

# THE CORPSE WORE LEATHER

Dorothy Linick

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Cover design by Janet Payne

# Introduction

It has long been my ambition to share with others some of the written work of my late wife, Dorothy. She began to write fiction in the mid-90's and at the time of her death, in 2007, she had compiled an impressive dossier. I hesitate to use the verb "completed" because Dorothy never seemed to be totally satisfied with any of her efforts and she was constantly undertaking tasks of revision. The job of preparing editions of her work, even for this website, was immensely complicated by this habit – but there were other problems as well.

I would have to say that Dorothy was never completely comfortable with computer technology and she never adopted a coherent system of handling her many projects and their revision. When she died there were four files on her desktop, 62 on her hard drive, 183 in her documents folder – and that was only the beginning. I discovered a total of 79 storage disks, mostly in the old three-and-a-half-inch square floppy format, but also including some zip disks and some CD's. Of these 19 belonged to the world of work, her role as special projects coordinator at the American School in London, and four (with literary titles) were by now blank. Of the remaining 56 disks, some nine were in word processing formats so ancient they could not be read by modern machines and I had to have these professionally recovered. Even those that could be read could be opened only in a text edit format on a number of occasions, and they required further manipulation to make them at all useful. In all, there were over 1600 files containing materials of a literary import!

Of course many of the files were merely copies or duplicates of earlier work – though there were true revisions as well. Indeed, one of my chief tasks was attempting to discover which draft represented Dorothy's most complete (I won't say final) intention. The problem was complicated by Dorothy's habit of adopting new titles for existing works – without getting rid of the original. As an example I discovered that Learning Curves, which I believe was her first attempt at novel writing, also later appeared in her electronic archive as Mimi Marcus, SightBites, Love Can Drive A Normal Woman To Extremes, Getting Over Gerry, and Getting Over Barry. In all, Dorothy worked on some twenty-five projects, leaving only fragments or outlines in some cases, and offering full-length versions in others. I remember urging her to try her hand at the short story format but I believe she intended all of her efforts to grow into novel-length proportions.

She offered some of her projects to publishers and had at one time an agent in New York and then one in London – but nothing came of these efforts. I read only one of these works during her lifetime (*Learning Curves*) but I knew the direction and tone of many of the others. For a wider audience, this website can now reveal what she left behind for us.

Dorothy was a dedicated reader of crime fiction and so it is not surprising that she decided to produce a novel in this genre herself. I believe that her last efforts at a revision of *The Corpse Wore Leather* were made in the year 2005. Of course I do recognize echoes of our life in East Lansing in this work, but in its events and its characters it is a complete work of fiction. Dorothy did consult with an officer of the East Lansing Police Department on certain technical matters and thanks are owed to him for his advice – though I no longer know his name. Her sister, Naomi Tschoegl, undertook many hours of research in an effort to identify the drafts that I could then edit and she also offered critical suggestions during this process. Dorothy's best friend in Michigan, the former state film commissioner, Janet Lockwood, also undertook the painstaking task of reading proof in this project. Finally I want to thank Janet Payne for again providing us with the cover design.

Anthony Linick

“People who are very beautiful make their own laws.”

Vivien Leigh as Mary Treadwell, *Ship of Fools*

## Chapter 1

The phone rang just as I was thinking that *anyone* would fall for Robert Redford – as Barbra Streisand did in *The Way We Were*. The caller was my boss, Lieutenant Herb Fedewa – who would see a chick flick only at gunpoint.

“Sophie. We have a dead woman decorating her backyard. 124 Sycamore Street. A gal called Ingrid Spoto and she’s not a pretty picture. Neighbor called it in about forty minutes ago. Medical Examiner’s on his way. And so are you. It’s your case.”

A poor start to my Saturday. I finished my morning hot water and lemon, deciding that even Herb would fall for Redford in his navy whites, and I was reluctantly on my way.

Barely able to stop myself from putting a hand over my eyes – in order to make viewing slits with my fingers – I looked down at the late Ingrid Spoto. She had been left sprawled on a pile of rotting leaves turned black with her blood. My mouth went dry at the nasty sight. I reached into my bag and found my bottle of water. God, I hated this part of the job.

“What do we have here then?” I asked Roger Hendrickson, the Medical Examiner, after I’d taken a swig.

“What you see is what you got. A stiff.” Roger harbored an eighth-grader’s sense of humor in a badly maintained forty-two-year-old body. It was generally agreed by my colleagues on the West Rapids Police that the Roger was a dead loss, ha, ha, from his thin, dirty blond hair to his no doubt corn-covered toes. He belonged in a *film noir* with a fedora stuck on the back of his head and Dick Powell or Humphrey Bogart to put him in his place. Good at his job though, very good indeed. Which still didn’t make him bearable.

“Roger . . .”

He shrugged. “Female Caucasian in good condition, except for the fact that she’s dead.”

Enough. I turned to a uniform standing patiently nearby. I recognized her as Janet Jansen. She was a recent Huron grad and I’d been hearing good

things about her. I would have put her at six-feet and redheaded – she was a Nicole Kidman lookee-likee without being that pretty. Maybe it was the nose.

“Do we know what she did?”

“Yes, Detective Pimlott. The vic was a professor at the U.”

Huron University was literally and figuratively the center of West Rapids and everyone within the town borders owed their soul to this company store. Forty-three thousand scholars roamed the streets, thousands of faculty were kept in work – as well as God knows how many support staff. Huron had a tradition for great football teams, ones that terrorized the gridiron far and wide, and a singular reputation in the area of agricultural scholarship, one that had earned it the not unaffectionate nickname of Moo U.

“Did she live alone?” I asked Janet.

“Yes ma’am. Neighbors told us.”

I turned back to Roger. “Do we know how she died – and play it straight.”

“Cashed in her chips – .” I winced and he rolled his eyes. “Okay, okay. The killer went for her with something that was smooth and heavy. But no weapon showed up in the prelim comb of the house, at least that’s what the uniforms said.”

So, had the killer brought a weapon along, or used something handy? Were we looking for someone who had given killing Ingrid Spoto some thought, or an impulsive loonie who brained her because it was the right time and place? I made myself look at the body again and had to drink more water to keep from running away. “Where did all the blood come from?”

He shrugged. “Severe injuries to the face, lot of soft tissue damage, teeth broken, some missing. She took five or six good ones to the parietal lobes, a lot of laceration of the tissues. A fractured skull – and that’s what killed her. I can tell more when I open her up.”

Oh, God. I’d seen Roger in action with his circular saw and I had had to retire from the lab with a stomach that didn’t settle for days – mostly from seeing bone chips flying around. The smell didn’t help either. Roger had more to tell me, as if what he had already shared was not enough.

“From the look of the bruising patterns and the bleed, I’d say the jaw, cheekbones, teeth and the nose got broken while she was alive. Not with the same instrument that crushed her skull, though. Fists, maybe, sure made a mess of her face. If she’d lived, maybe the damage would have been fixable, but I doubt she would have looked okay. I’ll know more when I get her on the table.”

*Oh God, please don’t make me have to attend the post mortem.* “Any sign of sexual aggression?”

“Uh, uh. If there was sex, I’m betting it was consensual.” He leered at

me.

“And just why would you bet that?”

He made a revolting noise down his nose. “Come on Sophie, think about what she’s wearing.”

The corpse wore leather and we weren’t talking about a warm jacket, or biker gear. No, no, the lady had been up to mischief, very sexy mischief. Laid out on her back, long legs splayed apart she wore black leather thigh high boots with stiletto heels. Her shapely body was strapped into what had to have been an agonizingly tight black corset with a couple of bits and pieces here and there that looked equally excruciating.

“I don’t go in for nipple piercing myself,” Roger said. He rolled carp-like green eyes. “Looks to me like what happened here was a sex game that went too far.” He leered again. God, if he had only known how unappetizing he looked when he did that. Would he have cared? He clicked his fingers like castanets, which made him seem worse, if that was possible.

I sighed. “Stop it Roger and while you’re at it, show some respect for the dead.”

“Whatever,” Roger said cheerfully. “I guess you want to have a guesstimate at the time of death?”

“Hmm, could be helpful.”

Sarcasm was lost on him, of course, but I never had given good Eve Arden. “Okey, dokey. Let’s say with night temperatures of just above freezing, rigor mortis, post-mortem lividity – check out how blue her legs are – we’re looking at between twelve and three in the morning. Uniforms say the perp did her inside the house, not out here, and the forensic guys back that up – so there’ll be a lot of blood inside the house. Deep stains and splatter. The killer carried or dragged her out here.”

I was surprised. “Then he had to be strong as well as being a bit nervy into the bargain. Anyone could have seen her being dumped out here.”

“In the back yard?” Roger shook his head. “This is the burbs, it was late, everyone’s storm windows still up. Nope.” He zipped up his jacket. It was cheap and ugly in a shade of green that would have done little for Brad Pitt, never mind Roger. “Cold, huh? Feels like snow,” he said.

It was cold. I crossed my fingers behind my back. “Roger, it’s the third of April.”

He wagged a finger at me. When I thought where that finger had been and where it would be, I wanted to puke. “Anything’s possible when it comes to the weather in the Midwest, you should know that by now, babe – .”

“Don’t call me babe – .”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Snow won’t last though, never does at this time of year.” He looked down at the body and shook his head. “I have to say I haven’t

seen this kind of thing since I left Detroit. You sure don't expect it in a burg like this."

Why not? The miserable things people did to one another no longer surprised me very much, regardless of geography. I'd seen just as bad on the streets of Knightsbridge and worse when I was working with the Metropolitan Police, Willesden Division. There had been a Russian prostitute who had been dismembered before she . . . well, no reason to dwell on that kind of stuff.

I looked down at Ingrid Spoto. My stomach didn't heave, so I guessed I was getting used to the way she looked. No, god no. If I ever got used to such a sight, it would be time to quit. "Strange stuff for a girl who lived in a neighborhood like the Glen."

"You got that one right," Roger said.

I looked around me. We were standing in a subdivision at the high end of West Rapids' real estate arc: quiet, conservative streets, light years away from the noisy side streets of the downtown area – where students from the university lived in shabby, cramped accommodation. Substantial homes lined tranquil streets, named after the trees that shaded them – Oakwood Avenue, Pine Drive, Elm Close and Sycamore Street – where we now stood. Each residence stood proudly in its own expensively landscaped grounds. This was a part of town that was as respectable as it was pricey and I wondered if Roger hadn't called it right. Night games gone wrong, very wrong.

I forced my eyes back to what was left of Ingrid Spoto. An open, white toweling bathrobe saturated with blood revealed how toned the victim had been; a babe from the neck down, at least, and young from the look of the muscle development. As if reading my mind, Roger said, "Vic was in her early to mid-thirties, I'd guess."

