

Chapter 21

Mireille Prudhomme's area of specialization was Eighteenth Century Canadian History. A subject as dull as *The Hours*, I should have thought, but Professor Prudhomme obviously did not. An extraordinarily elegant woman in her early fifties, one who looked the very opposite of her subject, opened the door at our knock.

"How can I help you?"

We showed her our badges and identified ourselves.

We sat, then went through the usual banter about Janet. Of course Professor Prudhomme knew who Janet was – she was a big sports fan, although ice hockey was her thing, blah, blah, blah. While she and Janet chattered I looked around the office.

It was smaller and less glamorous than Barnett Pazderka's quarters, in terms of its dimensions, but more welcoming – the fabled woman's touch in action. There were lovely flower prints hanging everywhere and the walls were painted shell pink. While Barnett's was chaotic here there were neat stacks of term papers on the desk – next to a pot of deeply scented white hyacinth and photos in silver frames.

She shook her head. "Poor Ingrid, dreadful. I'm so terribly sorry."

I nodded. "Yes. I hope you're up to talking about her."

"Of course, if it helps." Mireille sat behind her desk. She was wearing a starched, white piqué shirt, a black pencil skirt and black Ferragamo pumps that had broad grosgrain ribbons decorating the arch. A pale-as-pale shell pink pashmina was draped over her shoulders. A bit on the bony side, she was as chic as chic gets and attractive in a striking, rather than a pretty way – with a lush mouth, rather like Fanny Ardant. She had heavy silver hair cut into a sharp bob to just below her ears. I wondered if she went to the same hairdresser as Lee Il Kwon? If so I was going ask who this was and get an appointment a.s.a.p.

I had to admit that Prof. Prudhomme was quite something, having enough self-assurance for all three of us in the room. Perhaps even a shade over this ratio. Time would tell. An interesting woman though, of that I was

sure.

There was also a silver-framed photo on her desk of a distinguished man somewhere in his late fifties, with hair as silver as Mireille's and a patrician cut to his jib. I checked her ring finger and there was a square-cut diamond in a Tiffany setting that was far from modest in proportions and a thin platinum wedding band. Never assume, though. I nodded in the direction of the photo.

"Your husband?"

"Yes," she nodded and a tiny patch of color came into cheeks that looked clear of blusher or anything else to me. Mireille was one of those women who went without makeup and any woman over twenty who does so has a self-image to envy. Good skin, fine, gray eyes with thick, dark lashes and well-shaped eyebrows helped, but the natural look is one all women envy – but few dare to sport in public. Mr. Prudhomme was a lucky fellow. Now his missus looked down at her desk and played with the corner of an essay she had apparently been grading. "Ingrid was at our house, you know. At a dinner party. I mean on the night she died." She didn't look happy saying that.

"Can you tell us when she left?"

"Oh, early." Mireille looked up, thinking about that. "I would say about 9:30. The rest of us had just sat down for coffee in the living room, but she was behind on a deadline and excused herself."

"Did she drive?" I had already been told that Ingrid owned a decade-old VW Rabbit that was rusting out from neglect.

"No, she walked to our house and back. I remember her saying how cold it was getting when she arrived. We live in the Glen as well, so not far to go."

I noticed Mireille had a slight French accent. No, more of an intonation really, and I commented on that.

She smiled. "Yes, Montreal." That explained the interest in Canadian history.

"And you're English?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been here?"

"Six years." I returned to Ingrid. "What was her mood?"

Mireille reversed the position of her crossed legs. She had great ankles. "On excellent form. She looked well and sounded better – some research project had her excited."

I had concerns other than Ingrid's Spoto's career. "There seem to have been some problems with her colleagues – ."

"Oh, please." Mireille ran her hand through her hair impatiently and it fell back into place perfectly. Wouldn't it just? "People so attractive as Ingrid

always suffer criticism that has nothing to do with anything. She was also rather on the brusque side and that put a few noses out of joint.” Mireille sat back and smiled. She was completely relaxed with us, which is rare, especially under the present circumstances. Then again, people deal with a crisis in their own way.

She continued. “Take Barnett Pazderka. He has this image of himself as the shaker and mover of the department, when the truth is he’s the resident bully. Never got off her case. He would be incredibly rude and aggressive even when he passed her in the main office, or at department meetings.”

“How did she react?”

“Oh, she just got off some quip calculated to madden him even further – .”

“Goaded him?”

She shrugged. “Well, you could put it that way, I suppose. Ingrid’s way was to provoke, but in a way that made the other person look foolish if they jumped her for it. As to Barnett, the truth is that underneath the tough guy act he still hasn’t gotten over Ingrid finishing with him.” She shook her head. “Something neither forgiven nor forgotten by a serial philanderer.”

“How did you know we’d spoken to Professor Pazderka?” I asked.

Now she actually laughed, a pleasant sound, but lacking in genuine mirth. “I don’t have a crystal ball. Madge has been on the phone. Knows all, tells all, that’s our Madge. I have no doubt my colleagues – those who are around and relevant – will be more than happy to give you yet more opinions on Ingrid.”

I was my turn to smile slightly. “What will I hear?”

Mireille sighed. She leaned back, looking genuinely saddened. “Oh dear, some good, more bad. Face it, when you are as beautiful and accomplished as Ingrid, it’s a mixed bag.”

“But she had her supporters?”

“She was friendly with Eve Bishop. So was Charles Thomas, of course. He’s so dear, lovely to everyone. Dear Eve is heavy going.” I must have looked a shade surprised at such candor because she looked a touch embarrassed. She continued after a beat or two. “I hear you’ve also met Eve and Charles and don’t ask how I know. Historians are shocking gossips you know.”

Mireille Prudhomme had charm, bags full. She knew how to put people at ease. Her students were lucky. On the other hand charm was skin deep.

Mireille picked up a Mont Blanc pen and started doodling little circles on a pale pink post-it note. “I’m very shocked by all of this. It’s true that Ingrid could be difficult, but I neither saw nor heard of any behavior that would cause

someone to beat another person to death. That goes double for our colleagues. An exchange of letters and a few insults tossed into the hopper, maybe – we’re talking about academics, not gang warfare in Los Angeles.” She smiled.

“You knew Ingrid well, I take it?”

“Lawrence and I, that’s my husband,” she added for our benefit, “we were fond of her. She’ll be missed. I know I’ve made her sound like hard work, but she could be great fun. Witty, charming and God knows, decorative.”

I believed her, I supposed. I had a feeling that Mireille Prudhomme was the type who might eulogize the dead because it was good form to do so. This was a woman who was conscious of effect. Still, that did not mean she didn’t know sincerity from a hole in the road. “Could you tell us your guest list for Friday evening?”

She nodded. “Let me write the names down for you and any phone numbers I can remember.” She did so, on the legal pad at her elbow. “There were only eight of us. Town and gown, but no blood was shed – Oh, God, what a tactless thing to say.” She composed herself quickly and continued. “Ingrid of course, our next door neighbors, the Athertons, Dale and Rosemary. She’s with the university, a dean at one of the residential colleges and he’s in insurance. Lawrence’s anaesthesiologist Doug and his wife Jennifer Gordon, who’s a paediatrician, me of course and Lawrence – .”

“Dr. Prudhomme?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, it’s Saxton. I kept my own name. There was a hint of a simper, as she told us: ‘Lawrence is an obstetrician-gynecologist.’” Not my favorite field of specialization but the lady sounded as proud as proud could be and not just because she was in love. She was in love with a catch. “Are you married, Detective Pimlott?” She asked me.

“No,” I answered, then asked: “When did the party break up?”

She thought for a moment. “At about ten thirty. We tidied up a little then went to bed because we needed an early start the next day. We drove to Ann Arbor for a friend’s birthday,” she explained. “Stayed over until Sunday afternoon until we were sure the snow was gone.”

Another alibi. “Who was the eighth person?” I asked.

“Charles Thomas.”

What? So he knew the deceased more than in passing – if he’d had dinner with her on the night of her death. Why had he not told me that when I spoke to him the day before? Was he that upset? No, I should not have said so. It had been obfuscation on his part. No, no, no, that would never do. I took some of the points from his Pro column and moved them to the Con side.

I stood. “Where can I find him?”

Mireille looked surprised. “I think he’s teaching on the second floor –

.”

“One more thing. Did you know anything about Ingrid Spoto’s personal life?”

Mireille Prudhomme frowned. “Well, we weren’t close enough to discuss things like that. There was Barnett of course, but otherwise I don’t remember seeing her with anyone and she never asked to bring anyone with her to any of our dinner parties. I would have said Eve would be more likely to have the answer to that question.”

I thought Charles might have more to tell me, as well. We stood and I gave her my card. “If you think of anything.”

“Of course,” she said.

I stopped on my way to the door. “What do *you* think happened? To Ingrid, I mean.”

Mireille shook her head. “I assume she was attacked by some lunatic who got into the house, but scuttlebutt has it there may be more to it than that.”

“Not sure what happened yet,” Janet told her.

“I don’t know. It seems terrible that someone you know and like was killed with premeditation.” Mireille looked from one of us to the other. “She was a woman with secrets, perhaps?”

Oh, yes indeed.

“And Detective Pimlott?” She gave me a ravishing smile, then I got a more serious expression. “Do get this person, won’t you?”

“Oh, we will.”

The rest of our time on campus was not all that satisfying. Other members of the department who happened to be in their offices – a notably small congregation – were of little help and several showed so little interest in real events that it was as if they survived in sensory deprivation tanks. We walked past Ingrid’s office, but not surprisingly it was locked. I assumed Madge could facilitate entry, so I sent Janet to get the key. Better her than me.

I found Charles Thomas in a lecture hall on the second floor, as Prudhomme had suggested. He was as impeccably turned out as he had been the first time we met. He was the only man I knew of beside Cary Grant who could get away with wearing an ascot and not look like a sissy. When challenged about not telling me the truth of his evening at Mireille’s during our interview on Saturday, Charles was surprisingly poised.

“An omission.”

How dare he. “This is murder investigation, Professor Thomas. Omissions can be vital.”

“How could I tell you the truth in front of Eve?”

“You could have told me after our leaving her.”

He thought about that. “Yes, I should have. I didn’t realize it mattered
– .”

“Of course you did.”

He looked at me. “Yes. What do you need to know?”

“What was Ingrid Spoto’s state of mind during the evening?”

