, written on a white sticker in black ink.

"With love to Butch from Queenie."

Butch.

Robert Parker wasn't only the name of a great mystery writer. It was also Butch Cassidy's real name. I was reminded of that when I heard Paul Newman reveal his true identity to Robert Redford this morning in the first part of the movie.

Mr. Parker the doorman had a nickname just like Beverly Musgrave did. Maybe she called him "Butch." Maybe their relationship had started long ago, during her Queenie days.

"Queenie dumped you, right, Butch? Did you kill her?" I brandished the bookend.

"Yes, she dumped me. No I did not kill her. All I did was lend someone her keys."

With that Parker lunged for me, but he lost his balance and fell against me, crushing me momentarily against the wall.

I brought Fortitude or Patience or whoever it was down as hard as I could on his head.

I mean, I tried to. But I only managed a glancing blow, since he was already slipping away from me, out of balance.

No matter. It worked. He fell to the floor. He was out.

I stepped over and away from him, just as Mickey burst through the door, tearing apart that failure of a slider lock, with Fargo at his heels.

"Babe?!"

I stood there with the bloody bookend in my hand, staring at Parker. "Is he dead?" The fact that this was the second time I had asked that in two days was not lost on me. My knees felt like they would give way.

Mickey crouched next to Parker and felt for a pulse in his neck. "No. I'll call nine one one." He stood up and punched it in. While he gave the operator the particulars, I set the bookend down on the coffee table and sat on the couch. Fargo sniffed around at Parker's feet and then sat by mine. Mickey hung up and pulled out his gun, ready for Parker to

wake up. “Want to fill me in? I couldn’t hear anything after I heard a door slam, I guessed you got out from under the bed.”

“Yup. My phone is still there, in fact.” I started to get up to go get it, but Mickey put his hand on my shoulder to keep me seated. “Later. Tell me what happened.”

I did, while Mickey felt around in Parker’s pockets and pulled out his wallet. He went through the contents, pulling out money and credit cards, and a couple of photos. I finished talking just as he held one up to me. It was of three people, from a good long time ago. The man looked like a young Parker, the woman looked like a young Queenie, and the baby, I swear to god, was the spitting image of both of them and was wearing a tiny T-shirt that said “Jojo” on it.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Parker woke up and groaned. He rolled to his side and pushed himself up, only to see Mickey sitting on a chair facing him with a gun pointed at his forehead. Parker leaned against the wall and felt the back of his head. His hand came away bloodied.

I didn't waste any time. "Queenie is Jojo's mother?"

He nodded, eyes to the floor.

"She doesn't know?"

He shook his head.

"You loved her?"

He raised his head to focus on me. "Sure, until she split when Jojo was two weeks old. Promised that crook all her money in the divorce as long as he kept her real identity secret—and the fact that she did time. Then she shows up here having left her rich husband. Found me, god knows how. Wanted to know her daughter." He paused. "I never loved anyone but her, god knows why."

"Why'd you kill her?" Mickey asked.

Parker rubbed his face. "I didn't."

"Who'd you give the set of apartment keys to?"

He paused again. "Oliver. Samuel. Gregory. Tony."

I leaned toward him. "You gave them each a set? Why?"

He shook his head again and resumed looking at the floor. “Just one. I don’t know who ended up with it.”

Mickey indicated all the locks on the inside of the door. “To get in while she wasn’t here?”

“Yes. For the robbery.”

“And the murder?” I asked. “She would have locked all those locks once she was inside. A couple of them are engaged only from the inside.”

“She would let in someone she cared about.”

“Jojo?”

He nodded. “Queenie promised me she wouldn’t tell Jojo she was her mother. Wanted to put all that behind her. Didn’t want Jo to be disappointed in her.”

“Jojo killed Beverly?”

He shook his head.

I was getting a little fed up with this conversation. “Parker, tell us what you did, and . . .” But I stopped. I suddenly got it. “Beverly liked Jojo. So after the robbery, when she was holed up in here, Jojo knocks, Beverly lets her in, only to see that she’s not alone. Who was with her? Tony? Or Samuel? Or was it Gregory? And the bookend. You supplied the weapon?”

He exhaled. “Beverly took those bookends when she left Oliver and moved here. She tried to give them to me. She knew that I loved the library. We used to sit on the steps by the lions all those years ago and read, on sunny days. But I didn’t want the reminder. She left them for me anyway. Jojo took one with her as a reason for stopping by that night.” He took a deep breath. “She was going to tell Beverly that I insisted she take them back, to make her open the door. Tony, Samuel, Gregory . . . whoever it was. Had to be one of them. Jojo didn’t tell me . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Methinks you’re in it up to your armpits, bud.” I leaned

against the wall with my arms crossed.