Blossoms from the Japanese magnolia tree a few feet away had drifted down and covered her arms and breast, one or two petals coming to rest on Ingrid Spoto's face in mockery of a funeral bouquet. Of course, there was no knowing what that face had been like in life, since in death it was nothing but a bloated parody, lifeless blue eyes peering out between bruised slits. I started to feel queasy and had to have a sip of water. Roger was doing his thing and felt the need to bring me into the loop once more.

"I'll check her out for DNA. See if anyone left anything behind. Know what I mean? Wow," Roger said now, adding without much emotion. "she's a mess, huh."

"Look at that." I pointed to her long, glossy pale blond hair which had been carefully arranged to form a halo around her face. There was another novel touch, as well. However, Roger misunderstood which hair I was talking about.

"Is that a Brazilian? Is that what they call it? The one the girls on *Sex*



and the City used to have done?" he wanted to know.

"Yes." I considered what I was seeing here. I didn't have to read a textbook to understand why the killer had left the body out in the open. We were looking at the work of someone who was into humiliation – a cruel postscript to death. Robbing the helpless of their dignity. This was about power. Now I noticed something else, something not very nice at all. I pointed to Ingrid Spoto's mouth, which was caked with blood and strangely shrunken. "What's going on here?"

Roger shrugged. "Her tongue's been cut out. We haven't found it anywhere around here."

"Oh my. My, my, my," I said, for want of anything better to say. This was right out of a Roger Corman lurid horror flick. I cursed Herb for dumping me with such a grisly case when he knew full well I didn't deal all that well with this kind of crap. No, no – make that didn't deal at all well with what had been done to Ingrid Spoto. The ground started rising toward me and I grabbed Roger's arm.

"You okay, Sophie?" He steadied me.

I nodded, then managed: "We have an animal on our hands."

"No kidding?" Roger was doing flippant, but I could tell he was shocked by what he had found. He looked shaken, or as shaken as he was capable of looking. When you're ninety percent less sensitive than other people you can only go a short distance. "Her head and face look like the meat counter at Kroger's."

I stared at him. "You have a way with words, Roger."

Roger smirked at me. "I have a way with something else, too, babe."

That did it. A mutilated woman lay at the man's feet and all he could think of was his dick? "I've told you before not to call me babe and if you do it again, I will shoot you and it won't even get to court."

He wagged a finger at me. "You don't know what you're missing."

"I can guess." I stood for a long moment, gulping in the clear, springtime air. My head cleared and the bilious attack passed.

It was time to get on with my job.

## Chapter 2

“Is it okay for me to go inside,” I asked Officer Janet Jansen.

“Yes Detective, but you’d better check to see if we have a search warrant, just be on the safe side, before you do,” she answered. “We did a preliminary sweep,” she continued, “lots of blood in some kind of office upstairs – so we figured that’s where the killer caught up with her. Forced entry at the kitchen door in back. We didn’t touch anything, just made sure there weren’t any surprises like body number two, and then we got out of there. Forensic team was hot to trot, so they’ll be taking samples as soon as the warrant comes through.”

“Thanks.” I cautioned her and the other cops lounging around to the keep the press away for as long as possible.

“Er, too late,” Janet told me.

I could see that for myself. “Who found the body?”

“Mary Beth Drollette. Kid from next door.”

“How old?”

“Thirteen.”

“Terrible, what appalling luck.” We looked at one another, thinking the same thing, no doubt. Mary Beth would remember what she had seen in that backyard for the rest of her life. I cleared my throat. We had a murder to solve. “Do we know what *she* was doing here?”

“Yes, I spoke to her. Mom didn’t like it, but I thought someone had better get on it before the girl closed down.” She blushed slightly. “I mean she might have seen something.”

“You did the right thing.” I gave her points in the Pro column in my head.

“Thanks.” Janet checked her notebook. “The deceased asked the girl yesterday to come by at eight o’clock this morning. Wanted her to clear the back and front yards of the leaves and stuff left from the winter and treat the grass and all. In the fall she rakes the leaves as well and in the summer she mows the lawn. She’d gone round into the back yard with some plastic bags and that’s when she found the vic. Ran home and the mom, Geraldine

Drollette, called it in. As soon as I arrived I talked to mom as well.” Janet smiled slightly, “Spelled out both her names very slowly and carefully, but I managed not to move my lips as I wrote them down. She’s the one who told me the deceased was single and where she worked. Probably would have told me more, but the kid was coming to pieces. I got the impression mom didn’t like the deceased. Referred to her as ‘a university type.’”

Not very intriguing, all things considered. There were always tensions between town and gown. The former thought the latter should get real jobs, while the academic contingent acted as though speaking to anyone without a PhD was a gesture too generous to be quantifiable. And the students just reduced most of what they touched to rack and ruin, because they were, after all, just passing through. All were wary of one another

“Well done,” I said and meant it. Janet grinned. “I need someone to look around the house with me. That okay with you?” I asked.

“Not a problem.”

As we walked around to the front of Ingrid Spoto’s house, I spotted a TV transmitting van across the street and the fox-faced local anchor Kelli Kojecka, with a cameraman behind her, interviewing a man who seemed full of opinions. No surprises there, I had been warned. Murder didn’t happen all that often in West Rapids and usually involved party A standing over party B, the very beer bottle in a hand that had ruined party B’s Saturday nights forever. A dead woman in leather was news anywhere, never mind in a small college town in the Midwest. I turned to a very young cop with a hat that was too large for him; ditto for the regulation Sig Sauer resting on his hip. I could only hope he’d grow into it before hurting himself, or someone else.

“Tell them to turn off those flashing lights,” I told him, pointing to the two cop cars parked at the curb. “The emergency’s over.”

“You got it.” The sight of him running off set the growing group of snoopers buzzing. The white suited CSI team were trooping into the house, so I guessed the search warrant necessary to our thorough snooping had been granted, and I could follow when they were through with their preliminaries.

I shivered, wrapping my arms around my body as shelter from a wind unchallenged by pallid spring sunshine and wished I had not wilfully packed away my bulky winter coat. I did so stubbornly every year on the thirtieth of March and every year I was sorry. I had a more immediate worry, though. There were way too many onlookers trampling over the lawn, gossiping with one another and avidly asking the uniforms what was going on. It would only be minutes before the single body in the backyard escalated into multiples and these snoopers were on their cell phones – scaring anyone they could reach with news that we had a murder epidemic on our hands.

I showed my badge as I called out: “I’m Detective Sergeant Pimlott,

and while I respect your right to know what's going on here, I have to ask you to leave as soon as possible – since your presence risks contaminating the crime scene.”

A rush of excitement went through the crowd and I heard someone say: “Wow, they're always worrying on *CSI: Vegas* about that. I didn't know it was for real.” Most of them moved off but they didn't want to – that is if the surly glances I was getting meant anything.

“Thank you everyone,” I called out. “We really appreciate your cooperation in this matter.”

I turned away, but not fast enough. A mike was shoved in my face by Kelli Kojecka, who must have seen Holly Hunter, tics and all, in *Broadcast News* once too often. I disliked her as much on screen as I guessed I was going to detest her in person. She had a grating voice, for one thing. A cameraman followed and lights were shining on me, causing polka dots in front of my eyes.

“Kelli Kojecka of WFAK TV. Are you in charge of this case, Detective Pimlott?”

“Yes . . .” Just who was the twerp who'd told her my name? I imagined Herb watching me on screen and quailed in advance at his reaction.

“So what's going on? Do we know who did this? What about the leather and how badly was she beaten?” Foxy wanted to know. There was a buzz of excitement from the crowd.

Who had been blabbing? Out of the corner of my eye I caught the cop/kid in the over-sized hat sidling away and I had my answer to her question. I guessed I could turn him over to Herb, who would reduce him to a greasy puddle. I would settle for tearing a strip or two off the stupid lad when I had the chance. It was no good getting worked up though; I did a P.A.T.I.E.N.C.E. in my head and that did the trick. I deliberately didn't smile at Kelli. “I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of the case and speculation in such matters is dangerous. The victim Ingrid Spoto was only found an hour and a half ago – .”

“So you don't know who did it yet, huh?”

“Not yet – .”

“Any suspects – ?”

“I've told you – .”

“Well thank you, Detective Pimlott.” She turned to the camera. “It's a wrap.” She turned back to me.

“Are you bringing in backup from Scotland Yard?”

I stared at her. “What? Why?”

“Well, I can tell you're from England, right, so you must have connections.”

God, what was the woman thinking of? “We've called in the State

Police for some forensic assistance, so that's all the backup we need, thank you." Did I sound huffy? Well, I damn well felt huffy. The very idea!

"What are you doing here, anyway," Kelli wanted to know.

"As you see."

That didn't stop her. "No, I mean how come you're in West Rapids?"

I had known exactly what she meant. I just hadn't thought of it as any of Kelli Kojecka's business. "I have to go – ."

"Do you know Judi Dench?" A short, plump blonde called out from the crowd.

What was going on here and how did I lose control of the situation so quickly? I was getting hot and not just because of the lights blazing at me. The truth was I had actually stood behind Dame Judy in a supermarket in north London. To say so now would make me look like an even bigger fool than I felt already. "No and you must excuse me – ."

"She was great in that film about Queen Victoria," the same dodo called out.

"What was that called?" a man with a Great Dane sitting at his feet wanted to know. He wore a bright blue anorak. The man, not the dog.

"Mrs. Brown," I couldn't help myself. Mercifully my cell phone rang.

"What's going on?" Herb wanted to know.

"I'm about to check out the house. See what I can find out about her." I left out the details of my TV appearance. Plenty of time for that.

"Take a uniform with you."

"Okay. Talk to you later." He hung up.

I turned to Kelli. "You must excuse me, Kathy – ."

"It's Kelli." She corrected me with a frown. There were more titters.

"Of course. My apologies. We plan to follow any leads, but these are early days . . ." I came over all BBC received English, hoping that would get me off the hook. It did – Kelli thanked me effusively for my "valuable input" and I was let loose so that she could interpret my non-statement into faux grist for her mill. Two more blue and white cop cars arrived with lights flashing – adding drama to a situation that hardly needed any more. I spotted Janet Jansen and waved her over.

"I need someone to check the house out with me," I said.

"Not a problem." She too carried a Sig Sauer of course, but on her it looked neither dangerous nor pretentious.

Two County Crime Scene technicians talked quietly about their findings to one another as they came out of the front door of the Spoto house. A photographer from the State Police clicked away furiously at who knew what. A group of curious neighbors and passers-by walking their dogs had gathered to replace those onlookers shoed away minutes before – in spite

of the efforts of the uniformed cops throwing their weight around or, equally, because of that.

“Okay for us to take a look,” I called out to the forensic team.

“Yeah,” a balding man of about forty answered. “We’ll be back, so don’t contaminate the scene. I know how careless you guys can be.”

Patronizing git. What did he take me for?

“Let’s go take a look at chez Spoto,” I told Janet and we started for the front door. As we did so, I took a good look at the Spoto home and its well-groomed neighbor. The contrast was striking.