“She was fine. Left about 9:30, something to do with work.”

That gelled with what Prudhomme had said. “What did your evening out have to do with Eve Bishop?”

“She would have been shattered at not being invited. She’d been through enough.”

“Bruised feelings are hardly a priority in this instance.”

He looked deflated. “Look, the poor woman is never invited to such gatherings, that’s why. Least of all to Mireille’s.”

“Why not?”

He stopped stuffing books into a Louis Vuitton knapsack. “Because Eve doesn’t go with her décor, that’s why. Obviously you’ve met her so I don’t have to explain what I mean.”

“Yes, you do.” I smiled my best bland smile.

Charles got the point. “Mireille’s aspirational to the *n*th degree. She has big ideas and the brains and stamina to carry them out. Marrying Lawrence took her several rungs up the townie ladder and now she wants to travel upward on the greasy pole that is university politics. The fourth floor of the main building.”

“Fourth floor?”

“Administration. Play with the big boys.” He smiled. “She’s working hard at it and good luck to her.”

My sense of things was that Mireille Prudhomme might play with the big boys but she’d never be one of them. The lady was a supporting act, not a star. “This has what to do with Eve Bishop?”

“Oh, I do apologize. The facts of life. The university is like any other milieu. If you want to get ahead you cultivate the right people. Mireille and Lawrence are players; they entertain like mad and belong to the right country club. They’re socially well connected, that’s important to them and that’s their business. When they entertain it’s to dazzle and Eve doesn’t fit in a room where you have to keep up your end. A very bright woman, but small talk is not her strong suit. She’s not decorative like Ingrid and that matters to Mireille and after all, it was her party.”

This was Professor Prudhomme’s idea of someone who was “dear?” On the other hand, it did check with what she had said herself about Eve Bishop. What was Ingrid doing at a dinner party given by someone who habitually cut her best girlfriend? “How did Ingrid feel about this?”

“I assume she saw through Mireille’s strategy and played along because it amused her to, but that had nothing to do with her sentiments

toward Eve.” He closed the knapsack. The smile was gone from his face. “Ingrid was unfailingly kind to Eve, but that was the problem to some extent. There was a growing dependency there, a proprietary thing going on. If Ingrid was invited somewhere and Eve wasn’t, I picked up on the fact that there would be a scene. Eve is more fragile than she appears.”

I believed that, but it still didn’t explain why he hadn’t told me of seeing the deceased hours before her death. “Why didn’t you mention seeing Ingrid Spoto?”

“I don’t know. Yes, I do. I suppose I didn’t want to get involved, to be asked more questions. I’m sorry.”

I would have to accept that answer; there was nothing new about it, that was for sure. “Do you know a grad student of Ingrid’s, Lee Il Kwon?”

He sighed. “No, but I assume you know already that he was sleeping with Ingrid. I told you, she wasn’t all that discreet. They’d been seen around town. Anyway they were both adults. Whether he was into sadomasochism I don’t know.” He hesitated. “I . . . well, I did hear that her tastes also ran to . . . well, that she was bisexual. Campus life is very parochial, you know. Difficult to keep one’s business one’s own.”

I managed to form words with a mouth dry from anger. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this yesterday?”

“Because I’m telling you now. Anyway, is what I’m telling you now the least bit new? It’s something you already knew and now I’m repeating gossip, that’s all.” He hauled the knapsack on his back.

“We’re not finished here.”

“Oh.” He looked mildly cowed.

“What time did you return home on the night of the murder?”

He looked disconcerted. “Are you asking me for an alibi?”

“Yes, do you blame me?”

He shook his head. “No, I don’t. I got home at about eleven and watched a film with Meryl Streep, but I fell asleep before the end.”

I had watched *Silkwood* as well. “She dies.”

He nodded. “Yes, that seemed inevitable.” He checked his watch.

“Detective Pimlott you must excuse me, I have office hours.”

He rushed off before I had a chance to stop him.

Janet found me as I was strolling down the hall, counting the number of female coeds in critical need of diet counselling. I told her which beans Charles Thomas had spilled.

She looked thoughtful. “Ingrid was into girls as well?” was all she said, though. Madge had not been in the department office and her handmaidens were too scared to hand over the key to Ingrid’s office.

“We’re the police,” I said, shaking my head. “Surely we scare them more than she does?”

Apparently not.

Chapter 22

We were on our way back to the History department office when we bumped into Eve Bishop, struggling with a bulging briefcase and a shoulder bag that had become entwined; both were in danger of catapulting from her clutches. She seemed less agitated than she had been, although the red cord trousers and matching jacket were a mistake in my opinion, clashing badly with her lipstick. We greeted one another.

“Detective Pimlott, any developments?”

I smiled blandly. “Things are falling into line.”

“Have you been talking to people?” She sounded impatient and her face was becoming mottled. “Barnett Pazderka, I hope? Have you spoken to him? He’s on campus – Madge, the department secretary, told me. He hated Ingrid. Wouldn’t leave her alone, even though he said horrible things about her.”

I was weary of this mantra. We’d trawled these waters together once too often. “So you’ve said before, and we have spoken to him – .”

“So you know – .”

“What we know is that he has an alibi for the time of her death.”

“No.” All the color left her face. “No, that isn’t possible.”

“Yes, I’m afraid it is. We’re quite satisfied for the moment that he had nothing to do with Ingrid’s death.”

“Indeed?” She was breathing heavily – a woman who’d been told something she didn’t want to hear. “Well someone killed her, so I suggest you find out who as soon as possible. That’s your job, isn’t it?”

Janet gave a sharp intake of breath, but, like me, said nothing. I considered the source: a bitter woman grieving at a level that had to be exquisitely painful. Even so, I didn’t have a sign across my forehead saying “Take it out on me.” I gave the Prof a handful of points in the Con column and left it at that.

An exceptionally pretty girl walked up and said, “Professor Bishop. I know it’s late, but my paper will be in tomorrow, I ‘m sorry about that, really.”

Eve looked her up and down and I knew that look. She was in a

position to punish a younger woman with a life ahead of her – now that her own was gone and was she going to do just that. “That’s half a letter grade.” Of course, the student knew who had the power here and exactly where she stood in the unfairly balanced situation.

She paled. “Oh please, Dr. Bishop, that’s so totally unfair.”

“You know the penalties for being late with your work – I make that clear in the syllabus.”

I wondered at someone who was mourning a friend and pointing the finger at a colleague for a serious crime and who could, in the same breath, give a damn about a late paper. The student looked mutinous but headed off.

“Is there anyone else you can think of who might have been at odds with the deceased?” Janet asked.

“Do I know you?” Eve asked now, looking at her as if for the first time.

“No, ma’am,” she told her gently.

I introduced them.

“I never forget a face.”

Janet eyed one of the most miserly examples of a smile ever bestowed by Nature and gave a bland one of her own. “Me neither.”

I tried again. “Do you know of anyone who might have been involved with the deceased, shall we say, intimately?”

“No! No, no.” Eve was angry; her face was almost the same unflattering shade of red as her face. “I know what Charles thinks, but that’s because he listens to foolish gossip.”

So, Charles was not as discreet as he thought. “What sort of gossip?”

Eve Bishop’s mouth took on that tight look. “I don’t listen to gossip.”

She just knew that it existed, though. I went for it. “Anything to do with one of her grad students – .”

“I take it you mean that jackass Kwon?”

Oh, so she must have taken her hands off her ears for a minute or two. “Yes – .”

“Sheer rubbish.”

I knew better than to push. She would have shoved me down the stairs. Judging that to be that, I made noises indicating we should be on our way and Janet and I started toward the main office.

“Detective Pimlott?” Eve called after us.

I exchanged an exasperated look with Janet, one that I must not have wiped off my face quickly enough as I turned around, because Eve stepped back slightly, looking uncertain.

“Yes, is there something else?” I guessed we were in for more mud-slinging.

“Yes . . . there was something said on the TV. I was wondering . . .” She pushed a few strands of that extraordinary hair off her face. “I’m probably being foolish, but that woman with the blond hair on the local channel was saying . . .”

Those damn TV people. “Is there is anything you want to discuss that’s relevant to the case?” I knew I sounded impatient, but couldn’t help myself.

She made her mind up and the mouth tightened again. “Nothing, no, of course not.”

Eve turned on her heels and walked off down the hall in her ungainly fashion, then turned. “You think I’m ridiculous, don’t you?”

I got huffy, my usual reaction to someone calling me on something. “Not at all.”

“Of course you do. You think I’m, what’s that hideous word . . . over-reacting?”

“No, your friend died, so naturally you’re distressed – .”

“Don’t condescend to *me*. Ingrid was my friend. She told me things about herself – .” I must have looked expectant, because I got a look that redefined withering. “Oh, nothing sordid, just about what she was feeling just then and, in turn, she listened to me. Not an experience I was used to. I hate her death, hate it.”

I decided that there was perhaps one last question I could put to Eve. “Can you tell me anything about Ingrid having an abortion?”

Eve seemed astonished by this question but she responded bravely. “Oh that, that was two years or so ago. She didn’t want anybody around here knowing a thing so she went to Mexico for the procedure. She said it was very unpleasant.”

“Did she, by any chance, suggest who her partner in this pregnancy might have been?”

Eve had nothing to say on this topic. She turned and was gone, leaving me to feel part ashamed and part guilty. I wondered fleetingly what *had* caught her attention on the TV news, but if it had been important enough she would have followed through, regardless of my, yes, less that professional attitude. The woman was hurting, badly. She had lost someone who not only meant something to her, but to whom she had meant something as well. A profound loss I could recognize from first-hand experience.

What a shame I didn’t tell her so.

Chapter 23

We had wrestled the key from Madge but we were warned not to touch anything: “That’s university property, mind.”

“Good job she said that,” Janet said as we searched for Ingrid’s office.

“Yes, I was thinking of selling anything we find to the highest bidder.”

We walked down a narrow, dingy hallway without windows, one needing a refreshing coat of paint. I often wonder why they insist on a shade of green that flatters neither the space it covers nor its unfortunate occupants. The doors of each office held information about office hours and there were not many of those on offer by a faculty I had found disconcertingly elusive on our earlier trawl through their quarters. A student would have to be very quick off the mark to find a window of opportunity in which to discuss any matters scholastic.