“How does Oliver fit in?” Mickey asked.

“He’d split the money he’d inherit from the divorce agreement with all of us, as long as he didn’t have to do the dirty work.”

“Wow.” I looked at Mickey. “Everyone’s a suspect, and everyone’s in custody right now.”

“Except for Gregory.” Mickey stood up. “You’re all culpable, Parker. I’ve never heard of a person having so many ruthless enemies in my life.”

Parker laughed. “Then you didn’t really know Beverly Queenie McMillan Musgrave. Believe me, the world is a helluva lot better without her.”

I got up and headed to the bedroom to get my phone. “We’ve got to find Gregory.”

Just then the EMTs and Kermit arrived. I had the distinct feeling that Kermit was not all that happy to see me when he said, “You again, eh?”



After going over everything with Kermit and after he had sent Parker off to the station with a couple of uniforms, the three of us—plus Fargo—decided to head to Oliver’s penthouse in Kermit’s car to see if Gregory was hanging out.

Mickey called Luis to fill him in, but didn’t reach him. He left a message and said, “I think he will have picked up Ruby by now. I’m not surprised he doesn’t want to hear from us.”

Kermit pulled up outside, and I brought Fargo in with me, on the leash. As we entered the building, Paolo rushed out of *Per Favore*. “Aah, Annabella! I was hoping you would come back. Are you ready to schedule your wedding dinner now?” He took my hand and kissed it.

Kermit and Mickey headed toward the elevator and the

new doorman who had taken over for Tony.

“Oh, Paolo! Guess what? We got married, all of a sudden—two days ago, on Friday, in fact! So we are no longer planning on a fancy meal. But thank you very much for everything.” I was trying to graciously get away from him to join Mickey and Kermit.

“Well, congratulations to you and your husband, *cara!* I am sorry we couldn’t accommodate you, but at least now . . .”

He kept talking, but I wasn’t listening any longer. As I eyeballed the restaurant past his shoulder, I saw the very distinctive back of Gregory Wilcox, that shiny black ponytail pointing down his stylishly fitted shirt, sitting by himself at a table, having what I guessed was an early dinner.

Mickey called to me. “Annabelle, c’mon, the elevator’s here.” He was holding the door open.

I pointed toward the restaurant. “He’s here, Mickey.”

Paolo stopped talking and whirled around to look and turned back again. “Do you mean Mr. Wilcox? Do you know him? Why don’t you say hello. I’ll get you a nice glass of wine, and perhaps you can have a little antipasti . . .” He clapped his hands together like this was the happiest day of his life. Maybe it was. I mean, he owned a really bad restaurant.

That clap, and probably his excited demeanor, inspired Fargo to bark. Four times, the first three shorter and softer than the last one, which was loud and a little prolonged. The performance sounded like a canine version of the opening to Beethoven’s Fifth.

And it made Gregory Wilcox turn around and see me talking to Paolo.

I waved and walked toward him. “Hi, Gregory! We’re following up on a couple of things.”

He stood and started to approach me, fumbling around with his left ear like he did when I pulled my Beretta on

him at the White Horse Tavern. “Oh, hello, yes, nice to see you again without your gun. I suppose we do have things to discuss, given what happened yesterday. It’s such a shock, about Oliver and Tony.” He let his napkin fall to the floor deliberately and bent over to pick it up. When he straightened up I saw him put something in his shirt pocket as he dropped the napkin on the table.

And that’s when I knew Gregory was the murderer.

I tried to keep it cool when I said, “Why don’t you sit down and we’ll all talk turkey?” But maybe something in my voice alerted him, because when he saw Kermit and Mickey approach he scrambled, out the restaurant door and onto the street.

I dropped Fargo’s leash and took off after him, channeling Dustin Hoffman in *Marathon Man* and grateful that no old Nazi was chasing me to find out where a bunch of diamonds were hidden. I heard Mickey and Kermit behind me. Fargo barked now and then, but I figured Mickey had him on the leash and I was glad. I didn’t want the dog running free in the city and maybe getting hit by a car or running into a pedestrian.

I was gaining on Gregory, but slowly. He headed north on Central Park West and crossed the street toward the park at Seventy-Third, then headed up the path toward The Lake. He was flagging a bit when he cut over from the Bridle Path and onto West Drive. I knew I could catch him.

What I didn’t figure was that once he got to The Lake, he would jump in.

I can swim, but I hesitated to follow him, remembering that I used to finish last in fifty-meter races during high school. I started to yank my running shoes off, when something fairly large and bright white went sailing past me into the water.

It was Fargo.

Our wonder dog could swim. He was off after Wilcox like a dart.

Mickey and Kermit pulled up next to me. We were all panting, watching Fargo paddle after Wilcox.