The Drollette home was architecturally identical, on the outside, to Ingrid Spoto’s, but that was where the resemblance ended. The Drollette home was a handsome split-level house constructed of mellow, dark brown brick, built on the rise of a gentle hill like its neighbor the Spoto residence. It has a well-tended railroad tie and rosy octagonal-shaped brick steps winding up to the house. A profusion of flowerbeds crowded with daffodils and crocuses created a lovely effect. At every window there were frothy curtains that looked as if they had been starched within the hour. Its Spoto twin had crumbling cement steps leading up to a scuffed wooden front door, weed-ridden flowerbeds with shabby drapes at the windows. Why had Ingrid Spoto let things slide so? Surely the neglect of 122 grated on neighbors sensitive to proper maintenance? I doubted one of them had killed her for such a lapse; then again, you never know what people are going to do if they are pissed off enough.

I gave an inadvertent belch. “Sorry, I muttered. I wasn’t feeling one hundred percent.

A girl shouldn’t have to tackle dead bodies on an empty stomach.

## Chapter 3

Snapping on a pair of surgical rubber gloves and cautioning Janet to do the same, I walked into a good sized living room to the right of a gloomy little foyer. I was not surprised to find the interior of the house looking as drab and unloved as the exterior. Janet followed cautiously.

“The lady wasn’t into decorating, huh?” she said, looking around.

“It would appear not.” The furnishings were shabby without being chic – sparse, careless and used, mostly mismatched nondescript bits and pieces that looked as if they had been without charm even when new. I had rarely seen as many ugly things in one room. An avocado green plastic sofa belonged in a National Health Service doctor’s waiting room. I wondered if in hot weather your legs stuck to it and a squelch escaped your bum when you sat down.

“Ooh,” I said. It did.

A television and video, neither of too recent a vintage, rested on a cheap metal stand. A tired-looking low table in front of *that* sofa held a month-old copy of the *TV Guide* and a rental video from the local Blockbuster. Before *it* was returned the fine was going to wrack up quite a bit. I checked out Ingrid Spoto’s taste in movies: *The Piano*. Not a favorite of mine, but that didn’t mean she deserved to die.

We strolled into the dining room. French doors led out to the shabby patio. That came as no surprise. I could see that at least the stiff had been removed, but the forensic team and the uniforms, trampling all underfoot, had reduced an already sorry lawn to nothing. A heap of plastic bags, obviously discarded by poor Mary Beth, lay where she had dropped them. The sun had sensibly taken off for Florida now and skies were a yellowish grey. The inventory continued. A matching dining table and chairs were without distinction, as was a credenza made of distressed something or other. Dreary.

“Wow,” Janet said holding up a lovely white plate and checking out the base. “Rosenthal and the crystal is Baccarat.”

These bits and pieces told me two things. “From the layer of dust I’d say the lady of the house didn’t entertain much and that these could only

have been inherited. From the look of the place someone else chose them and bought in multiples.”

“Maybe wedding presents?”

I thought about it. “You say she wasn’t married?”

“Well, she lived alone,” Janet said. “Doesn’t mean there isn’t an ex somewhere.”

No, it didn’t. Estranged partners were not above killing the former love of their lives if property was involved and they had convinced themselves the police would not think to look for blood on ex-hubby’s hands. The logic was confused to say the least, but murderers’ heads don’t work straight. Otherwise they would think about death row and settle for sending rude letters.

We walked through to the kitchen. There were red chickens on the wallpaper scampering across mustard yellow paper that looked well past its shelf life. I checked a back door and sure enough there were scrapes and splintered wood— as had been reported.

“Wow,” Janet said, opening the door of a large refrigerator stuffed with organic produce and bottles of spring water. “The lady looked after herself.”

I guessed from the recycled brown paper sacks holding drooping produce that, like me, Ingrid Spoto was an ardent fan of the farmer’s market held every Sunday afternoon in the parking lot of the City Hall. “Well done, Ingrid,” I murmured, then remembered Ingrid was no longer in any position to appreciate my praise. Still, I gave her a cluster of check marks in the Pro column.

“Look at all this stuff,” Janet said, pointing at a kitchen counter groaning under a battery of health supplements that rivalled my own. Ingrid Spoto’s standards in what went in and out of her body almost made up for her crap taste in decorating.

I gave myself a mental shake. I needed to stop editorializing and find who had killed her and why.

We started for the stairs and my stomach did a flip-flop. There were dark stains on the carpeted stairs and blood smeared on the walls.

“Nasty,” Janet muttered, stepping gingerly as she followed me upstairs. “What a mess the killer must have been in after he finished.”

Yuck and double yuck: his clothing would have to have been destroyed, or discarded. “Make a note to ask for a uniform to check the garbage cans in the surrounding area. Had he walked home? Had he driven? Would there be blood traces in the car if we ever found it? Had he been seen? How did I know it was a man?”

“You want a door-to-door in case someone suspicious was seen around the time of the killing?”

I nodded. “Good thinking.”



A good-sized bathroom at the top of the stairs was tiled in black and duck egg blue and had not been refurbished since the Fifties. Like the sofa it belonged in a style morgue.

“Look at all these lipsticks.” Janet was carefully inspecting the drawer to the right of the sink. There were enough to start a museum, many as red as red gets.

“Guess she thought, like most women, that a new lipstick promises a new life,” I said, “That promise hadn’t been kept in her case obviously, but when is it?”

“Well, we know she had a sex life,” Janet said. The left hand drawer in the vanity unit at the side of the sink revealed two packets of flavored condoms and a jumbo-sized tube of K-Y Jelly. I didn’t know whether their presence deserved points in Ingrid’s Pro or Con column. Time would tell.

I moved on to what was obviously an office. “I guess this is where the murder took place.” There was dried blood sprayed everywhere and the worn burnt orange carpet was ruined, which was no great loss. She had bled out badly from her beating and the stains were enormous, the largest outlined in chalk. It had been a while since I had witnessed the mess that accompanies homicide and it hit me hard. I noticed Janet looked a bit green.

“You okay? First time you’ve seen a crime scene like this?”

She nodded. “Only photographs. This is awful, huh?”

Who could disagree? Who would bother? The proportions of the room were generous, with the desk set into an alcove with a good-sized window, but it was so gloomy. If Ingrid had been a homeowner at heart, she would have known her trees needed cutting back in order to let desperately needed light into her home.

“This is about as welcoming as a tax office,” I said

“Notice anything?” Janet asked. “No music. I mean there’s no CD player or even a radio.”

“Maybe the lady didn’t like distractions,” I posited. “Single-minded. She worked in here and that was that.”

“What’s this?” Janet asked – pointing at a silver-framed photograph sitting on a rickety little table under a gooseneck reading lamp that needed a brighter bulb.

I picked it up. It was a framed photo of the victim with a smiling older woman, whom I took to be the victim’s mother – since the resemblance was so striking. The frame was from Tiffany and a bit of polish wouldn’t have gone amiss. I picked it up and carried it to the window to get the advantage of the poor light. I felt a bit like Dana Andrews ogling Gene Tierney’s portrait in *Laura*.

“My, oh my,” I said out loud. “Well, well, well.”

Ingrid Spoto had been gorgeous in that All American, blonde, fine-featured, wide-mouthed, blue-eyed way. A Candace Bergen clone, all jaw, cheekbones, glowing complexion and open, lovely smile. No make that Grace Kelly in *To Catch A Thief*, a performance that I personally found more interesting than that bland role in *The Country Girl* – for which she won her Oscar. Then again, easier to smoulder with Cary Grant than Bing Crosby . . . No, definitely Candace, pre-Murphy Brown, that is. *Carnal Knowledge*, maybe *Soldier Blue*.

In the photo Ingrid was holding that fabulous hair off her face, as if against the wind. It looked better when not smeared with blood. God, talk about a movie star-type pose. A white shirt was open at the neck and there was a faint blush of color at her throat from the sunlight, one that also gave a sheen to her loosened hair. I remembered my first view of her and it was sobering that someone had put so cruel an end to such beauty, as if acting out the climax of an early Brian De Palma flick. God, but that someone must have hated her. What could she have done to earn such a terrible end? I slipped the photo from its frame and stored it in the outer pocket of my bag. One never knew.

“She was something, huh?” Janet said.

“Yes, she was indeed.”

Lining the walls in an orderly fashion were cheap, unpainted wooden shelves holding books that were alphabetized and sorted by category – the first sign I’d seen that the victim had much feeling for possessions at all, other than the photo frame. Quite obviously, Ingrid Spoto had been a historian and her field of expertise was China, apparently since the end of World War Two. Three large file boxes rested one atop the other on the lowest shelf. The neatly written labels identified them as containing financial data. I tagged them – to be delivered to my office. Neat stacks of professional journals, now blood-splattered, rested on the floor beneath the shelves.

The desk held an IBM personal computer that, miracle of miracles, had been left snoozing and was easy to access without a password. The half-full glass of white wine beside the computer indicated Ingrid been working at her desk when the intruder sneaked up on her.

Did we have any business accessing the files without the appropriate protocols in place? On the other hand, no time like the present. Anyway, who would know? I wasn’t about to spill the beans and I doubted Janet would. Bugger it.

“What do you know about computers?” I asked Janet. I knew her generation, so guessed plenty.

“Not a problem,” she confirmed, fingers flying back and forth over the keyboard and the banal screen-saver of a babbling brook vanished.

There were any number of items including correspondence that

turned out to be little more than a few letters about some quarrel with the Drollettes next door over boundary rights. I wondered if this had caused any of that post-mortem rancor and if that could be of any help to us in foraging for information; it was, usually. Antipathy, especially of the self-righteous kind makes people less hesitant to speak ill of the dead. We also found lots of reference materials and the text of articles written by the deceased. I was disappointed and so was Janet.

“That’s about it,” she told me, sounding disappointed.

I had hardly expected files that, once opened, would reveal all – still I *was* disappointed. “Tag the computer and bring it in. You never know,” I told Janet.

We moved on to the bedroom. A queen-sized bed was covered by a cheap quilted bedspread in a dull floral pattern of pink and blue flowers – hardly the bower of a bad girl. I moved on to the closet and a carelessly painted bureau. More of the same junk that furnished this dreary home. I didn’t get it. The woman had a good position at the university and could afford a home in an area where real estate didn’t come cheap. Was she simply one of those people who didn’t care, or was she property-poor? The place was so impersonal. As if Ingrid Spoto was passing through and just put some stuff together for as long as she needed it. Most people who neglect their homes are often just as careless about the people in their lives.

The closet was hardly crowded and held the kind of clothes one expected an academic to wear: functional. There was a pair of black patent stilettos though, which was more like it. A Coach satchel rather like my own, but also in black, hung on a hook in the closet. It definitely wasn’t an accessory for the stilettos. I checked and found a wallet with credit cards and an envelope with a membership card for the Silver Spa gym in the downtown area. On the back of the envelope I found an unusual name written by someone other than Ingrid – Lee Il Kwon; we needed to do some checking here. The cash was untouched. There were no photographs, or credit card receipts to give anything away about the lady.