Spoto’s office offered few hints about its late resident. It was a spartan space, offering as little sense of its inhabitant as had her home. The bookshelves contained only texts, and there was nothing of any personal nature – other than a lonely coffee mug proclaiming its loyalties to the university. A layer of cold, scummy coffee on the bottom showed it had been discarded some days before.

Janet pointed to the desk, denuded of anything but a plastic holder for pens and papers. There was a square patch with noticeably less dust than the area surrounding it. “I bet her computer fits here. The one we have at the station. Laptop gave her mobility.”

I looked around. “Have the room dusted for prints just in case,” I told Janet as we walked out of the office.

“We have to go on with what we’ve got,” Janet said as she checked that the door was locked behind us. “There’s the hot-as-hot sex life. Add the fact that the woman sounds like a real manipulator and a user. Liked twisting the knife. She had one complicated life, you know? That has to have caused her trouble.”

“Yes,” I said, “but our trouble is that we aren’t flush with leads. I mean she had to have made someone terribly angry, or frightened, to kill her as he

did.”

“Leaving her that way has to mean something,” Janet agreed. “No one does something that brutal without it meaning something.”

What a lot of dead ends. “Maybe we should talk to Barnett again, or Eve Bishop,” Janet said. “All of this sending us in other directions might be a red herring. And there’s all that leather. Who was into that with her? Maybe they were going at it, then there was a fight and oops! Then he decides on window dressing because he’s so worked up. Maybe he found out about Kwon? Or, was it Kwon? He *was* in Leather Bob’s – even if he claims not to have initiated that visit. Maybe she got him so worked up . . .”

I thought about that. “Not bad, not bad. Whoever did it had to have been covered in blood though. Big chance to take on not being seen, strolling along a street in The Glen and hoping no one would see you looking like Carrie. I think this was more premeditated than that.”

Janet nodded. “Yes, maybe, but I like my version best. Passion run amok.”

“Perhaps.” I only wanted to find the real version and before some more shit hit the fan.

First, though, I had to get ready for dinner with Paul.

Chapter 24

I was listening to a CD of Ella Fitzgerald and Cole Porter doing one another mutual favors. It was almost 8:00, the time designated for Paul to arrive. The fire flickered, the lights were dimmed, the flowers were fresh, the chicken breasts were ready to grill and the broccoli was in the steamer. However, though the wine was chilled, the hostess was not.

Indeed, far from it: I was agitated to say the least. When a woman has her hair done and has her legs waxed? Takes a long bath in jasmine salts? Runs about plumping up pillows and lighting candles? Changes her outfit three times? Well, she can fool some people into believing she isn't thinking hot date, but she can't fool herself. And I knew exactly why I was working so hard at doing just that.

Was I breaking any rules by entertaining someone who was part of an ongoing investigation? Well, I knew enough to keep the relationship under wraps. And I knew better than to tell myself I was simply being kind to a stranger who had just lost his sister. For one thing, a voice a lot like Herb's was telling me over and over that while in all probability he had not killed his sister, the possibility that he had done so was reason enough for my having nothing to do with him – other than by the book. Did my hormones care? Not enough, apparently, and it had been a long time since I had felt that way. Not since Gavin.

I had not lived like a nun. I'd done the round of dinner parties and been seated next to eligible men. I had gone on dates, but the candidates rarely got past the front door after bringing me home. On the rare occasions that barrier was breached, it was about need rather than anything else and we both knew that from the way breakfast was not on the agenda. Nothing like being thrown out into a freezing Michigan winter night to get the message across that a viable future together is off the page.

Now, here I was waiting for someone who made me feel very much the opposite. If only the circumstances had been more conducive to romance than to arrest.

The doorbell rang. I ran my tongue along my teeth to see that there

were no streaks of lipstick, straightened my just-the-right-side-of-tight red dress, turned the dimmer back up and opened the door – the theme music from *Love With The Proper Stranger* playing in my head.

“I like that dress,” Paul told me, smiling. “Am I allowed to kiss my hostess or will that compromise anything?”

I answered the question.

The evening was going well. I managed neither to overcook the chicken, nor the broccoli. There wasn’t too much vinegar in the salad dressing – a culinary minefield for me. We had drunk enough Chablis that I was going soft in the center, but not so much that there was any peril of total meltdown. We were sipping our coffee in front of the fire and now Dido was moaning about life on the CD.

“The Coroner’s office said the body would be released tomorrow,” Paul said, staring into the flames. He was wearing gray cords, a blue Oxford-cloth shirt, a cheery rep tie and his tweed jacket: very nice. He was sitting close enough without crowding me. “Do you think she suffered?” he asked now, staring moodily into the fire.

A great deal, I should have thought. “Ah, well, difficult to say.”

Paul was quiet for a moment, digesting what I had said, wondering if I had been telling the truth, hoping so. “The funeral will be in Chicago.”

Ah, that subject at last. Gosh, Herb would be pleased, but I would wait to let him know – no reason to touch base at this moment. “Yes, well that was her home – .”

“Oh, it’s in her will. Those are her instructions. Next to our parents.”

I don’t know why, but that was a jolt. “So you’ve read the will? How did you know who her lawyer was?”

“I called her department head, Nancy Marcus. She looked it up for me in her records.”

My, my, my, fast work. I smiled. “Oh, that’s good. Any surprises?”

“Well, believe it or not, only what you had speculated.”

“Lucky guess.”

“Yes, wasn’t it?” He smiled knowingly and then put his arm around my shoulders and played with my hair very gently. “I hadn’t expected to get the bulk of the estate. I still don’t understand why I did. I like short hair on women, by the way.”

I could have done without the collective noun, but never mind. “No one else to leave it to, apparently,” I said.

He sighed, “So it would seem. I just wish . . .”

“What?”

“That she’d been happier.”

“She seemed to be enjoying life to me,” I said ruefully.

“Yes, well, sex.” He went quiet. “That filled the void, but the nature of that particular void was insatiable in her case.”

I looked at him, faintly shocked. “You didn’t like her, did you?”

“I didn’t know her,” he insisted, but the jaw was set in an uncompromising way as he said that.

“You knew her well enough to judge her.”

He thought about that. “Members of families always do that to one another.”

“Maybe if her marriage had worked out, if she’d had children.”

“She didn’t though.” He stared into the fire again, seemingly having retreated into his own thoughts. I said nothing, remembering that both he and Ingrid had struggled with the disappointment of bad marriages and neither had gone for a second round. Tried it once, didn’t like it, as the old joke went. Perhaps he and Ingrid hadn’t been so different.

“Anyway,” he took my hand, and seemed to come back to me. “As to the money, I don’t need it and I don’t want it.”

Easy to say to the police, but follow-through was often the sticking point. “Maybe you can give it away then?” That was a weak joke and I knew it but he took me seriously.

“I thought of doing just that, to be honest. I’d have a chair named for her in the department. What do you think of establishing an endowment in Ingrid’s name to underwrite graduate students in her field? Grad school costs a fortune these days.”

The irony of that almost undid me, but I managed, “Good idea.” Would Lee Il Kwon be eligible, I wondered? One thing could be said about Paul’s professed philanthropic intentions; they would make Herb’s suspicions about his killing Ingrid for money look like a load of caca. That lightened the load on my heart, all right. “What’s next on your agenda?” I asked.

“I have to clear out the house, I suppose. At least get started on the process.” He looked depressed by that prospect. “When can I get in to do that? I’m not sure I’m up to it myself.”

I was used to that reaction, so I had a solution. “I think I can clear it for you to start tomorrow or the day after – I’ll check with forensics. As to getting stuff out of there after sifting through the personal items, there are commercial services that do that when there’s been . . .” I left it at that. “You could have the contents auctioned off, if you have no need for them.”

He looked marginally cheered. “Yes, that would help. Check out her papers, box and ship everything to storage at home. I can look at them when it doesn’t feel so . . .”

“Intrusive?” I suggested. Of course, what to do with the leather bits and pieces and the hooker undies could be a problem, but a large, black plastic

bag and a garbage can would solve that problem. "Sifting through someone else's life isn't a nice idea, is it?"

"Exactly." Paul drew the tip of his finger down the side of my neck. "I guess you know all about it. Other cases, I mean?"

I nodded. "The longer you wait to check out her stuff, the fewer the ghosts." He had still not said anything.

"I need to get out of here by Friday."

"Friday?" I could hear the disappointment in my own voice, which, to my gratification, he picked up on and echoed. In certain situations we lead with our egos.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I brought my laptop and I've been working from the motel, but taking more time off is tricky." We were both quiet for a moment, then he said: "I think you know that, in spite of the situation, I've been thinking about you. A lot."

Why lie? "So have I. About you, I mean."

"I know I've said this before, but I need to make sure. Is my being part of a case you're investigating going to cause any trouble?" He was playing with my fingertips.

No reason to lie about that, either. "Perhaps, but obviously I'm not all that conflicted, or you wouldn't be here. Still, best to go slow."

He nodded. "I have patience. This has to end soon." Our fingers linked. "Chicago is only a fifty-five minute flight, you know."

"And only about a six-hour drive." I couldn't help myself, even with the shadow of Herb frowning at me over Paul's broad shoulder.

"Does it take that long?" He looked vaguely interested.

"I would think so."

"Useful to know." He brushed a lock of my hair, one that had fallen across my forehead and I swear either the earth moved, or else the San Andreas fault line was closer than I thought. "Enough of this."

I had a choice to make and I made it. We moved toward one another and there was a lot of hot kissing with tongues. When we came up for breath, he said:

"This isn't much of a display of patience, is it?"

"We're grownups." Well, we were adults. Not always the same thing, but this was no time to quibble over definitions. "We can handle it."

"So it's all right?"

I breathed: "All right? It's damn near perfect."

The phone rang.

I was still breathless, as I said: "Hello."

"We have another dead body on our hands," Herb told me.

Chapter 25

I felt the cold.

“Who?”

“Eve Bishop.”

Oh God. I sat up straight, clenching the phone. What had she been going to tell us earlier that day when my impatience got in the way of her doing so? Had I stopped her from telling me something that might possibly have saved her life?

“Whatever you’re doing, get over to Eve Bishop’s. I’ll meet you there, but if you’re doing what I think you’re doing with who I think, I’d better never find out for sure.”

He hung up, leaving me trembling.

I told Paul what had happened, leaving out how unprofessional I had been to Eve Bishop earlier that day. For obvious reasons, I didn’t want to go there. He was shocked, badly.