I took off to the left, around the perimeter of the lake, trying to judge where Wilcox would exit. Mickey was in a holding pattern, keeping his eyes peeled on the swimmers. Kermit was on the phone, alerting the park police.

I guess Gregory Wilcox wasn't the greatest swimmer either—or else Fargo unnerved him, barking at him and chasing him at the same time—because he swam only to the Hershhead, a giant rock promontory that juts out into the lake. He hoisted himself onto it and was trying to bring his legs up, just as I got there. My plan was to keep half of him in the water, maybe by grabbing his shirt collar, until Mickey could catch up.

But Wilcox did the grabbing, holding onto my ankle and pulling it so hard that I fell on my ass faster than Ethel Merman when she slipped on a banana peel at the end of *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*, only nobody was laughing. We both slid into the water, and as we came up for air together and while he tried to push me back under, I managed to wrap my legs around his waist and I grabbed onto the front of his shirt, holding tight to the pocket. If I was going down, he was going with me. Fargo caught up to us and got Gregory's arm tight in his jaws, but he had to let go since while he's a wonder dog, he can't breathe underwater.

Then there was another big splash and Mickey was in the lake. He wrapped his arm around Gregory's neck and pulled him away from me. I sputtered and grabbed onto the edge of Hershhead. Fargo clawed his way out of the water and barked. Gregory kicked and yelled, but he wasn't strong enough for

Mickey, who swam him over to the edge.

Kermit was there, along with two policemen. They hauled Wilcox out of the water and sat him on the big rock. One of the cops cuffed him. Fargo kept barking at him. Mickey and I were still in the water, catching our breath. My feet could just touch the bottom; Mickey was standing erect.

“You’ve got no evidence against me!” Wilcox yelled.

“You running away from us for the exercise?” Kermit asked.

“Did you try to drown my wife by mistake?” Mickey asked.

“What’s in your pocket, dirtbag?” I asked.

Gregory Wilcox got the most panicky expression on his face I had ever seen on anyone as he dropped his chin to his chest and realized there was nothing in that shirt pocket of his.

Kermit and Mickey looked at me, curious.

I held up my right fist and opened it to reveal Beverly’s missing diamond earring. One of the ones she never took off. The one missing from her dead body. When Gregory Wilcox was hurriedly messing with his ear at *Per Favore*, I remembered not only that he had done the same thing before, but also that Oliver told us about his pierced ears. A diamond stud was the size of the object he deposited in his pocket when he fake-dropped his napkin.

“Annabelle, maybe you’d better give me that rock. I’d hate to see a cool million float to the bottom of the lake.” Kermit held his hand out, and I gave him the earring. “Well, Mr. Wilcox, along with confessions from your pals and this missing earring, which Ms. Musgrave never took off, I’d say your goose is cooked.”

“His bird has flown,” I added.

“His ship is sunk,” said Mickey.

“His cake is frosted,” I giggled.

“His wheels are flat,” Mickey laughed.

“Okay, stop, please,” said Kermit. “You two okay? I can drive you back to your place.”

Mickey and I kept our eyes on each other. “Nope, thanks though, Kerm,” Mickey answered. “It’s warm enough for us to dry out in the sun here for a bit, then we’ll get going.”

“Copy that. Reach out to me tomorrow, all right? In the morning.”

“My phone is dead,” I realized.

“You mean, ‘his phone is dead?’”

“No!” I pulled it out of my running belt. “Look! Soaking wet.”

We watched as Wilcox was pulled to his feet and led away. Fargo bid Wilcox adieu with a few final barks, and then sat down, regarding us.

Mickey reached out to me and pulled me to him. “You okay?”

“Yup. Just unreachable by anyone but you at the moment.”

“Okay with me.” We kissed and then pulled ourselves up on the Hershhead, where Fargo licked our faces.

“I love you, partner.” Mickey put his arm around my shoulders.

Then his phone vibrated. He had dumped his sweatshirt on the rock before he dove in. He picked it up, read the text, and showed it to me.

It was from Luis. Apparently Ruby did go into labor on the train ride home. He got her to the hospital just in time. She had given birth to a baby girl.

They named her Micaela Bella Maldonado.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Mickey and I were home, sitting on the couch with our feet up on the coffee table, enjoying a bottle of Pinot Gris and munching on manchego cheese with crackers. He had donned his Chicago Cubs ball cap, claiming that he had forgotten all about it until he saw it in the closet that night. I told him to take it off. Turns out he looks bad in hats.

Fargo was sleeping at Mickey's feet, and Bonkers was curled up next to me, also asleep. We were watching the Wes Anderson film *Moonrise Kingdom*, which we had both somehow missed when it was originally released. It's sweet and odd and tender and hilarious. In one scene, the main boy character, Sam, is struck by lightning. And later, his girlfriend, Suzy, says, "I think you've still got lightning in you."