I was never surprised by the places people chose to hide their things – Ingrid’s choice of a top drawer in a bureau that needed refinishing was not an original venue for the stash of dope I now found, even if it was taped cunningly underneath. Oh, duh. The same top drawer yielded workout clothes – spandex this and that and tee shirts, while the drawer beneath yielded utilitarian bras and panties.

The middle drawer, though, contained the kind of expensive lacy bras, sheer briefs, garter belts and sheer stockings in black or red, worn by a girl with good times on her mind. I have never liked thongs myself, but with the right butt I guess they make a point. These were not items sewn by Belgian

nuns. “Now this is more like it,” I said.

“Whoa,” Janet said opening the bottom drawer and pulling back. “What was she into?”

“Accessories.” I took a pen from my bag and gingerly poked at a set of handcuffs, two vibrators of intimidating proportions, some sex toys I couldn’t identify but made me blanch and a leather hood. It all looked like an uncomfortable way to have sex and I was on safe ground thinking that none of this paraphernalia would be most peoples’ idea of arousing. It had however been Ingrid Spoto’s and presumably that of someone beside the lady. It was up to me to find that person. I was thinking, with a sinking stomach, of just what sort of person that might be, when my cell phone rang.

## Chapter 4

“We have a lead, Sophie,” Herb told me right off the bat. Lieutenant Herb Fedewa had been a star of the fabled 1982 Huron Geese, the one that sent their traditional rivals, the Fighting Quakers, packing with their collective tail between their legs. These distant glory days made him a local hero. He could have tied up newborn kittens in a sack and thrown them in the Delacroix River in full view of the City Council and still his rep would have been untarnished. Sports figured little in my world but in the Midwest, if you could run down a field with a ball, or put one into a hoop, you were God.

Herb stood 6’ 4,” and was what is euphemistically known as burly – in a Brian Dennehy mode. He was married to a former cheerleader, Marilyn, and they had two sons with dreams of gridiron glory. I still didn’t really know Herb, even after working with him for the six years I had been in West Rapids. I accepted also that I never would – and that was fine. He was, after all, what the locals called a “good ol’ boy,” a type of American male whose ways were as alien to me as those of the odd Martian who might drop out of the sky. He was however, the fabled “good guy,” the who, on certain days, we need in our lives and I’d had one or two of these on his watch.

“What?”

“Who. An Eve Bishop who says she was a friend and colleague of Ingrid Spoto’s at the U. Says she’s sure she knows who killed her.” I heard the rustling of papers. “Barnett Pazderka – P.A.Z.D.E.R.K.A. Says this guy works with her at the U. and also worked with the deceased. He’d been violent toward her in the past. Police *were* called in, so it must have been a bad scene. I sent a couple of uniforms round to his house but the guy’s out, no one else seems to be around, and there was no car in the garage. I’ve left a message on his voice mail to call us immediately.”

“Think he’s taken off? Could this Eve Bishop have fingered our killer?”

“Well, best not to jump to conclusions. The Bishop woman seems very determined, demanding the Desk Sergeant send over the person in charge of the case.”

“Where is she now?”

“Fern Meadows, number 204.” Fern Meadows was a condo development on the southern borders of West Rapids, a pretty community adjacent to the River Delacroix as it snaked its way through the city and its environs. A considerable number of single faculty members lived there in attractive one and two bedroom townhouses. “Maybe this means we’ll get the chance of a fast collar because if we *don’t* get this guy within the first twenty-four hours, the press will come out of their cages,” Herb said.

Why beat around the bush? “Uh, too late, I’m afraid. They’ve broken out.” I filled him in on my interview with Kelli. I heard a groan.

“That’s just fine, just fine. Guess I’ll be getting feedback soon enough.”

“We need to find this monster and fast, Herb.”

“No kidding. The State Police are already in on this.”

“Yes, their forensics guys already took a look around.” West Rapids didn’t have the manpower resources for a high profile homicide, so it was no use pretending we did. “By the way, I need some help on a door-to-door.” I explained my theory about soiled clothes being discarded by the killer.

“Okay and I’ll get someone going through the computer to see if we have anyone local on record for doing violent stuff. Found anything at the murder scene that I should know about?”

“I’ve tagged two files with financial data and her computer to be brought to the station house.” I saw no need to tell him about my tampering with the latter. My former chief in the Met would have been all over me like a layer of dust for a transparent prevarication like that one. On the other hand, Herb had no doubt seen through that ruse just as easily, but decided no harm had been done. Ever the pragmatist, I guessed he knew I knew what I knew and trusted me accordingly. He reasoned, no doubt, that what had not been witnessed could not rebound and kick us in the ass.

“We need someone to identify the body,” I told him now. “The neighbor didn’t think there was a next of kin.”

“I’m way ahead of you. Her brother, Paul Spoto, is on the way from Chicago.”

“Good.” I wondered what the brother would be like. Would he be as gorgeous as his sister? Probably not.

There’s something else we need to talk about. I don’t want you working alone on this one,” Herb said.

Was he thinking of attaching one of the three other detectives in the department to the case? Nice chaps, but I had no chemistry with any one of them. They would slow me down until the case was as cold as the coffee at the station house. This would not do.

“I work alone, Herb you know that.”

“We need to keep ahead of the State police, or they’ll poach.” He had a point. There was a certain sibling rivalry between our local force and our bigger, tougher brother.

“Oh, Herb . . .” Why was I bothering? He would get his way on this one, because he was right. “Why don’t you just give me a uniform to do some of the footwork as backup? That’s all I usually need.” I looked over my shoulder at Janet, who was busy tagging the computer. I left the room and walked down the stairs with my phone. I lowered my voice. “Listen Herb, Janet Jansen has been a big help today.”

“The tall redhead?” He sounded interested. “Played basketball for the U, you know.”

Who cared? “That’s the one.”

I held my breath, willing him to agree. I was a small town copper. I had no delusions about that and even fewer complaints. I had no desire to raid crack houses, or dodge bullets like my counterparts in New York or Los Angeles. I had had enough of rough stuff, God knows, when I served with the London Metropolitan Police, Westminster division. Still, there was much to be said for having something to get my teeth into after a diet of stolen bicycles, drunken undergraduates, clumsy robberies and domestic dramas. I wouldn’t have chosen such a terrible thing as Ingrid Spoto’s grisly death to kick-start my career, but it’s a chill wind.

“Okay,” Herb said. “Why not?”

It was a done deal.

The new assignment went down a treat with Janet.

“Wow. Not a problem,” was her reaction.

As we stepped out of the Spoto house, I caught a glimpse of dark hair poking out between one of the starched muslin curtains at 122. I had an idea.

“First thing is to go over there and find out what the Drollette woman knows about Spoto’s life. I’d do it myself but I need to speak to a lead and the neighbor has already met you. I’m guessing she’s a stay at home mom.”

“Why?”

“The look of the place and especially the garden. Takes a lot of time to keep that up. To say nothing of her being outdoors so she might have noticed what was going on next door. We have a good chance she saw all, knows all and can’t wait to tell all. Make her feel important.”

Janet was as enthusiastic as a golden retriever. “Not a problem.”

“And change into plain clothes when you get the chance, okay?”

My lips moved along with her as she said, “Not a problem.”

We had to do something about that.

## Chapter 5

I had barely got my black Jeep in gear before Herb called again. I pulled over.

“So you’re on the way to see this Bishop gal?” he wanted to know.

“Yes. We finished looking through the house.” I told him what Janet was doing.

“Sounds good, let’s hope the neighbor can tell her something we can run with. And maybe this Pazderka guy was the man in Spoto’s life and things just got too rough and he lost it. ”

I wasn’t so sure. “I think it was premeditated, Herb. I mean no one did her in and then ran away in panic. Took her outside, cut out her tongue.”

“Doesn’t mean it wasn’t what I said.”

“No, but . . .” My gut instinct told me we weren’t looking for a lover who had gone over the top, but I kept my counsel since I had no options to offer. “Anyway, we’ll get whoever it is – .”

“Sooner rather than later?” Herb suggested, then continued, “I talked to Roger and told him to push the autopsy up. The brother’s on board, by the way. Flying in this evening. You can meet him. Coming in at six something. United.”

“What?” Why did I have to go to the airport? “Can’t you send a couple of uniforms? Have a heart, Herb, it’s Saturday night.”

“So?”

“Well . . .” I had tickets to attend the first offering of the Japanese Film Festival on campus – where Kurosawa’s rarely viewed masterpiece *Hidden Fortress* was to start at eight. I had only ever seen it on TV, so to watch it on the big screen was a treat I had been anticipating for weeks. “I do have plans, actually.”

“I don’t care.” My social life was of no interest to a man with a violent murder on his hands, the State police nipping at his behind, and the hot breath of the press at the back of his neck. “Put it on hold, Sophie, because according to our brothers in Chicago, Paul Spoto’s a mover and shaker in the financial zone. I don’t want him thinking we don’t have our best people on this. I don’t



want calls to his Congressman.”

“Oh, please – .”

“He gets a lot of attention – so see he doesn’t bring any our way, okay? He’ll be expecting the organ grinder, not the monkey to give him a briefing on what’s going on. You’re in charge of the case, so that means you, Guiseppe.”

“That is so, so politically incorrect.”

“So is cutting someone’s tongue out.” Herb hung up and that was that.

My digestive system was okay again and I was hungry, as usual. The designated organ grinder was ready for nourishment, so I stopped at Bon Appétit. The upscale deli offered “Special food for the special palate,” and who doesn’t want to think of themselves that way? Business was booming.

The appeal of Bon Appétit for me and other locals in West Rapids, after determining that their breads, pastas, olive oils and other delicacies were toxin free, was in organic merchandise that we could trust to be exactly that. It was a matter of not taking unnecessary chances with your body and since I took a lot into mine, vigilance was necessary. Now I ordered a bottle of French still water and, knowing the ingredients were fail-safe, a granary bread sandwich filled with mozzarella, sun dried tomatoes and basil mayonnaise.

I was lucky to find a table in the adjacent restaurant. It was puffed as Provençal in style, well appointed with cane chairs and deal tables on which sat fancy pottery olive oil dispensers. I guess it had a continental atmosphere if you hadn’t travelled much, or seen *Jean de Florette*. Masses of dried flowers were everywhere. Rustic hutches displayed attractive local pottery created by the artisans who sold their wares at the ubiquitous arts and crafts fairs that West Rapids hosted throughout the year. People often spoke of how once upon a time you could only get the sort of things on offer here in big cities, but that was all changed. Who needed the big city and its hassles when you had its convenience in a place that was as appealing as our little corner of mid-Michigan?

I would argue that West Rapids had its charms, but in all honesty it *was* a bit on the bland side. I pined for London’s edge but I was grateful nevertheless that Bon Appétit existed – even if it was roughly four thousand miles away from the place that, at times, I thought I wanted to be.