“You think it had something to do with what happened to Ingrid, don’t you?”

“I don’t rule out coincidence, but it probably does.”

“Oh, God. Ingrid. Ingrid.” He leaned forward, his head in his hands. “What was she into?”

“Into?” Had Paul more to tell me?

Paul was silent.

“What are you telling me now and whatever it is, why didn’t you tell me before?” I said. The points he’d scored in the Pro column during the evening got shifted to the Con. Well, not all of them, perhaps.

He stood and started pacing. “Ingrid lived in the moral shadows, was careless with people,” he now said. “Didn’t seem to care about the contradictions in her own nature, about the way she lived two lives. There was the gifted professional, the good daughter. Then she was someone else.” He looked at me with that look men get on their faces when they are out of their depth – that “How can it be, if I don’t understand it?” look. “She had no control when it came to sex, no boundaries.”

“Yes, we have evidence of that, I’m afraid.” To have it confirmed was to realize that I was going to have to go through more unsavory layers and this was dispiriting.

At the risk of blowing Kwon’s chances of a prospective Ingrid Spoto scholarship I described the kind of relationship she had with her graduate student, then filled Paul in on the torrid episode with Barnett Pazderka. I didn’t mention Charles Thomas’s allusion to a gay relationship and the sadomasochism was best left dormant; the man had had enough.

“I think we are going to find out about others,” was all I said now. “There seems to have been someone wearing a baseball cap lurking in the shadows. Probably married.”

“God, what a cliché.” He looked ill. “I wish I could say I was surprised.”

I stood. “I have to go, I have a body to check out. I’ll call you at the motel. Tomorrow, probably.”

“Yes,” he said, as we walked to the front door. He turned. “I’m sorry.”

So was I, because I knew instinctively that when he did get around to pulling me into Ingrid’s life I was going to hear something I didn’t want to. It wouldn’t be the first time in my career, but it never got any easier.

Half an hour later, after hastily changing out of my dress into jeans, turtleneck and a windbreaker, I stood looking at Eve Bishop’s body, propped up in a chair in her living room.

Her body was still warm.

She wore the same clothes as earlier in the day. The Shaker table next to her right elbow was still stacked with essays – now repellently blood-spattered. There were graded essays strewn at Eve’s feet, all defaced by comments slashed in blue pen – as well as by her blood. Most had ominously low grades. Well, the young lady of the afternoon had no worries anymore about late papers. That stroke of luck didn’t make her a suspect in my eyes, however.

Eve’s throat had been cut from ear to ear. I had always thought that was simply an expression, but I now knew how wrong I was in that assumption. There was blood, everywhere – the coppery smell was terrible, the blood spattered all over the walls and carpet. I had gagged as I came into the house and my stomach was certainly not settled after seeing what the killer had done to Eve Bishop. As far as I was concerned however, the mutilated throat was not the worst cruelty inflicted on her.

Eve’s glorious hair lay in clumps and wisps at her feet as well as clinging to the pillared brown cardigan that covered her arms and shoulders. Her scalp had been hacked at clumsily, leaving ugly abrasions. Who did we have here with such hatred for women that there was a compulsion to ruin

whatever had been beautiful about them? This was a killer as wicked as he or she was mad. For once, I could think of no cinematic image that quite captured the sense of fear and loathing instilled by this killer: *The Boston Strangler* perhaps? I turned away, trembling, taking a bottle of water from my bag and sipping slowly in the hope that it would quell both my seething stomach and yes, a badly jolted conscience. I should have taken better care of Eve Bishop.

There were uniformed cops outside as well as three blue and white PD cars with their lights flashing superfluously – after all, the emergency was over. Lights were on in most of the surrounding condos, but only a few people had gathered to see what was going on. Most neighbors' morbid curiosity had been overcome, no doubt, by their distaste for the cold wind, one that had come up at dusk and by the on-again, off-again April shower that had started just as I left my house.

I watched through the window as Janet jumped off her bicycle. She pulled off her safety helmet and secured it to the seat. I checked my watch and noted that it was 10:55 as she came into the room and stopped short. Her freckles stood out against a very pale face.

"Oh my," was all she said. I nodded my agreement.

A camera went off a few times and one of the State Police forensic team members was brushing for prints. "We've gone through the place and there's nothing really," he said, "certainly no signs that the perp went anywhere but the living room where he killed her." Roger arrived and came over to the body. His hair looked stranger than usual, so I assumed he'd been asleep. His fly was open, which clinched my suspicions.

"What the hell?"

"This is crazy stuff," Janet said. My thoughts exactly.

I stared down at what had been Eve Bishop. "I wonder *what* she would have asked us this afternoon? If I hadn't been so impatient with her."

"Don't go there," Janet said quietly just as Herb arrived. His appearance long after what I knew was his beddy-bye time was not a reassuring sign of his confidence in our abilities to wrap up this case anytime soon. It was also an indication that he was getting calls from panicked locals with enough clout to get him out to a crime scene on a miserable spring night. His presence made three unhappy campers, four if you counted Eve Bishop.

"Really racking up the bodies, aren't you, Sophie?" He stuck his hands in the pocket of his dark blue anorak. "I don't like this one bit."

"Neither did she," I told him, shortly. The remark about racking up bodies had been below the belt.

"When did this happen?" Herb asked Roger, ignoring me.

"I'm going to say in the last couple of hours. The heating is on but so low that it wouldn't affect things too much."

“Cause of death?”

Considering the gash in her throat, that was not much of a question, but I held my tongue. Experience, combined with a healthy sense of survival, told me that Herb was in no mood for snappy chatter. Roger picked up on that also and, no doubt for the same reasons, he played it straight.

“Severed the main blood vessels, the carotid artery and the jugular vein. Cutting the carotid caused blood to spurt several feet. Left to right from behind, so a right-handed killer. Death occurs from asphyxia because the blood blocks the air passages.” We were all silent for a moment, pondering what it was like to choke to death on your own blood. Roger continued. “Whoever did this didn’t hesitate for a second.” He pointed to her hands and arms. “No defensive wounds, he came on her from behind so that she would be relaxed, then whacked her fast.”

Something occurred to me. “Would she have known her hair was being cut off?”

Roger shrugged. “No, probably not.”

My heart went wobbly just at the “probably.”

Herb looked around. “How did the perp get in?”

“Forced entrance just like Spoto. Got in from the patio,” I told him. “Opened the sliding doors behind her and he was in.” That confirmed what Roger had said about the element of surprise.

“Any sign of the weapon?”

“No,” I told him. “We have to do a proper sweep though. Could have been something from her own kitchen and he put it back.”

“No.” Herb shook his head. “This guy leaves nothing behind.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “I’ll tell you something else. He makes the crimes look as if they were done in a moment of anger, but I’m convinced he thought it out step by step.”

Herb nodded. “Yeah, I think it reads like that too. What do we know about this woman?” he asked me, leaning over the body. “We don’t have a serial killer here, I’ll tell you that. Both women died for a reason and I don’t mean any off the wall junk festering in some crazy’s brain. Whoever it was, he had a motive, and it’s the kind that any jury could understand without a shrink having to explain.”

“I agree.” I looked around the living room. Something struck me, where was Charles Thomas? I would have expected to see him around the scene, to say the least.

“Have anyone seen or spoken to one of her neighbors, a man called Charles Thomas?” I asked the uniforms.

“That’s the guy who found the body,” a cop piped up.

“Oh my God,” I said.

“Wow,” Janet said at the same time.

“That’s the guy you talked to already?” Herb said.

“Yes. You can see his place from here. It’s in the curve of the cul-de-sac.”

“Well, he’s going to talk to you again, in fact he’s going to get the three of us.” Herb looked from Janet to me. “Are we going, or what?”

We were.

Chapter 26

Charles Thomas looked knocked back, to say the least, as he met us at the door. He was as well-turned-out as ever – in pressed jeans, a red and white striped oxford cloth shirt with a grey v-necked cashmere sweater over his shoulders. His dark hair was as smooth as patent leather, but he was pale, ghostly pale. He was hobbling badly. I knew a bad back when I saw one. Probably had to do with his right hand being held in the small of his back.

“I see you’re not feeling well,” Herb said and introduced himself.

“I’m afraid so.” Thomas nodded wearily. There were shadows under his eyes and an anxious expression on his face. “I’m afraid I did my back in this morning.” So, that was why he was walking like the oldest man in the world.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“No, no, please, don’t waste your sympathy, Detective Pimlott. I was rearranging the bookshelves in my office this afternoon and pulled when I should have pushed.” He blanched. “That did it. My department chair insisted I be taken over to the Medical Center. Not a pleasant experience. The back I mean, not the Med Center.”

“Wow,” Janet said. “I know about injuries like that. You’ll need physiotherapy to make sure that doesn’t turn into something permanent. There’s a great guy at the Med Center who works with athletes. I’ll see you get his name.”

“Oh thank you so much, Officer . . . Jansen, isn’t it?”

“Not a problem,” she beamed.

“I felt ridiculous,” he told us, shaking his head. “They gave me some pills and naturally I thought a scotch would help and that was pretty much all I remember.” We expressed our sympathy. “Woke up an hour or so ago, realized I hadn’t heard from Eve, went over there and . . . I found her,” he told us in a voice as wobbly as his walk. “I’ve never seen anything like that. Oh God, poor Eve. How frightened she must have been. And to leave her looking like that, to cut off her beautiful hair.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Herb said.

“Who’s doing this? Why?” Charles was in shock.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out.”

He shook his head. “I can’t believe this. First Ingrid, now poor Eve . . .” He sank into an overstuffed armchair upholstered in oaten-color linen and winced at the effort. Then he remembered us. “Please, please, sit down.”

Janet and I did so on a buttery brown leather sofa and Herb sank into an identical one opposite us. I assumed Charles had private money, a terrific salary, or he was very good at budgeting.

The contrast between Charles Thomas’s home and Ingrid Spoto’s was not lost on me. While there was nothing original about the minimally furnished living room this was something special – walls painted in soothing celadon, natural oak floors covered with silky Persian rugs, simply displayed pieces of modern art – the impact was of a unique spirit in residence. I reckoned this was a man who lived for effects not in any fashionable sense but because that was way he needed to live. Herb was soon prowling around, looking at this and that.

“Great stuff you have here,” he told Charles.