It was a perfect film for calming down after such a hectic week. When it ended, I told Mickey that he always had lightning in him and I bet he always would. He told me that I was his thunder.

We get corny when we're exhausted.

So, Gregory confessed. He killed Beverly. Parker gave Jojo a key so that she could steal stuff. Oliver was behind the stolen dry cleaning. Tony admitted to smashing the windshield of Beverly's Lexus, and Parker canceled the couple of

dinner reservations that Beverly had made the mistake of mentioning to him. Samuel was the one who compromised Beverly's emails. She trusted him with her online accounts.

It was a six-ring circus. Under Oliver's instigation and direction, they had colluded to get rid of Beverly, first by scaring her, then killing her, with no evidence to put on anyone—at least that's what they hoped. Everyone insisted that killing Beverly wasn't part of the deal, but their protestations didn't make sense. The only way for Oliver to get Beverly's money was for her to die.

The biggest mistakes they made came out of arrogance. Jojo wearing the Q pendant that either she or her father stole, and Gregory wearing that ridiculously ostentatious diamond earring, and then trying to hide it from me, taking it out of his ear and dropping it on the floor at *Per Favore*.

The group had worked it out that Gregory would be suspected the least—especially since Tony backed up his alibi—and there was nothing to incriminate Samuel, though they figured the attention would be put on him. Jojo confessed everything she knew to Kermit. She wanted nothing to do with anyone, after Kermit told her that Oliver had blamed Tony, and Tony had blamed her. She admitted to letting Gregory into the apartment, so she would be going down for aiding and abetting, at the very least. Probably second degree murder, in fact. I didn't know if anyone told her that Queenie McMillan, aka the nasty Beverly Musgrave, was her mother. I supposed she'd find out sooner or later.

We didn't much care what would happen to the gang of six. I was just happy to have the case over and done with. We didn't get a final check in payment for our services, of course, but we didn't solve it for Beverly after all. We didn't help her in time.

“How bad could she have been, really, Mickey? I mean for

six people to plot for her demise.”

He yawned. “Well, she certainly was unpleasant, we know that. And want of money makes people do dastardly deeds.”

“I love it when you talk so rough and tough.” I stretched. “Let’s go to bed. Let’s sleep in tomorrow. Let’s sleep in all week.”

Mickey’s phone vibrated and he read the text. “It’s from Luis and Ruby with another picture of Micaela.” He showed me.

“Damn, she’s cute.” Then my phone dinged. “It’s Kathleen!” I read the message. “Listen to this: Fargo is half Dogo Argentino.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“It’s a breed. She says that’s why he’s so smart and protective. She’s relieved we have him. She moved in with her parents in Cleveland. Couldn’t take him with her.”

“Babe, I’m glad we have Fargo, but that was irresponsible of her, leaving him on the sidewalk for us. She should have asked.”

“You’re right. I think she got out of town fast. We don’t know the whole story. My gut tells me she did what she had to do. But I feel better now, trusting that he’s ours for real.” I stroked Bonkers’ ears. “I can’t wait to meet Micaela. Tomorrow, right? When they come home from the hospital?”

“In the morning.”

“That’s when they’ll be home?”

“That’s when we have to see them.”

I stood up to clear the glasses and cheese platter from the table. “No, I’m sleeping in.”

“No, in fact you’re not.”

I sat back down. “Excuuuuuse me?”

“We need to get a cab at noon to get out to JFK.”

“Mickey, what?”

He pulled me to him. "Voolay voo ayer a Paree avec mwa?"

"That sounds like very bad French."

"Honeymoon, my wife-o. Paris."

'MICKEY!!!'

"Better get packin', and I don't mean your Beretta."

"I don't have it back yet from the police. So you will have to love me for worse. I have to say, I don't miss it, Mickey.

Wow! Paris! Really?! I love you! But Fargo and Bonkers?"

"Kermit. His place is being painted. He'll be here tomorrow to get the keys and get situated. Didn't want to ask Luis, him being a new dad and all."

"When in the world did you do all of this?"

He smiled. "I'm a seasoned conniver. And I get things done on the treadmill. Hey, pack that wedding dress of yours and those wedding boots."

"Um, okay, but why?"

"Because we're going to have a fancy night out and I want to take your dress off appropriately, find out what's blue under there, and have a real wedding night."

Mickey can still make me blush, and I could feel the heat rising in my face. "Holy moly."

"Better get some sleep so that we can get up early."

I kissed him. "Sleep may be out of the question."

He picked me up and carried me over the threshold to our bedroom and kicked the door closed behind us with his heel.

We weren't the least bit tired anymore.