As I tackled my sandwich, I worked through some entries for my mythical movie trivia night. I had tried pushing the idea to François Benoit, owner of this place, but so far he had been evasive. Still, wise to keep my hand in, and I came up with the following contributions:

- ❑ Who played Gerald O’Hara in *Gone With The Wind*? Thomas Mitchell, of course.

- ❑ To whom did Marlon Brando claim he “could have been a contender” and in which film? To his brother, played by Rod Steiger and the movie was *On The Waterfront*.
- ❑ What was the last film directed by Alfred Hitchcock? *Family Plot* and just *why* had he cast Karen Black? Well, he was getting old.
- ❑ Which actor made his international reputation in the British film, *Room At The Top*? The late, not so great Lawrence Harvey.
- ❑ Who wrote Hollywood Babylon parts I and II? Kenneth Anger, of course.
- ❑ In which film did Joan Crawford throw a martini at John Garfield? *Humoresque* and boy was he surprised, because they hadn’t rehearsed it that way.
- ❑ Who said “I don’t mind a parasite. I object to a cut-rate one.” Humphrey Bogart to Peter Lorre, in *Casablanca*.
- ❑ Which red-headed actress won the Academy Award for *I Want To Live* in 1958? Susan Hayward
- ❑ Who played the male lead in Italian film *La Dolce Vita*? Marcello Mastroianni

Well, it kept me from eating too fast. I finished my meal, thanking François as effusively as if he had prepared a seven-course meal – and not simply slapped some ingredients between two pieces of bread. To make such a fuss was a matter of protocol, reinforcing the idea that he had done the right thing in coming to a West Rapids that was inconveniently located in the proverbial middle of nowhere. The nearest city was Detroit and that was nowhere in its own right.

“Thank you, so much. Wonderful as always!”

He looked at me, hesitated then asked: “Is this true about Ingrid Spoto?”

Bad news travelled fast. I nodded. “Yes, did you know her?”

He hesitated again. “*En passant*.” The expression on his face was pensive and went well with his dark hair, straight, thin French nose and his clean jaw line. He had a great haircut. There was definitely a Gerard Phillippe cut to his jib and he would have been right at home in a Cocteau film. “What a shame. A beautiful woman.”

“She came here often?”

He shrugged. “Often enough. A shame,” he repeated, asking then if there was anything else I needed?

Obscurely pleased that he had spoken with apparent regret over Ingrid’s death I bought a large ribbon-wrapped plastic bag of gluten-free pasta imported from Perugia. I said goodbye, curious that the Frenchman was so preoccupied by the death of someone who had been only a customer. Or, had

she? I thought about him in leather, with a whip in his hand, but the image didn't fly – too tatty a getup for a Frenchman, perhaps? Then again, there was *The Story of O* . . .

My phone rang again. It was Janet. She had already spoken with G.E.R.A.L.D.I.N.E. D.R.O.L.L.E.T.T.E. and had some hard information. What a wonder the Jansen woman was.

“So, according to this lady Ingrid Spoto was quite a busy lady and you were right by the way. Mrs. D *didn't* like her. Janet used Mrs. D's phrase, “one of those career gals,” in a way I wasn't crazy about. I figured she would have used the same brush on me if there'd been any tar left. Janet added that her witness had almost said Ingrid was a slut, then remembered that speaking ill of the dead wasn't something a nice girl did. Anyway, Ingrid had several regular visitors. I heard paper rustling. “Okay. One was very plain woman with great hair but she dressed badly and another was a tall, dark woman. She had a loud voice, seemed to like Ingrid Spoto ‘a lot’ quote, unquote.”

“How so?”

“Well, the implication was that they were more than good friends, but that was just one woman's opinion and not one necessarily to be trusted,” Janet continued. “My feeling was that if she could find something to throw at the deceased, she would.”

“Nevertheless, we're getting somewhere.”

“Oh, yes. Anyway, the tall one wore suits and high heels which made her ‘too tall,’ so not ‘feminine’,” Janet said with feeling, then continued, “There was a redheaded woman who dressed well, and a guy who wore a hat like JR. Ingrid called the police on him about three months ago – .”

“Barnett Pazderka.”

“Oh, you know about him?”

“Oh, yes,” I filled her in on Eve Bishop. “I'm on my way to see the lady now. Go on.”

“Anyway, he and Ingrid fought a lot. Also there was a very handsome Chinese guy who looked fairly young and wore exercise clothes and was ‘buff.’ She'd thought at first he was delivering take out, but he didn't have any plastic bags.” Janet's voice was withering. “The really interesting visitor though was a guy who was really secretive, showed up usually in the early evening, wore his jacket collar turned up and a baseball hat. Mrs. D figured he was married and I think she could have been right. Never drove up, always walked.”

Odd how married men and drug pushers thought a baseball hat was camouflage. “Good work. See you tomorrow, first thing, okay?”

“Not a problem,” she told me and hung up.

Oh well . . .

I hit the road and drove past a strip mall of cheap fast food joints, nail bars and liquor stores that segued after ten minutes into the delightful complex that was Fern Meadows. It was definitely getting colder and the thin, flat atmosphere depressed me. Roger was probably right about the snow. It would not settle, but it was discouraging nevertheless.

I was not a winter person. I spent months huddled near any source of heat, hoping spring would take mercy on West Rapids, sooner rather than later. It never did and today was evidence enough.

The tree-shaded car park at Fern Meadows was almost empty of vehicles. I had expected it would be. People would be shopping at the nearby Henry Ford Mall, or hanging out in one of the coffee shops in town. I headed for number 204, ringing a doorbell that chimed discreetly.

While waiting for the door to be answered, I took a look around. The complex was row house style, in pleasant shades of ash-color brick and decorated with touches of weather-beaten wood. Each had a small garden in the front, which helped alleviate the claustrophobic sense of these homes being on top of one another. The setting was lovely however, since the complex backed onto the Delacroix River and the developers had left enough trees to give the illusion of privacy.

Number 204 had a few daffodils and a small square of grass out front. I could hear music through the door – something symphonic and moody. I didn't have to knock; the door was opened before I got the chance by a badly dressed woman in her mid forties with a plain face and beautiful, honey-color hair.

I didn't have to ask who she was.

## Chapter 6

“You want Barnett Pazderka. He did this to Ingrid. A disgusting man.” Eve Bishop’s thin voice was full of grief, but she was under control. Not totally, but enough for my purposes.

“Shall we discuss this inside?” I suggested.

I was waved impatiently into a small living room as sparsely furnished as Ingrid Spoto’s but the expensive pieces here were chosen with care. A very good quality Persian rug in pale shades of blue and beige covered most of a finished oak floor. Eve Bishop waved me toward a two-seater sofa covered in oat-colored linen, while she sat opposite in a Shaker chair by a round table made of ash – on which rested a pile of essays and a red pen. A pale wood-framed photograph of Eve and Ingrid standing together sat on a corner of the mantelpiece. The photo reminded me that Eve had been taller and about a decade older than Ingrid. No need to comment on which one was the prettier.

“What are you going to do about Barnett?” Fingers pulled nervously at the hem of the kind of vaguely shaped long sweater that women mistakenly think covers those pounds – even though, in fact, they do not respond to any kind of camouflage. Fuchsia lipstick did little for Eve’s sallow complexion, but whom does it suit? Ancient loafers did little to draw the eye away from thick, veined ankles. An Oscar nomination would come the way of any actress who could glam down enough to play her.

Her mouth formed a thin, hard line. “I want him punished.”

Yes, I could tell that, but first I needed to find out one or two things before I clapped the handcuffs on this Barnett Pazderka. “What was your relationship to the deceased?”

“Don’t call her that.” Pale eyes filled with tears, but Eve Bishop didn’t lose control. “We were colleagues in the History department and she was my dearest friend in the world and I can’t imagine life without her.” For the first time, in my company at least, she seemed close to tears. “A wonderful person, so kind and thoughtful. A good scholar. And beautiful, so beautiful. That didn’t matter to her, though.”

I didn’t believe that for one second, but I might learn something, so

I said nothing. “Do you know what Ingrid told me? About why she chose the academic life?”

“No.” I had rather wondered that myself. To get the best that the world has to offer beautiful people just have to make the effort to show up. But Ingrid Spoto chose to take up the challenge of a world where the dues were stiff and her looks would garner little. Rather the opposite perhaps, since serious types have a rather jaundiced attitude toward the vanities. “What did she tell you?”

Thank God I asked – for Eve Bishop was dying to tell me. Talk about intense. “Ingrid knew the academic world valued her as she *wanted* to be valued. Where intellectual acumen is the measure. She said,” Eve paused and I had to avert my eyes from the palpable grief, “that people think beauty is enough in itself. But it’s like any other natural resource, that’s all. She realized her beauty was nothing more than an accident. Ingrid wanted what she did with her life to be a choice and one having nothing to do with such a random circumstance. She didn’t want to be defined by her looks and refused to let others do so. A woman of character.”

Yes, but one who was damaged; no one ended as she had without having emotional baggage, nor did I believe for one second that Ingrid Spoto did not exploit her beauty. I was also interested to realize that the more Eve Bishop drooled her admiration for Ingrid’s dismissive attitude toward beauty the more I thought it was all a load of old rubbish. I had a feeling, from seeing the contents of Ingrid’s bureau, that she enjoyed decorating that beauty – no matter how much she disavowed that random circumstance. A thought raced across my mind; would *spoiling* the very thing that defined Ingrid, for Eve and others, be the very punishment that filled the bill for such insincerity? Just how over was the affair between Ingrid Spoto and Barnett Pazderka and if there had even been a suspicion that it was not, could that have set Eve herself off on a rampage?

Now, though, since I had a murder to solve, the philosophy of beauty had to wait. I tried again to get some hard facts. “So, could you tell me exactly on what evidence you base your suspicions of Barnett Pazderka as Ingrid Spoto’s killer?”

The mouth compressed again. “He claims to have had an affair with her two years ago. All in his mind, of course. She spurned him. But he’s never missed an opportunity since to make her miserable, to intrude in her life. That’s why he was making a jackass out of himself in front of her house and the police were sent for.”

I was struggling with the “spurned” but managed. “This was the incident three months ago?”

“So you’ve checked that out, have you?” Bishop sounded pleased in a vindictive way.

“Again, I have to ask you on what you base your very serious accusation?”

“He hated her.”

“How do you know?”

“Oh, please,” she shook her head and the lovely hair swirled back and forth. “He was actually taken into custody for making that scene outside her home – .”

“Was there any follow up?”

She looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Was he angry with her that the police had been called? Was she the one who called them, by the way?”

“No, no, she didn’t.” Eve Bishop shifted uncomfortably. “I have no idea why not.”

I did. “Had she ever had a relationship with him?”

Pale eyes filled with tears. “Well, so he claimed, as I told you.”

“What exactly did the deceased claim?”

“Don’t call her that,” was said through gritted teeth.

“I’m afraid an event of three months ago doesn’t mean he killed her.”

For one thing, people passionate enough to cause public scenes, don’t wait around for three months to thrash the life out of the love object. “Do you know that he was anywhere near the Spoto home yesterday?”