“Oh, thank you. Yes, well . . .” He looked at us. “What happens next? About Eve, I mean?”

“Could you tell me what were you doing over there this evening and what time it was?” I asked.

“I gave a statement to a policeman at the scene.”

“I realize that and thank you, but I need to get things in focus for myself.”

“What? Oh . . . yes, of course.” Charles was watching Herb nosing around, which seemed to make him uncomfortable. Then again, there was a lot of Herb and some of the pieces of sculpture looked relatively fragile – one big elbow in the wrong place and that would be that.

“These are cute,” Herb said now. On the small table by the wall under the stairwell were painted ceramic figurines standing about nine inches high: Chairman Mao and his infamous missus, perched in ceramic arm chairs side by side, he with an arm raised as if declaring a great thought – while Madame Mao transcribed whatever it was he was saying in a tiny, ceramic notebook.

Herb picked up Chairman Mao in one hand and the lady wife in the other. “These are great. Where did you get them?”

Charles Thomas looked distracted. “Thank you, they’re witty aren’t they? I found them in a flea market in Beijing and couldn’t resist. Of no great value, but a delight, nevertheless.”

“Solid, huh? Oh,” Herb held out the figure of Mao. “There’s a crack in the back.”

“Happened in the shipping from China,” Charles explained absently. Herb returned the Mao and the missus to their place on the table, as Charles asked me, “I’m so sorry. What do you need to know?”

“What time did you find the . . .” I stopped at the look of horror on his face. “Eve Bishop?” I concluded, more tactfully.

He swallowed hard. “Oh, just after ten. She told me that she would come over after grading some essays. She was a bit of a stay-at-home of an evening, but she felt safe just having to cross the close . . . As I told you, I woke up, was worried . . .” He stopped and tears came to his eyes. Charles continued, “We were going to have some green tea when she came.” I warned him even more. He struggled to compose himself and continued. “She was so upset about Ingrid, I wanted to keep her busy, not let her be on her own too much. When she didn’t arrive I called, but there was no answer. I knew she was there because the lights were on,” he finished, in a whisper.

“So you went there to check it out, right?”

“I called first, because, as you can tell, moving around is difficult for me, but yes, exactly. She didn’t answer the door and I have an extra key to her place – as she does to mine. I found her.” He put his head down. “Like that.” He looked up, anguished. “I called the police from *my* place right away.” He looked up. “I didn’t think I should touch anything at *her* place.”

“You were right.”

Charles shook his head. “If only I’d gone over there earlier, she might be alive now. When I think that just this afternoon I was talking about her so callously – .”

“Don’t blame yourself.” I sat beside him. God knows if anyone understood about any insensitivity toward Eve Bishop, I was that anyone. “You have nothing to blame yourself for.” I noticed his hands were trembling, badly. “Do you need to see a doctor? I think you might be in shock – .”

“No, no,” he said. “I am, but it’ll pass.” He tried smiling. “Perhaps a strong scotch will help.”

“That’s my prescription,” Herb agreed. He turned to Janet. “You have all of this?”

Janet showed him her palm pilot. “Yes, sir.”

Herb said, “Good.” He extended his hand to Charles Thomas. “We’ll call if we need anything else, but it all looks straightforward. Your part in this, that is to say. Thank you and believe me, we’re sorry for your loss. We’re going to leave a uniformed cop out front, to keep an eye on things.”

Charles stood and it was clearly an effort. “Two friends in almost as many days.” He started for the door. “What next, we have to wonder?”

None of us were up for that particular exercise. What one of us was up for, however, was a confrontation.

Herb was unhappy and this time it was the real thing.

“So, does *anyone* look good to you for this? Anybody at all?”

“No, afraid not.” We were standing in the parking lot outside Eve Bishop’s condo, watching the body being removed under Roger’s supervision. Herb was leaning against his car, a gigantic black Ford Cherokee that would be seeing service during the deer-hunting season in the fall. I had a Bambi mentality and was vocal in my objection to this local custom. Herb couldn’t have cared less.

The rain had cleared, but it was cold, the moon had done a runner. There did not seem to be a star visible in the sky and the wind was making the trees sound like a chorus of reproach over our ineffectual efforts. Herb joined that chorus.

“Another woman dead and we’re no closer to figuring anything out. What about the brother?”

“He’s out of the picture.”

“And that is because?” Herb’s large arms were folded across his impressive chest. I hated it when he acted the heavy. It brought out the mutinous schoolgirl in me.

I told him about Paul’s intentions to donate his share of Ingrid estate. “He would hardly drive four hours in a frenzy to kill his sister over her millions – then turn around and go back to Chicago so that he would look good by giving her money away.”

“Oh, yeah?” Herb said. “How do we know he was telling you the truth about his philanthropic urges and even more to the point, Sophie, when did he tell you this?”

I knew this would eventually be thrown back in my face. “This evening, actually.” I didn’t look at Herb, being engaged by a loose thread on the cuff of my jacket. “I thought one of the guys could run a check on him,” I added lamely.

“That hasn’t been done yet?” Herb shifted from one hip to the other. He stared down at a pair of enormous boots. He was kicking the toe of one with the heel of another. I took this as a sign his patience was running out.

So did Janet, who piped up: “I don’t mind. I can get on that now, if you want.”

“You do that,” Herb said without looking at her. He turned his attention back to me. “Just how close are you to this guy?”

That did it. “Herb, the man is not a suspect, he’s the brother of one of the victims. I’ve had a couple of meals with him. He’s told me a lot of useful things about Ingrid’s life – .”

“What?”

“She was out of control sexually. We already know there was bad

blood between her and one ex – over another who was on his way out. Charles Thomas indicated still another lover, possibly a woman, although he has no name. There’s probably someone else as well, if not more than one. Certainly the neighbor talked about an older man, wearing a baseball cap – .”

“Oh, only a few thousand of them in town.”

“Are you going to listen to me, or throw your weight around?”

Janet almost stopped breathing, but Herb just looked sulky and shut up.

I went on. “I think Eve Bishop knew something, or someone thought she did, about Ingrid’s murder, which is why she’s dead now. That we haven’t figured this very weird case out in three days and that’s only three,” I held up three fingers to make my point, “is hardly proof that Janet and I have been snoozing on the job, or that we have sponges between our ears. Whoever did this covered his or her ...”

“Her?” Herb looked interested, instead of threatening, for the first time.

“Why not? The mutilation, the deliberate gesture of humiliation in leaving her outside for everyone to see? Vindictiveness is often a part of the pattern when the killer is a female.”

Herb nodded. “Hit on the head from behind, throat cut from behind – no great strength needed there, just skill ...”

“Snuck up on Eve through the sliding door behind her, she was absorbed in her work, just the way Ingrid was. Sophie could have a point, Chief,” Janet now added, “It sounds right to me.”

Oh, phew, what a relief – Big Janet was on my side.

Herb thought for a minute. “How would a woman have got Ingrid out of the house?”

“The woman was a stick doll, weighed as much as a sparrow and how do we know what the killer’s build was? Could have dragged her out. There was a lot of blood on the stairs. It’s a stretch, but doable.” I got my keys out of my bag. “I don’t know who did it, Herb, I have to be honest...”

“Might I cut to the chase and ask what you are going to do next, since there’s no one running around saying ‘I did it!’ As I’ve pointed out before, bodies are piling up here.”

I took a deep breath and did my P.A.T.I.E.N.C.E. exercise, then continued as the quiet voice of reason. It was a stretch, but I managed. “I’m going after the female angle. I like the guy in the baseball cap, as well.”

Herb stared at me. “A guy in a baseball cap. Get real. I like the sex angle, if you must know. If she was playing partners off against each other and one of them got pissed off then it could have been hack and slash time. Passion can get anyone angry enough to make the kind of chaos this character is into.”

He looked thoughtful, then put his keys in his pocket.

“Yes, well we had thought of that – .”

“Well, think about it some more!” Herb raising his voice meant times were tough. “Get this geek and soon. The media will be having a feeding frenzy over this tomorrow and they’re going to look for someone to gnaw on and that’s me. See what forensics comes up with while you’re at it. You know something about baseball, don’t you?”

“Well enough.” I had seen *Fields of Dreams* twice.

“Good, then you’ll understand when I say that one more body makes three strikes.”

“Which means one more and I’m not on the case?”

“Yeah and I’ll hand it over to Beau Pesky.”

Janet looked horrified, but I knew a cheap bluff when I heard one.

“That would be throwing the case away, Herb. Beau Pesky can’t complete the *TV Guide* crossword. I know. I’ve seen him try. In pencil.”

Herb didn’t bother to disagree. “Okay, but I want butt kicked, Sophie, and I mean all butts, get my drift?”

“Yes,” he was right. “So I’m still in charge?”

“Yes, so act that way.” He turned to Janet, who looked relieved. “Janet, first thing check Paul Spoto’s financial status.” He turned, looking down his nose at me. “Men have been known to lie to women about such things.”

I deserved that.

Chapter 27

My phone rang as I was getting up at 7:00 to gray skies that looked as unhappy as I felt. My having lost my patience before pushing Eve Bishop into telling me whatever had been on *her* mind was now plaguing my mind. I'd been unprofessional in blowing her off just because she got on my nerves. While she might have had nothing of importance to tell me; conversely she might have saved her own life. The residual bad taste over this carelessness would take a while to fade away. The only positive thing was that Janet had said nothing to Herb. She had been loyal to her partner and that was money in the bank.

As if guilt over Eve was not enough of a burden, there were also my feelings for Paul. That I had them was not worth disputing, but what was to be done about them? I wanted to do the appropriate thing and draw a line under them until the investigation was over, but that was easier said than done.

A late night, another murder and Herb nipping at my backside like a bloodhound had taken their toll – I had slept fitfully, adding to my blues. I dreamt I was on one side of a lake of blood and trying to attract Gavin's attention, so that he could help me cross to his side, when Paul showed up. Within the next second though, both were gone. I had tossed and turned, my subconscious throwing up hanks of hair, leather hoods, cowboy hats, good haircuts and a collage of the faces of the characters, alive and dead, who had crossed my path over the last three days. I had an emotional overload. To compound the crime I had not had my necessary water intake because of a routine shot to hell, so I was worried about the effects of under-hydration. This time I would definitely take a sachet of electrolytes before setting out.