“What?” She faltered for the first time. “I don’t . . . she hadn’t said anything . . .”

“When did you last speak to her?”

“Ten-thirty last night. We usually spoke in the late evening. She told me she was in her bathrobe, ready to go to bed. She was just doing a little work at her computer – .”

“Did she mention seeing or speaking to Barnett Pazderka yesterday, or at all? Had she seen him, do you know?”

Bishop didn’t like that. “No. He wasn’t around the office yesterday, but that means nothing. He might not have had any classes. It didn’t mean he wasn’t lurking around Ingrid’s – .”

“Was she alone when you spoke to her?”

“Of course she was.” That fuchsia mouth formed the same unhappy slit of minutes before. “I told you, she was ready to go to bed.”

With *whom* was the question, but I was not about to risk life or limb by asking the lady. I had gone to a girl’s school and I knew a red hot crush when I saw one. Resentment of the hair-tearing-out type was not unusual if the messenger delivered news that the smitten one didn’t want to hear. Then again . . .

I pretended to check my notes. “Neighbors have mentioned several

regular visitors to the Spoto house – .”

“What?” She didn’t like that. “Who?”

I pretended to read. “Well, beside yourself, there was a handsome, young Chinese man, a tall, dark woman, a man in a baseball cap and a well-dressed redhead of a certain age. Do any of these descriptions mean anything to you?”

“No, no . . .” Bishop looked stricken, so I guessed not. “I can only assume the neighbors are making mischief,” she continued, “I knew everyone in Ingrid’s circle and none of these descriptions have any credence . . . oh.”

“What?”

“Well, the redhead. That sort of sounds like the chair of our department, Nancy Marcus, but I hardly see anything sinister in that. Anyway, Ingrid liked being alone and doing her research and writing. Not a social creature, at all.”

Poor Eve Bishop – what a tough business being in love could be. I switched topics. “I’m still far from clear on what you base your accusation against Pazderka?”

“I told you he hated her.”

Not good enough. What a time waster. I did a P.A.T.I.E.N.C.E. in my head and threw a few points into her Con column for good measure. “So the honest truth is that you have no hard evidence whatsoever that Barnett Pazderka had anything to do with Ingrid Spoto’s death.”

That did it and part of me could hardly blame her. “I knew the police wouldn’t listen. It’s your job to prove it, not mine.” She was on her feet, but the effort cost her. I would have said losing a few pounds would have helped in the nimble department. I got a killer look and her face was blotching up. “For God sake, who else could it have been?”

Leather lad, for one, but tact prevented me from saying so. “It could have been a burglar who broke in and things got violent.” Even I didn’t believe that one and neither did Eve Bishop.

“Don’t be so ridiculous. I’ve heard all I need on the news to know that this is outside the bounds of possibility. Burglars don’t drag bodies out of the house. They kill by accident and cut and run.” Smart lady. No mention of the leather gear, I noticed. She stood, started pacing. “It had to be him, there was no one else.”

Er, not so fast. “I don’t know if you are aware that Professor Spoto had other people in her life with whom she might well have been involved – .”

I would never know what Eve Bishop would have done to me for threatening the most impregnable case of denial I had ever encountered because there was a discreet knock at the door.

“Could you get that please? I’m too upset,” the lady of the house



announced.

I resisted the urge to tug my forelock and did as I was told.

## Chapter 7

“Oh Charles, it’s you,” Eve Bishop said without much interest as a man of about forty, of medium height, was ushered into her presence. I was impressed. He looked as if he had been steam-cleaned – he was so immaculate – and as dapper as Fred Astaire in cavalry twill and gleaming brogues. He turned to me and smiled. A pleasant expression, a mouth with a rather sensual lower lip and heavily lashed, intelligent dark blue eyes more than made up for a face that was not good-looking in the conventional sense. I liked him at once, just as, in the same time frame, I had found Eve Bishop a touch off-putting. He extended his hand.

“I’m so sorry, am I interrupting? I’m Charles Thomas from two doors down.” He proffered a bottle of merlot, which from its label looked French and expensive. “Just a little something at what I know must be a terrible time for you, Eve dear.” He turned to me. “I don’t think we’ve met?”

I introduced myself. He looked taken aback. “Oh, dear. I take it that this has something to do with Ingrid Spoto’s terrible death?”

“Of course it does,” Eve Bishop muttered. “That damned Barnett Pazderka – .”

“Who?” Charles Thomas looked mystified.

“Oh for Christ’s sake, Charles. That man who made such a nuisance of himself outside her house? You know who I mean.”

He nodded. “Oh, yes, odd fellow, noisy, wears awful clothes. What did he have to do with this, though?”

“I’m trying to convince Detective Pimlott that he had something to do with her death, but not getting anywhere.” She glared at me, but sticks and stones, etcetera.

“Oh, Eve, my dear,” he sounded shocked. “Should you be jumping to such conclusions – .”

“He did it, I know he did.” I could see the muscles in her face twitching in agitation and she ran a hand through her hair.

Charles Thomas looked helplessly at me, so I gave him a hand. “So you do know who Professor Bishop is talking about?”

“Oh, yes. Seen him around the U.”

“So you work at the university?” I asked, sitting down again.

“Yes, but not in the same department as Eve and Ingrid and Pazderka.”

He sat in an easy chair at right angles to both Bishop and myself. Eve was slouched into her chair, morosely inspecting again the hem of her sweater. It was going to be unravelled up to her tits if she did not stop doing that.

“English. We’re in the same building though.”

“Did you know the deceased?”

“I’ve told you,” Eve said through clenched teeth, “I hate that term. Her name was Ingrid. Ingrid . . . what will I do without her . . .” Her voice faded away and I could not look at the expression in her eyes, so I turned back to Charles Thomas, who was looking shaken.

I rephrased the question. “Did you know Ingrid Spoto?”

“Yes, sort of,” he told me. “That is I saw her on campus, or visiting Eve . . .” He seemed to stop himself from saying something, then went on. “Beautiful woman. We spoke a few times.” He seemed at a loss. “She seemed very bright and so beautiful. I’ve already said that, haven’t I? I value beauty, perhaps too much, perhaps,” he said, almost to himself. “She seemed to have a lot of spirit as well.”

“She glowed with goodness,” Eve said. I had heard nothing before of this glow Ingrid gave out, then again I hadn’t spoken to that many people about the lady. Eve continued, “She was one of the few people in the world who was my friend. No one really understood what we had between us. She could confide in me, tell me anything.”

Had Ingrid told her something that had anything to do with her own murder? She certainly had spared her the details of her sex life. Of course, perhaps that was where that glow came from? “What sort of confidences?”

“Oh, she said she liked secrets. Told me that when we first became friends. We had lunch at Bon Appetit, just ran into each other one day. We’d known each other as colleagues since she got to Huron and joined the department. This meeting was different, it was the beginning of our friendship . . .” Her eyes were bleak. “Ingrid told me she liked knowing things about people that other people didn’t know.”

Curiosity killed the cat. “She said that? What kind of secrets?”

She ran her hand through her hair, pulling it off her brow. “I don’t know, she never said. I didn’t care, really. I’m not all that interested in other people, to be truthful. If Ingrid got pleasure from finding things out, I could see nothing wrong with it.”

I guessed that if Ingrid had liked setting fire to buildings, her acolyte would have justified that behavior as well. Still, put the predisposition for snuffing around in other people’s very private business and her liking for

sex – and odd sex at that – and we might have a collision that proved fatal. I liked the synchronicity of a busybody having her tongue removed and if I did, perhaps someone else had. Had there been any sort of confrontation over her dangerous snooping, prior to her death, that had escalated into murder?

“Did Professor Spoto seem upset at all, agitated?”

Eve Bishop shook her head. “No, why would she?”

“I think that is what Detective Pimlott is trying to determine,” Thomas told her gently. Something struck him. “I saw her a couple of weeks ago - .” He stopped himself and flashed an odd look at Bishop.

“Where did you see her and was she with anyone?”

He shifted in his chair. “It was at Starbucks - .”

“Nonsense,” Eve told him. “She never drank that stuff. You must have seen someone else.”

Charles looked ruffled. “I think not. She was, after all, someone who stood out in a crowd. She was talking to a man.”

“Can you describe him and say when this was?”

He thought about that. “Oh, last Wednesday afternoon. Latish. He had his back to me and was wearing a hat.”

She was on her feet. “Barnett always wears a hat.”

God but the woman was wearing me down. “What sort of a hat, Professor Thomas?”

“Oh, one of those baseball caps.”

Hmm – hadn’t Drollette mentioned such a person as a regular visitor? A confirmation by another source that such a person existed and had been seen with her so recently *was* useful. Now, all I had to do was find the elusive sucker.

I stood. “Well, I’ve done everything here I can - .”

“What about Barnett?”

This was getting old. “We’ll talk to him as soon as we track him down - .”

“He’s gone?” Bishop was on her feet and her face was red. “So you have been looking for him? Has someone else said something?”

Shrewd. “No, they haven’t. He isn’t at home, that’s all. We’ll find him.”

Charles Thomas jumped to his feet, looking alarmed. “Eve, dear, let the police do their job.”

“Yes, nothing more I can do than I already have,” she said. Her head seemed to droop, seemed too heavy to hold up. “I want to be alone right now.”

Eve Bishop had shut down, so I guessed I would get nothing more out of her. Charles Thomas and I both stood. “Of course. If you need me, just call,” he said.

She nodded again. I gave her my card and assurances that I would contact her with any developments. I got no thanks, just a perfunctory shake of the hand.

Her very presence was glazed by grief.

Charles Thomas walked me to my car. It was much colder and a huge milky cloud hovered about. It all but had a sign across it declaring “Snow.”

He had something to say. Shivering, he said it. “Detective Pimlott. I think you need to know something about Ingrid Spoto that I couldn’t say in front of Eve.”

I nodded, hoping he would hurry up. I was freezing, “What do you want to tell me?”

“About Pazderka. There was a lot of gossip about them. They *did* have an affair and everyone on campus knew about it. Discretion was the strong suit of neither party. I couldn’t speak in front of Eve. She couldn’t take that right now.”

“Why are you telling me now?”

He blushed. “When someone has died, as Ingrid Spoto has, we revise our definition of tattle-tale.”

So true. “Yes and thank you. I won’t betray this confidence, either. Is there anyone else I should speak to beside Barnett Pazderka.”

He considered that. “I should have said her department chair, Nancy Marcus. I should have said she might have insights.”

Yes, I bet she did – if she was the lady spotted visiting Ingrid. I thanked him. “Thank you again.”

He smiled. “Not at all.” He hesitated. “Detective Pimlott, is it true that a child discovered the body?”

I pinged my car door open. “Yes, a thirteen year-old girl.”

“Awful,” he said, shaking his head. “That shouldn’t have happened.”