Now I answered the phone and of course, it was Herb. "I sat on Roger and the autopsy should be ready this afternoon. He wants to know when you're coming in and there's a Vera Ziegler who wants to talk to you."

I padded into the kitchen and put on the kettle. "Who's Vera Ziegler?"
"Vera was a friend of Ingrid's and, from the sound of it, more than that."

I caught on. "Charles Thomas's suspicions confirmed?" And more than

suspicions no doubt, but I wasn't going to waste time in such speculation.

"Could be. She's pissed off at not having been contacted by the officer in charge of the case. I said we did not know about her, so she said it was our business to know. Somehow that's my fault." He sounded aggrieved, so I guessed who ever Vera Ziegler was, she'd trampled Herb underfoot. Good for her. "She's in one hell of a temper about the way the case is being run, period," he added.

Oh, please: not a lecture on competence from yet another member of the public. Some things look so easy from the outside. No, *everything* looks easy from the outside. I struggled to the bathroom mirror. I looked like hell – my skin always reacts badly to stress and I was worried about constipation because that always made me spotty. I could only hope the lemon juice and hot water would do the trick. Of course, I'd missed my morning yoga for three days in a row. God, I hoped my muscles didn't seize up. "Okay, okay. Where do we find her?"

"She said she takes her morning run at eight on the U. track and she runs for an hour. She'll look for you in the bleachers."

Shit. "Is it as cold as it looks?"

"No, just your typical mid-Michigan spring day."

I decided to slip into my thermals.

"How's everything going, by the way?" I asked.

"Catch me on TV and you'll know."

Oh shit.

I turned on the shower to steam up the bathroom then went back into the kitchen. The kettle had come to a boil and as I busied myself with preparing my lemon drink, I turned on the TV. Kelli was telling the world with orgasmic excitement of the Leather Killer having struck again! Herb was on camera. He spoke without enthusiasm and to no point, admitting forensics had picked up neither a fingerprint, nor any useful DNA in either case.

Our lack of progress harvested a barrage of opinions from the man and woman on the street about the sad performance of the local police in the matter. Considering Herb's confidence-draining turn, I could understand the reasons behind what seemed like a universal condemnation of our abilities. I turned off the TV, declining to check out more of the same in the *West Rapids Standard*, a copy of which lay rolled up on my doorstep.

What would be even harder to live with was not having time for breakfast, a lapse that always played havoc with my glycemic levels later in the day.

It was nowhere near frigid in the bleachers at the outdoor track, but I was wrapped up like a baby in swaddling right down to an ugly wool hat. I was already uncomfortably warm. I watched a surprisingly large number of

masochists jogging around the six-lane track.

“Are you the cop on the Spoto case?” Someone roared. A woman bounded up the bleacher stairs. My worst fears were realized. A formidable six feet plus, Vera Ziegler, wearing a grey tracksuit, stood over me, muscled arms akimbo. I felt my heart fall, Establishing your authority is a struggle if you’re looking up at the person you want to push around.

“Vera Ziegler,” she said. “You on this case?” Her eyes were bright blue. She had a woollen headband pulled over short, dark hair and her expression was not going to light up a room.

“Yes, I’m Detective Sergeant Pimlott.” I put a firm stress on my title. I didn’t get up. Sitting gave me the right not to have to stand on tiptoe. “I need to know your relationship to the deceased, Ingrid Spoto, and why you contacted us.”

“We were lovers, what did you think? That we were in the same girl-scout troop?” This was delivered at a decibel level that had runners on the track turning to look. Oh, my, oh, my. Someone was very irritated with us: yet another case of transference. Which did not mean I was obligated to bear the brunt of her loss.

“It isn’t my job to assume and I’m sorry for your loss. I hope you’ll tell me what you know that might help us find who killed Ingrid.”

“Yeah, right, like that’s *my* job.”

Enough. “You called us, Ms Ziegler, we didn’t call you. So now I don’t mind assuming that you wanted us to know something that might help get a piece of murdering crap off the streets. If you have something to contribute, please do. Time is of the essence and I don’t like having mine wasted. Do we understand each other?”

Vera lost a bit of the attitude. I got a sullen look, but she calmed down a fraction and started doing stretching exercises, one long, long leg outstretched. “Ingrid was a great gal, but she had gender confusions.”

I was not surprised to hear that. “And these manifested themselves how?”

Vera shook her head. “Jesus Christ. She slept with guys even though she realized what a waste of time that is.”

Not a universally held opinion. “Could you just tell me how long you and the deceased – .”

“Do you mind not calling her that? Jesus how insensitive can you get?”

God, but I was weary of having my hands slapped over terminology. “I need to know how long you and Ingrid Spoto knew each other and, if you replaced someone in her life, might they have been angry enough to kill her?”

“Try that asshole Barnett Pazderka, if you want my advice. Mister

Macho never got over her dumping him.”

Another voice added to the chorus of Get Pazderka – oh, no, that’s right, one of those voices was gone. To say nothing of the fact that I was fed up with people telling me how to do my job, then sending me up blind alleys. I decided to put a stop to it. I was hungry and hot and it looked to me as if the rain were getting ready to start again. I stood and to Hell with Ziegler’s height margin.

“Ms Ziegler. We need to ascertain what real information, and I don’t mean wishful thinking, you can contribute, anything that might help us track down the killer, or killers of Ingrid Spoto and Eve Bishop – .”

“What?” Ziegler looked and sounded uncertain for the first time.

“What’s happened?”

“I take it you haven’t heard the news?”

“Well, I guess not – .”

“Eve Bishop was murdered in her home yesterday evening.”

“Shit, poor old thing.” Vera was shocked. “Does this have something to do with Ingrid’s death?” she asked accusingly.

“I don’t want to speculate at this time. Now, are you going to stop fulminating and tell us whatever you know? We can do that in comfort at Dodo’s Diner while we drink excellent cappuccinos, or we can go a few steps from there and drink bad coffee out of Styrofoam cups at the station house. Either way, I want the hostility quotient to be turned down way past simmer. It’s your call.”

She chewed on her lower lip, then agreed, albeit grudgingly. “Okay, I take your point. Yeah, let’s have the cappuccinos. Follow me.”

Well done. Sometimes you only have to appeal to people’s better side to get them to do what you want them to do. That, a badge and a gun will get you anything you ask for.

Chapter 28

A few minutes later we were squeezing into a banquette, ordering our cappuccinos. I shed several layers of sweaters, scarves and whatever, because of the overheated restaurant. Conveniently, Dodo's Diner *was* situated a few door down from the station house. The fittings and furnishings were the same age as the waitresses – which put them on the wrong side of fifty. The waitresses wore folded lace hankies in the breast pockets of their blue uniforms and the decor featured red naugahyde and tables made of an indestructible speckled gray laminate that belonged in the Smithsonian. There was always the fug of grease, coffee and too many men in uniforms. The food was old-fashionedly splendid.

Vera turned out to be not half bad. For one thing, she was a straight arrow, no doubt about that. Considering that the late Ingrid Spoto seemed to have been anything but straight, their mutual pull did support the adage that opposites attract.

While not conventionally pretty, Vera had a wide smile and a candid gaze. On screen Faye Dunaway could have done her justice in her *Network* phase. Vera was toned like a champ and I guessed there might be a Silver Spa connection. I was beginning to know Ingrid a little. Connecting one lover with another while neither – or much more fun – only *one* of them knew the real connection, struck me as something that might have excited her. She worked out with one, trained with the other, slept with both of them and neither was any the wiser. She got to pull the strings, which I assumed was the turn-on. Beyond the obvious, of course.

Seen without the sweatband Vera had a great haircut. God, where did these women go? Was I the only local out of the loop? I asked her about this and wrote the name Boris at Boris! in my notebook.

She lived, as it turned out, in the same neighborhood as I did and had done so since high school. For all her tough, urban posturing, Vera Ziegler was a hometown girl who'd either stuck around, or like Herb, proved you *could* come home again.

“Yeah, I know your place, beautiful,” she said now.

“Thanks.”

“Didn’t that belong to the Moreheads?”

“Yes.”

She looked at me. “Oh, wait a minute. Of course, you’re the English one who married Gavin – .”

“Yes.”

Vera took a swallow of her cappuccino. “He was in high school with my brother. Really sorry to hear what happened.”

I nodded but said nothing more. Time to get to Vera’s business and get away from mine.

“Where were you on Friday night and last night?”

“At work, lots of people saw me and what’s with the asking about last night?”

I ignored the latter question because it was my prerogative to do so. That’s part of the fun of being the police. “What is it you do, Vera?”

“Own a bar, just near Fern Meadows, Hello Gorgeous,” Vera supplied. I’d heard of it, of course. “And why Hello Gorgeous?”

Vera looked at me as if she couldn’t believe what I’d just said. “Barbra Streisand? Big with gays?”

I knew that. I wiped my brow as surreptitiously as I could. God, Dodo’s was getting steamy, literally and metaphorically.

“Started it four years ago, after working clubs on the West coast for years. Got to know the business, my dad left me some money, and the show was on the road.” She was pleased with herself and why not? I could have done without the belligerent delivery but I was beginning to think this was Vera’s style. The best defence is a good offence; being gay isn’t easy in small communities, even if you are over six feet tall and can take care of yourself. I also have to admit that too many law enforcement types are not as gracious as they could be with the sub-culture. Vera’s keeping up her defensive posturing until she figured out the lay of the land was not so surprising.

“Why West Rapids?” I asked.

She took a swallow of cappuccino. “Gap in the market. Closest decent one around was Detroit. I get a lot of the professional crowd, who look just like real people. We aren’t all queens and bull dykes.”

I refused to touch that one. “How did you meet Ingrid Spoto and when?”

“At Bon Appétit. François introduced us and we clicked. Ingrid was there one night with the one who got murdered as well – Eve Bishop.” Vera stared into her cup.

Was François part of the gay scene? That could explain his attitude on Saturday when I’d stopped by and he had been so interested in Ingrid’s death.

I reminded myself of my injunction to Vera – not to jump to assumptions. I reminded myself also that François' sex life was none of my business. "When was this?"

"Late autumn, maybe first or second week in October." So, we had another lover whose meeting Ingrid had been a watershed in her life, to say the least.

"Had you seen either Ingrid or Eve before?"

"Are you asking if they were lesbians?"

"Yes."

"Ingrid? She liked sex with anyone." Vera did not sound thrilled by that. "Eve, who knows? She sure had a crush on Ingrid."