Who would disagree? Good of him to be sensitive to collateral damage and decent of him to step up to the crease and tell me what I needed to know about Spoto and Pazderka’s ding-dong. I smiled – my Gavin had always corrected me when I used or misused a cricketing term.

“It’s stepping up to the plate,” he would tell me.

“Both tough to do,” I always answered. Yes, Thomas got points in the Pro column for making the right ethical call.

As to his neighbor, she was looking at several points in the Con for being, well, herself.

As I drove away from Fern Meadows I checked in with the station house for Nancy Marcus’s address. She lived, as it turned out, just two streets away from Ingrid. I checked my watch and decided to stop by the Marcus place on the way home. You never could tell – people often knew things they

didn't even know they knew. Anyway, I was up for any insights into the victim that might help me find her killer. I set off in that direction

As I stopped for a red light, I considered Thomas' neighbor and her pathological guardianship of Ingrid Spoto, as well as her obstinate insistence on Barnett Pazderka as the killer. Could her own feelings have got out of hand? Had she had a jealous fit over the competition and acted out her resentment with violence? Was her finger-pointing at that competition nothing more than a smoke-screen to shield herself? Was I thinking along these lines because, in truth, I had not taken to Eve Bishop? Why did this case throw up nothing but questions?

## Chapter 8

Nancy Marcus knew how to pull a garden together, especially when her efforts were compared to the lackluster labors of her dead colleague. Flowerbeds filled with masses of daffodils crowded the sizeable front yard. A smart, brick walkway led to the porch of a white two-story frame house. I parked my black Jeep on the street and walked to a front door that was painted a glossy light blue.

Even as I was pressing the bell, a handsome woman in her middle forties with short, beautifully styled auburn hair opened the door. She put me in mind of a mature Susan Hayward in her potboiler period: *Back Street*, for example. She was dressed, much to my approval, in smart grey wool pants and a soft grey wool top that looked expensive – with large pewter jewelry that she carried off a treat. Very Eileen Fisher.

Hmm: Nancy Marcus was a redhead of a certain age, wearing good clothes – just like the visitor to Ingrid Spoto’s remembered by Geraldine Drollette. Although what could be more innocent than a chair visiting a member of her department – as Eve Bishop had pointed out? On the other hand, I’d seen enough murder mysteries on screen to know that no good screen-writer wasted valuable screen time on coincidences that led down the garden path. No, no this was real life and such things did indeed happen. Still, food for thought. For my part, I was glad I was wearing my new Anne Klein dark chocolate-colored wool pants suit – if only to show Professor Marcus that she was not dealing with just any flatfoot.

“Detective Sergeant Sophie Pimlott.” I displayed my badge. “You’re Professor Nancy Marcus?”

“Yes, I’ve been expecting someone from the police.” I wondered why, or was that just nerves? The police have that effect. She ushered me into an entranceway not unlike the one I had just seen in Ingrid Spoto’s home, except it was painted in magnolia to compensate for the lack of natural light and had a mass of daffodils in a bronze bowl to cheer things up. “You’re here about Ingrid, of course.”

“I’m afraid so.” We went into a sizeable living room full of

comfortable furniture, a log fire going and pots of fresh flowers. The effect was cozy and attractive in an unpretentious way that was right up my street – neither shabby, nor chic.

I sat down in an overstuffed armchair covered in dusty shades of plaid. It blended perfectly with the soft blues and greys dominating a room that was not so much decorated, as pulled together with a sure eye. The fire felt warm and welcoming on a cold day that hinted at worse to come. If this had been a movie set, someone would have been remembered at Oscar time for hitting the authenticity button spot on. The contrast between this home and Ingrid Spoto's was profound and not only because it lacked a dead body in the backyard and bloodstained carpets.

“Thank you for seeing me, Professor – .”

“Oh, please, it's Nancy.” she sat across from me. She had a clear complexion and wore the most discreet makeup. She was one of those women who are well-groomed without making other women feel the opposite. “I feel so self-important when other professional women use my title.”

“Done.” Used to being condescended to by that very species, such a courtesy now earned a plus in the Pro list for the Prof.

“I suppose you want to know where I was between the hours of roughly 11:00 and 2:00 last night?”

I had not up, until that point. My suspicions are always raised by anyone who volunteers such information. “That would be useful,” I told her, keeping it bland.

Nancy nodded. “Well, I went to bed just before 11:00 and read for a while. At 12:00 I was up, making my daughter Cameron get off the phone. Like most sixteen year-olds she is welded to that damn phone and it drives me mad. I'm sure her friend Megan will verify that claim since voices were raised.” We smiled at one another. “I had no sooner done that when my college roommate Linda called from Los Angeles and I had to explain to Cameron why I was allowed to talk on the phone after midnight while someone else wasn't. I said I was the one who paid the bill. There's a time for rational discourse and a time to get tough.” She was trying too hard to be endearing, but I gave a polite laugh. “I talked to Linda for half an hour, then read some more and went to sleep. Is that okay, I can give you Linda's number?”

“Don't worry about that for now. About Ingrid Spoto – how did you find out about her death?”

She cleared her throat. “A neighbor. I can only hope the details of the story were distorted. I take it we are not talking about an accident clearing winter guck from the yard?”

“No, I'm afraid not. There was a fair degree of violence.” Nancy paled, so I hastily changed the subject. “Do you know her brother by any



chance?”

“No, no.” Nancy sat back, hands with square cut nails rubbing back and forth against the arms of the chair. She was tense, restless, but I put that down to the shock of hearing about the brutal death of a colleague – then again ... you never knew. “Paul Spoto,” Nancy continued, “he lives in Chicago, which is where Ingrid grew up, apparently. Ingrid told my husband Gerry – he’s in the Business Department – that her brother was in the financial sector there. I don’t remember Ingrid mentioning him to me however, in all the time since I’ve known her.” She sighed again. “Knew her, that is.”

“How long was that?”

“Five years.” Nancy told me. “We wanted a China specialist, so we brought her here from Iowa, or rather my predecessor Sam Bishop did. He’s retired now, lives in Sarasota. She had a six months leave for some family matter, perhaps two or three years ago.”

“Do you know what that might have been?”

“No, I’ve only been Chair for a year and I don’t know her very well,” she explained. “*Didn’t* that is,” Nancy Marcus added and frowned.

A question came to me, something I had not thought to ask Eve Bishop. “Do you know how old she was, exactly?”

“Thirty-seven.” The same age as I was and she was dead. For whom the bell tolls, and all the rest, but still, it shook me up. I can take people older, or even younger than me dying, but I take it personally when I share a birthday with the deceased.

“Was Ingrid Spoto well liked? I mean by colleagues?”

Nancy shrugged. “Well enough, I suppose. She could be interesting, but she knew how to ruffle feathers.” She smiled ruefully. “Not hard to do in academic circles of course. The smaller the stakes, the more bitter the fight. We’re good guerrilla fighters. Know how to finish someone off without our lips being seen to move.”

“How was she with students?”

“Hard on the undergraduates and even more demanding of her graduate students. This will sound ridiculous, but her rather abrasive manner seemed out of synch at times with her astonishing beauty.” Nancy paused and shook her head. “How silly – why should beautiful people necessarily be loveable? Didn’t Tolstoy say something about that? ‘What a strange illusion it is to suppose that beauty is goodness or worthwhile,’” she quoted now, looking unhappy about that.

Yes, well. *I* expected beautiful people to be good and worthwhile out of gratitude for nature’s bounty but as Leo observed, you couldn’t count on that. In my experience they all too often behaved fairly badly, knowing they would be so easily forgiven their trespasses. And if we were going to throw

quotations around then Helena Rubinstein had said, “Beauty is power,” and don’t tell me the learned Ms Spoto hadn’t known that. I’d seen her bottom drawer.

“So she could be difficult?” A beat was missed.

“Oh . . . not quite that, really.” I noticed Nancy did not like looking at me when she talked about Ingrid and her tone was guarded. While some of that reluctance could stem from discussing the dead, there was something else going on. “She wasn’t an easy person to approach.”

Someone had managed; there was all that leather and fancy underwear, for a start. “Did she have friends in the department?”

She nodded, looking relieved. “Oh, yes. Eve Bishop and she were close.”

“We’ve spoken already.”

Nancy was taken aback. “Really?”

“Yes she contacted us. Had quite a bit to say about Barnett Pazderka.”

“Ah,” was the only reaction.

“I believe he and Ingrid Spoto had a relationship?”

“Yes . . . I suppose that was what it was.” Nancy had again begun to pick her words carefully. I did a P.A.T.I.E.N.C.E., while the game played out. “There was a rather stormy business but that was a while ago and it didn’t last long. I suppose it was a case of two strong personalities equally fond of getting their own way.”

“I understand he was arrested recently for disturbing the peace outside her home.”

“Yes, well, greatly exaggerated, I’m sure.” Nancy got up and stirred the fire with a poker, flames leaping up. Now, she leaned against the mantelpiece her face averted for the moment, then she turned and faced me. “Nothing of interest about her personal life ever reached me in terms of gossip that might be useful to you.”

I knew bullshit when I heard it and had no intention of following such a trail of stale breadcrumbs. This waltzing around Ingrid Spoto’s personal life was getting me down, since I knew damn well she’d had one, and I didn’t doubt for a moment that Nancy had her suspicions and they were specific into the bargain. A woman was dead and someone had killed her. I needed to know what I needed to know and bugger the niceties, but I wasn’t going to find the truth here. Nancy Marcus might be a brilliant academician, but she was a shitty liar. As a rule, most nice people were. The evidence so far, however, indicated that Ingrid Spoto had not suffered any prohibitions against deceiving others.

“Were you ever in her house?”

“Never, no, no.”

I put a check mark in Nancy’s Con column for what I was reasonably

sure was a lie, judging by the Drollette thumbnail sketch of visitors and Eve Bishop's contribution. "Do you know anything else about her personal life which might be of help?"

"No, not really. She kept to herself."

I gave it one more chance. "You can't think of anyone at all. Even a casual thing? Maybe someone out of the academic loop?"

Nancy shrugged. "Perhaps, but her interests were limited so I don't know where or how she would meet anyone off-campus. She was very absorbed by her work."

Not all the time, that was on the record. Ingrid had been interested in something that had nothing to do with the horrors of Mao's Cultural Revolution. It was time to stop and move on, since I had learned as much as I could here. If I needed Nancy Marcus, I knew where to find her.

I stood and put my bag across my body, bandoleer style. "That's it for today. Thank you, I know none of this has been easy."

"No, no it hasn't." She entwined her hands, fingers gripping one another. "God I hope it was an intruder, not anyone I knew. Ingrid didn't deserve this."

And just who did, I wondered?

As we walked toward the front door she said: "I hope you don't think I'm being nosy, but how did an English woman come to be on the local police force?"

Now it was my turn to hold back. "I married a man from West Rapids."

"Is he on the police force as well?"

"No. Thanks again," I told her – and walked out of the house and back to my car, not turning around to see if Nancy Marcus was watching.

I was willing to bet she was, though.