"Was Eve Bishop attracted to the gay lifestyle?"

I got a laugh that sounded like a flock of geese flying overhead. "Oh, please! That old biddy didn't have a lifestyle. Talk about repressed."

I could not disagree with that assessment. "Were they close friends?"

"Yeah, and it was weird, I mean talk about birds of paradise hanging out with sparrows." She shook her head. "Ingrid knew she was beautiful. Mattered a whole lot to her." Vera was shaking her head. "Maybe she got off on the contrast between them. No, that's not fair. She *was* fond of Eve, for real." The look on her face was bleak.

"Did Eve know about you and Ingrid?"

Vera did her honking act again. "Are you crazy? We were a big, big secret."

"Why?"

Vera shook her head, as if she were being confronted by an idiot. "Because that was Ingrid's style."

In due time I would need to find out more about Vera's knowledge of Ingrid's pleasure in intrigue. "How would you characterize your affair with Ingrid?"

She leaned back, large hands with square-edged, unpolished nails flat on the table. I checked for any signs that her knuckles might have been connecting with something they shouldn't, like Ingrid's face, but no such luck. "We hit it off and I mean we hit it off big time. That girl would do anything, anywhere, anytime. No boundaries."

I'd heard that before in passing. "Were you very involved with her?"

Vera put her hands up, palms facing me. "Uh, uh. Don't get me wrong. It wasn't love, it just packed one hell of a wallop."

So far three people had made a point of letting me know just how casual their interest had been in Ingrid and if I were any judge, they were all lying to themselves as much as to me. So far, Lee Il Kwon, Barnett Pazderka and now Vera Ziegler could be counted in the growing litany of conquests

notched up by Ingrid Spoto and yet all three were in serious denial. I wouldn't be surprised if the tide threw up a couple more sad bastards, either. Had Ingrid Spoto been one of those damaged people whom no one wanted to admit to loving – because instinct told them she was incapable of returning their feelings in kind? Her brother seemed to think so.

It would be useful to confirm exactly what it was about Ingrid that triggered someone to dispatch her so brutally; time perhaps to forage, see what I unearthed. I leaned against the back of the booth and let fly.

“I agree Ingrid Spoto got off on pushing other people's buttons and that she knew her looks gave her almost instant access to their switches. We're all suckers for beauty and let our guard down with a crash if beckoned. Am I right so far?” Vera said nothing, but her eyes looked like twin slot machines, with all the little fruit icons lined up in a row. I was encouraged to go on.

“Ingrid raised the risk factor each and every time because she was without a moral compass with which to read the signs that she was going too far. I think Eve Bishop was caught in her slipstream somehow and now she's dead, too.”

“Is that a warning of some sort to watch *my* back?”

“Absolutely.”

Vera signalled to the server for a refill. “You?” I shook my head. Continuing, Vera concurred, “She had to be the winner. Anything she wanted and people gave it to her. You're right, beautiful people are used to that, you know?”

“It's a form of power,” I said.

“Spot on,” Vera said, but there was something in her tone of voice that gave her away: Ingrid's character had an appeal for Vera. Perhaps she didn't mind being in her power, in fact found it exciting, a turn on. Or, while this was true, could she nevertheless have resented that power at the same time? People have killed to get someone off their back and out of their head.

“I got dropped.” Vera sounded bitter. “‘Don't call me, I'll call you,’ as far as I could tell.” Vera was getting worked up again.

“Why? Did she tell you?”

“Bitch said she needed time for herself and her work. It wasn't me, it was her. The usual crap that people lay on someone when they're tired of them.” Vera was getting *very* worked up again.

And why had they been dropped? Because, I felt, there was someone new in the picture who was getting her off big time – that was why. Was this the time to tell Vera that Lee Il Kwon had a similar story to tell? Now there was a thought – did Vera know about Lee? Did Ingrid use sexual jealousy as a prod to keep things exciting and to keep the troops in line. Did I dare ask without a whip and a chair for protection? I could always throw a waitress in

front of me.

“Did you know a grad student of Ingrid’s called Lee Il Kwon?”

Vera’s second cappuccino arrived. “Sure, he was our personal trainer at Silver’s.”

As I expected; what a double dealer Ingrid Spoto had been. Time to get tough. “More than that, actually – with Lee, I mean.”

Vera stopped spooning cappuccino foam into her mouth. “What?”

“Well, according to him, they were lovers.”

“No!” Vera’s expression was the one usually worn by people who have just found out that the person they love has betrayed them. Sometimes I don’t like the things I have to do on the job just to get where I need to be. So many casualties and Vera Ziegler was one in too long a line. On the other hand she was alive, which was more than could be said for Eve Bishop – so no reason for me to get squeamish. Anyway, Vera didn’t strike me as the trusting type, so had she not suspected *something* was going on?

“He’s full of shit, no way,” she told me, but I knew bravado when I heard it.

“Neighbor saw him around her house at unsocial hours,” I said in a neutral tone of voice. “Confirms what he says about them getting it on. For the last few months.”

She was furious. “The neighbor’s full of shit as well. I never saw him there when I was watching the house – oh fuck.” Vera sat back, clearly disgusted with that slip of her tongue. I’d been right. She wasn’t the trusting type. Vera Ziegler must have spent quite a few days and nights parked near Ingrid’s house, watching the comings and goings of the competition.

“When did you start playing I spy?” That seemed a more judicious way of phrasing what she had been up to than calling her a stalker to her face; a lawsuit by a minority litigant was not what we needed and she was irate enough and hurting enough to be reckless. We all pick our ways of mourning, God knows.

She tried shrivelling my bowels with a nasty look but gave up before I could give her points in the Pro column for tenacity. “Oh fuck it. About a month ago, just after I got shoved to one side. I’ll tell you one thing. There was someone else and recently, too. It wasn’t Lee, though.”

“Do you know who he was?”

She sat back. “No. Tall, thin, older maybe. Hard to tell.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Something about the way he carried himself. Always had a baseball cap pulled down over his face.”

Yes, Geraldine had told me about this man. “What kind of car?”

“None.”

“Hmm. “So you don’t know how he got there?”

“Walked? Flew there on the wings of love? Who cares?” Vera snarled.

“Reckon he lived in the neighborhood?”

“Or parked nearby, maybe? How the fuck would I know?” She was clearly irritated just being reminded of the competition, and a man at that, whom, she suspected, had succeeded her in Ingrid’s affections. Well, her bed at any rate.

“What kind of times did he show up and how often?”

“Who knows? Who cares?” She did, of course, but now Vera called the server. “The check’s on you,” she told me truculently. “Wouldn’t want you to think I was into bribes.”

I was fed up with her big mouth. “Let’s try again. What kind of times did he show and how often?”

“Oh please!” I’d won that round, though, I could tell from the look on her face. “I saw him three or four times and it was in the late afternoon, early evening, mostly weekdays. Don’t know much about the evenings because I’m at the club.”

“Did you speak to her about this man?”

“No.”

The hell she hadn’t. Her “No” came out too quickly and her eyes slid to the left. This is a sign that the person with such eye action is lying. I heard that from an expert on body language on Ricki Lake and I never forgot it. Anyway, I understand women, whatever their sexual preferences, because I am one. I know how we tick when it comes to love affairs. I understand our need to exhaust ourselves wringing the meaning out of every word, every gesture. While men will surrender their thumbnails to avoid confrontation, women thrive on it. Closure is a process pursued by women, not men. *They* would just walk away. We’re the ones who want the last word. I could only imagine how aggressive such a meeting between two women must have been. Subtlety was not Vera’s strong suit and the Ingrid Spoto I had heard about was not one to shrink from conflict, either.

I had one last question. “Did she take drugs?” I didn’t want to chase up the baseball cap to find he wasn’t a secret lover and the answer to my prayers, but a student, dealing in order to hustle up the money for tuition.

Vera shrugged. “Some dope.”

“Where’d she get it?” The check came and I paid it, keeping the receipt.

“Oh, duh.” Vera stood. “Like I’m going to tell a cop that? How dumb do I look? Oh fuck it. She got it from me. We liked the effect at certain times, if you catch my drift.” She started to leave, then came back and leaned over the table. “Your gun is showing, Sergeant. Very sexy.”

Gavin had told me the same thing more than once and we'd worked through a couple of fantasies with him as the perp. She waited long enough for me to blush and pull my jacket further over my holster, then strode off and out of the restaurant, letting the glass door slam behind her.

I made a check in her Con column and gave myself one as well for showing my embarrassment.

I remained in my seat at Dodo's Diner and once again I thought I could just picture the scene.

At least it wasn't cold, just a bit nippy and finally it was getting dark, so the street was quiet. Optimum conditions for sitting around and spying on someone, Vera would have figured. Thank God she had a sense of humor, otherwise the irony of loving Ingrid Spoto would have driven her crazy. Vera Ziegler, who always called the tune was now dancing to someone else's – and on quicksand at that.

Dusk was setting in. Vera sipped her Starbucks *latte*, then stopped. Here he was, as he usually was on a weekday. A tall figure wearing that shit baseball cap and so furtive he had to be someone else's husband. All she cared about was that this bozo was getting what was hers.

He'd be there for an hour – Jesus what was with this guy? Was he on his dinner break? She had tried following him the week before, but it was impossible to drive at cruising speed on a suburban street – that woman messing around with a lot of daffodils next door had called out to ask if she was looking for an address. That sent Vera roaring on her way.

She sat now, waiting, coming to a boil, hands with whitening knuckles clinging to the steering wheel. Today was the day. When baseball cap left she would tackle that bitch. Straighten her out. Vera Ziegler shared no one. It was exclusivity or Ingrid would be history.

Who was she kidding?

Just under an hour later the door opened and a beam of light flowed from the house. Vera caught a glimpse of Ingrid's white bathrobe, then the guy was out of there, hurrying down the walkway which, she noted to her disgust, needed weeding. The whole yard needed a facelift as far as Vera was concerned, but she figured Ingrid would hire some kid to clear the dead leaves left over from the winter and toss some grass seed around and that would be that.

Too busy fucking around to be house-proud, aren't you baby?

Vera got out of the car. She expected Ingrid to answer the door quickly, assuming her lover was back for some reason. What Vera wasn't expecting was the robe to fall open and that Ingrid would look like the leather queen of West Rapids. And what was with the nipples?