## Chapter 9

It was cold and damp when I arrived home. I turned up the heat and switched on the TV for company. A group of hideously dressed men were playing golf in the sunshine somewhere, so I switched to an ancient black and white film where an impossibly glamorous Jane Greer was putting one over on Robert Mitchum. Talk about gold medal sexual chemistry.

My house was not far from Nancy Marcus's yet it backed up, like Fern Meadows, onto a stretch of the Delacroix River as it wound hither and thither for miles through West Rapids. Though there were houses around mine, I still had a welcome sense of privacy because the surrounding homes were hidden from view in densely wooded lots, thick with birch and oak trees.

Frank Lloyd Wright, who, not many know, was stepfather to Anne Baxter, the eponymous snake of *All About Eve*, was *so* hard up during the nineteen thirties that he designed several houses in the state for tobacco money. My husband, Gavin, had inherited one from his parents – who had, in turn, bought it at auction in the late fifties. It was everything it was supposed to be and more. Gavin told me about the house on the night we got engaged during dinner at my tiny flat in London. In an area of the London called Angel (dubbed “up and coming” by optimistic real estate hacks) my home was surrounded neither by birch, nor oak trees and provided nothing that resembled seclusion.

We'd been dating in a transatlantic fashion for two years after meeting in London – where Gavin had come on vacation with friends. One of them had been mugged and that is how one lady cop met this Yank. Both in our late twenties, we were in agreement, after two years, that the time had come to commit, or part.

“House is great. It isn't a palace, but it might make up for your moving to West Rapids,” Gavin told me, grinning.

“Oh, my God,” I said, staring at him. “Does something have to?”

“Probably after London, yes. Being a small town girl is going to be a stretch for you. You'll have to be one hell of a good sport.”

“Can I still do what I do?”

“Yes, but on a much, much, much smaller scale.” He had grinned. “At least you’ll get all the sex you need.”

“Prove it,” I told him.

I moved to West Rapids and Herb hired me, tickled, he said, to be hiring a “bobby.” He shuffled the paper work so that I retained my Detective Sergeant rank, or its equivalent, after acing the exam – just meeting the minimum height requirement by stretching my neck at the right moment. I continued to do what I done since graduating university, only it became a job and not a career – any scope needed for ambitions to soar did not exist in West Rapids.

We were happy for three years. Or as happy, Gavin liked to point out, as I could be with a town that had only two cineplexes and an unreliable record for showing foreign imports. Then Gavin was suddenly gone from my life, but I did not leave. I stayed on. I stayed, because I wasn’t going to let go of him or what we had that easily. I saw no reason to give him up just because he wasn’t anymore. I never lost the feeling of being an outsider, though. I might be home, in the sense of where the heart is, but the rest of me was far from committed to small town life.

As if to reinforce the idea that I had one foot in and one foot out, I had even tried to find Wonder Man Mark II among the local talent. The good thing about living with a ghost though, is that he lets you be. When that ghost looked like Colin Farrell my choices made great sense – to me, at least. Weird, perhaps, but how weird might I become if a real man crashed into my life? And how many answers are there to that question? Hands up.

I was about to discard my bag on the dining room table, as I always did after coming into the house, but instead I took Ingrid’s photo out of a front pocket and studied the lovely face staring back at me. She looked happy in that moment, but had she been a happy person? Not particularly, if I could go by the dribble of evidence so far. I needed to know more. For example, how had she inspired enough hatred to be killed as she had been? Yes, Ingrid Spoto was becoming a someone and not just a something with a tag on her toe in the morgue. Was that good or bad?

Another issue was playing on my mind. Lying on the table next to my bag was my new contract from the West Rapids Police, its ends curling up at the corners from neglect. The deadline was April 30<sup>th</sup> – very soon. I was supposed to be signing up for three more years of employment. I looked at the space for my signature, did an eenie meenie in my head, then put the contract face down on its resting place on the table, unsigned.

I went into the kitchen and checked out the fridge. I would grill some fish for dinner, bake a sweet potato, make a green salad and take my usual supplement of vitamins as prescribed by my nutritionist. I had planned on

attending the Film Festival on the campus. First though, I would drink my third bottle of water of the day and later treat myself to a glass of Chablis . . .

“Shit!” I said out loud.

My plans were down the waste disposal because I was going to the airport instead. I could hardly greet a bereaved brother, one whose sister had been murdered, while breathing boozy fumes in his face. I doubted also that I would be freed up in time to catch *Hidden Fortress*. I could have hanged Herb Fedewa out of his own office window and left him for the jays to peck to death.

I put away the clothes I’d been wearing, thinking of the other closet I had rummaged through earlier in the day. I pulled on a towelling robe not unlike the unfortunate Ingrid’s and went into the bathroom to run a long, long bath. I threw in a reckless handful of jasmine bath salts as hot water pounded into the tub.

I lay in the scented water, enjoying the steam from more hot water added in small increments by a toe manipulating the faucet and wondering what Paul Spoto was like. No one I wanted to know, undoubtedly. I visualized him as a self-important twit who lived to give people like me a bad time.

I remembered thinking I was up for just another wasted Saturday night.

## Chapter 10

It took me a moment or two to realize that the good-looking, sexy man looking around with an expression indicating he expected to be met, had to be Paul Spoto. The few females hanging around West Rapids' small airport on a Saturday night made a point of looking twice and giving good flirt.

To his credit, he paid them no attention. Entirely appropriate behavior in my opinion, considering the miserable circumstances governing his visit. Paul Spoto got double points in his Pro column. He was of medium height as well – and I like that in a man. Too tall turns me off, because I feel foolish being at eye level with a tie. I felt guilty at the same time for having thoughts as unprofessional as those of the shallow sluts eyeing him with carnal intentions – even as he was going through what must be hell.

I was relieved nevertheless that I was wearing a belted, black silk raincoat that was quite Joan Crawford in her Adrian phase. I almost patted my hair, but thought better of such silliness. The man's sister was dead. He hadn't flown out from Chicago to look for a date.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Sophie Pimlott of the West Rapids Police," I told him, my hand extended. "May I express my condolences?"

"Thank you." His voice was low, pleasing. He carried a small black bag over one shoulder, one that I assumed contained a laptop. He shifted a Louis Vuitton overnighter from his right to his left hand so that we could shake hands. It was as if a jolt of electricity was going through me when we touched. I knew from the flash of something in his dark eyes, dark as in 70% cocoa dark chocolate, that he was experiencing the same pull. We let go of one another at the same instant.

I caught my breath, then said: "I hope your trip was all right?"

"All things considered, yes." He looked over my shoulder at something or other. Anything rather than me – he had to be as thrown as I was by our unexpected connection. "Very easy. I hadn't realized it would be so cold, though. Chicago is getting this now, probably." He was wearing a Burberry over what looked like a well-worn black and white Harris Tweed jacket, tobacco-color wide whale cords and a black cashmere turtleneck. His

loafers were Gucci and brown.

“No, we weren’t expecting it.”

We were both silent. Then he said: “I suppose I have to, well . . . Poor Ingrid. Poor Ingrid.” Those brown eyes were unhappy.

I had seen this before; relatives with no idea of what to say in the immediate face of a wretched death. He stood now, waiting, I assumed, for me to take over. He ran a hand nervously through plenty of floppy medium brown hair touched with just enough silver. God, but he was yummy. I visualized rolling over on my back so that he could rub my tummy – then remembered where I was and why.

“I have to identify the body, don’t I? Where do I go?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Where is she?”

“At the local hospital, St Joseph’s.”

“Why there?”

I cleared my throat. “That’s where the Medical Examiner does the autopsy.”

He sighed. “Ah.”

I took my cell phone from my bag. “Just let me check to see if he’s ready.” He was. I turned back to Paul Spoto. “My car is outside.” I indicated that he should follow me. “How was the trip?” God, I’d said that already. He didn’t seem to notice, though.

“I think I’m still in shock. Bad enough Ingrid is dead, but I can’t get over the way she died . . .” He looked away.

I said nothing since there was nothing to be said worth hearing.

We reached Saint Joseph’s Hospital – having had the kind of conversation people have when they are attracted to one another under bizarre circumstances. Or so I assumed, never having been in such a situation before. Paul told me that he hadn’t had time to think about where he would stay while in West Rapids, having had only his dead sister on his mind.

“I take it there are hotels here?” he asked absently.

God, where did he think he was? Not that I had that much good news to give him. “Not really. There are motels where parents stay when they’re visiting their kids and they’re on the outskirts of town – a lot of people drive here. There’s a hotel on campus, the Ford House, but I don’t recommend it.”

“On the campus?”

I nodded. “Yes, it’s run by the School of Hotel Management. Well, students.”

He nodded and sighed. “I take your point.”

We stopped at a signal. Hordes of noisy undergraduates full of Saturday night cheer were wandering up and down the main drag, Delacroix



Avenue, visiting the bars, pizza parlors and hamburger joints that lined one side of the brightly lit street. Quantity and cost were the criteria and tastes did not run to either booze or food being on the “lite” side. The U. stretched along the opposite side for almost its entire length of just under a mile. It was a lot of university.

“Are there always so many people?” he asked as the signal changed and we were on our way.

“Saturday night and forty thousand or so students make a crowd.”

“Yes,” he agreed, staring out of the front window. “A city in itself. Your jurisdiction?”

“We have campus police. The streets are ours to monitor though, but the campus police are authorized to run interference. They aren’t bad kids, generally. Love their beer too much, as you may have noticed.” As if to punctuate what I had just said, an empty beer can flew by the windshield, ricocheting off the car next to us and landing on the sidewalk to our right.

“Oh.” He looked at me for the first time in several minutes. “What is the best option? For a place to stay I mean?”

“Leave it to me.”

“Great news.” He tried a little laugh again and I was ready to jump up and catch a rubber ball on my nose because I’d pleased him. “It’s your call,” he told me now.

“Holiday Inn,” I said because it was the closest, recently refurbished and only a few minutes away on M75.

“First things first, though,” he said soberly. “I need to see Ingrid.”

Roger might have done his best, but Ingrid still looked at her worst. She’d taken a bad beating. Cleaned up, the lividity and swelling were more conspicuous and the malformed mouth more ugly. Roger promised me a copy of the autopsy by Monday afternoon, but he had found nothing that spelled shocking – other than the ones already dished up.

Paul looked at his sister for a long moment. “What happened to her mouth?”

Roger told him, but he kept the account straight and brief.

Paul stared at him. “My God.” He touched Ingrid’s cheek, nodded and turned away. He looked pale, but composed: both became him. “Yes,” he said, “that’s Ingrid. That is my sister, Ingrid Elizabeth Spoto. Poor girl,” he said, as if to himself.

It’s tough at the best of times to see a dead body. When it’s someone you know, it’s a sight that cuts into your consciousness as sharply as any piece of paper slices into the soft part of a finger. There are no words to describe the sensation that lingers; it’s something that people who have done so can only share with one another. They became members of a club no one chooses to join.

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