"Shit, what are you into?" She pushed Ingrid into the house, unable to

take her eyes off. Ingrid looked as sexy as she ever had. *I'm not into this kind of shit*, Vera told herself weakly as she turned away and stalked into the living room. "Who's the guy, Ingrid? Who is he?"

"This is none of your business, Vera." Ingrid slammed the door behind her and marched into the living room. Vera was stunned as she watched the love of her life sit on the sofa, crossing her long legs in their stiletto heeled thigh high boots, one foot swinging back and forth. Vera could not take her eyes off Ingrid's leather-clad body, off her breasts. She swallowed hard, then felt a flash of lust, succeeded by blind jealous rage.

"Who's the guy? I want to know who he is!"

"At the risk of repeating myself, this is none of your business." Ingrid told her. "Want a glass of wine?" She got up and walked toward the kitchen.

Vera followed. "I thought you were through with guys –."

"No, you wanted me to be through with guys." Ingrid opened the fridge. "Sancerre okay?"

Vera slammed her against the refrigerator door. She grabbed Ingrid's wrists and pinned them above her head. "You bitch, you told me you wanted me out of the way because of your *job*, but you fucking lied."

Ingrid leaned forward and kissed Vera, a long exploration of tongue on tongue, then pulled back. "I wanted to try it rough and found someone else who was into the same thing."

"Where does that leave me?" Vera always saw Ingrid as someone who took what she wanted when she wanted it, then discarded who or what, as she became bored. The only bond she understood was that of sensation fulfilled. "Guess I was too nice, should have been a lot tougher."

"You are a bit on the straight side in the sack," Ingrid smiled. She looked as beautiful as she ever had in the short time Vera had known her.

"I'm not into S&M." Even as she said it, she knew she would be – if Ingrid asked.

Ingrid smiled. She looked so ravishing that Vera's heart almost stopped. "If you haven't tried it, don't knock it."

"Who are you? Christ just how damaged are you?" Vera asked, wanting Ingrid so badly she could barely breathe. "Where's the center of you?"

"Find it," Ingrid suggested. "It's there for you if you want it."

Vera filled her nostrils with the smell of Ingrid, the scent of sex. She was getting off on knowing the person she loved had been with someone else and this terrified her. Vera Ziegler had relinquished power over herself to someone who valued her so little, a person so self-absorbed it was impossible for her to pay back that gift of love with the same currency. Yet Vera had never felt as excited as she felt now. As dirty and as hot as she had ever felt in her life. She knew exactly what she wanted now and knew Ingrid would give it

to her. If she had to share Ingrid, she would. If she had to, she would lick the heels of those boots.

Vera stood back. “Whose husband is he?”

Ingrid smiled. “Someone who wouldn’t like him doing what he’s doing, because it looks so, so bad. Probably kick me round the block if she knew.”

At that moment Vera, I would have guessed, could only hope so.

Chapter 29

After paying the check, I went back to the office.

“I hate this gun, hate wearing it,” I told Herb through gritted teeth. I had never worn a gun in the London Met; it wasn’t even legal to do so unless you were in the Special Response Unit. Now I dragged a regulation Sig Sauer 8mm around with me, ruining the line of my clothes. Some of the time I rebelled and left it in my bag. I’d only had to use my gun once, but I did no greater damage than blowing away a pot of geraniums. Of course, this would be the day that I’d even worn the holster.

“What’s all this about?”

“Nothing. Just that woman, God, a pain in the ass.”

“What do you think? Do you like Vera Ziegler for it?”

I shrugged. “She’s a big, strong woman, easy for her to carry a body outside and she’s a stalker to boot. If she had been sore enough she might have seen red and then wham, bam, baby there goes your face.”

“Stalker?”

I told him the full story, leaving out the part about how sexy the gun made me look. “She has an alibi but saying she was around a busy club doesn’t mean she really was. Also, why kill Eve Bishop?”

“Because she knew something, or someone thought she did, which does not exonerate Vera Ziegler in my book. I want to know more about Pazderka’s alibi, as well. Get the Ann Arbor police on that one.”

“Pazderka’s playing coy.”

“Who gives a shit? I have two dead bodies and no one is putting up their hand to either.”

“We must find the mystery man with the baseball cap – .”

“Well, someone knows who he is. Maybe if we push Lee and that creep Barnett a little harder,” Herb added.

The sun slithered behind a cloud, even as my spirits did, now that I considered how little we still had to go on. I didn’t see how we had advanced at all from day one, and, to make things worse, we had another victim. All we had were random facts, a cast of characters and no one who looked like a

killer.

“Where to now?” Herb wanted to know, “Pazderka again, maybe. Also check and see if that Thomas guy remembers more this morning. Something he heard, maybe.”

Before I got a chance to answer, my cell phone rang. It was Paul, who wanted to go to his sister’s house. All things being equal, I wasn’t proud of the way I had perked up the second I heard his voice. He wanted to know who had the keys and would I be willing join him there? “Bit heavy on my own, you know what I mean?”

I did indeed. “I’ll get the keys from the station house and meet you there at noon, okay?”

It was, and we both hung up.

“Paul Spoto wants to get into his sister’s house and he needs the keys. I thought I’d take a look around at the same time.” I hoped I sounded as businesslike as I wanted to. “You never know, he might spot something and not realize its significance to the case. He needs to start clearing things out before he leaves on Friday.”

“How come?”

“Taking his sister’s body back to Chicago for burial. That should be a relief for you.”

“Just remember what I told you. He could still be a suspect.”

Crap, I thought, but I kept that to myself. I gave Herb a point in the Con column though, and why not?

Before seeing Paul, I wanted to go home and shed the several layers of ugly stuff I’d worn to protect myself on the bleachers, to say nothing of taking a shower. I was feeling very flushed, worryingly so.

Could I have had a hot flash? Of course, I had been rather overdressed, but there was always pre-menopause to think about, although my gynecologist had been very reassuring when I voiced my concerns at my last checkup. I remembered reading that women in the Mediterranean have an easier time because their diet is high in isoflavones. I wished I liked lentils more.

I drove home thinking about what to wear for my rendezvous with Paul. No, no, no, it wasn’t a rendezvous. I was just assisting the next of kin.

I decided on a dark blue pants suit. It had a tiny pinstripe in it that I fancied gave me height. I hung on to that fantasy by wearing high-heeled boots, ones that I didn’t usually wear during working hours, because they pinched my little toes. After an hour of wearing them I was willing to tell the secrets of my country to get them off my feet. Still, some sacrifices are worth making. I grabbed my bag from the dining table where it rested on that pesky employment contract. Would I stay as Gavin’s ghost wanted me to, or would I listen to my family and return home? I would wrestle with that issue when my

head could get around it. My heart had a way to go, as well.

On the way I stopped at Kroger's in Traverse Mall to pick up some boxes. Paul was waiting for me, leaning against his car. He had rented a late model Oldsmobile in a sickly shade of blue. He was wearing the raincoat, over dark brown, wide wale cords and a gray crew neck sweater with the collar of a white shirt showing.

Besides clocking Paul Spoto's sartorial style, my attention was drawn toward a steady trail of people hanging out on the street, muttering to one another and pointing toward the house. Cars were driving by and slowing down as they passed, the passengers straining to get a better look. The scene was a mini-version of what had gone on outside the house of Nicole Simpson: the curious, the foolish and the ghoulish getting a cheap thrill. I called the station and told them to get a uniformed cop out to the house again and not to spare the sirens.

I greeted Paul, commiserated with him over the bottom feeders outside, telling him I had requested a uniform.

"Thank you. I hate the gawkers, I really do. Probably trying to see if there is any blood."

"No probably about it, I'm afraid." I told him about the boxes. "Don't want to hang around here any longer than you have to."

"Yes, thank you for thinking of that," he said as we walked up to the house, both quiet, apprehensive for different reasons. The sun elbowed the clouds out of the way. "Nice day."

"Sun's welcome," I agreed. The yellow crime scene tape across the door still fluttered in the wind. "Spring looks set to be sprung," I said for want of anything else, as I struggled with the lock.

"Let's hope," Paul replied just as lamely, putting his hand on the small of my back. It felt far too good.

A fluttering curtain next door caught my eye, but I flashed my badge and that was that. As we were walking in the house, Roger called on my cell phone. "You must excuse me. It's the Medical Examiner," I told Paul.

We walked into Ingrid's depressing living room, me with the phone at my ear.

"So, Roger, what do you have for me?"

"Nothing sexual. Ever. I didn't know virgins came this old. Well, nuns."

"Roger, Roger, Roger," I sighed. "No mysteries about the cause of death?"

"Nope, throat cut clean as a whistle."

"Roger, please." I put some distance between Paul and myself. "Any way of telling if the thing with the hair . . .?" I sighed.

“The hair? Postmortem,” Roger said quickly, knowing what I was after. “Got her from behind as I told you and it was sayonara baby.”

“Why don’t you try publishing the wit of Roger Hendrickson?” I hung up before having to put up with any more of the same, but I was relieved nevertheless that Eve hadn’t been conscious of being shorn.

Paul was walking around the living room and the dining room. “Look at this place. God and it’s such a fine house.” He shook his head. “She was always the same. Her room at home was so unfinished, uncared for. Not in the sense that it was dirty or untidy, just unloved.”

Exactly the term I had used. “Why do you think she chose such a big, expensive house when it was clear she was so disinterested in her living space?”

“She was a single woman with a large inheritance. Needed all the tax breaks she could get.”

“She discussed this with you?”

“Yes, yes, she did.” He looked uncomfortable about this.

“When?”

“The last time we met.” He sounded even more uncomfortable than he looked. “It’s cold in here.”

“Yes.”

Without looking at me he asked: “Can I see where it happened?”

I nodded. This was always a bad moment. It’s one thing to be told someone you know has been murdered, but seeing the mess that has been made killing that someone makes for a cruel occasion. Paul though, was quite controlled. He saw the blood spatter and the stains and the mess but he stayed calm, leaning with one hand on the back of the chair at her desk.

“I need to go through the desk and filing cabinets, don’t I?”

I nodded. “Yes, we’ll box them. Don’t stay here for any longer than you have to. It’ll get to you.”

He checked out the pattern of dust on the desk. “Where’s her computer?”

“Taken as evidence.”

He looked wretched. I wanted to comfort him, but it was best if I kept my hands to myself. It was a tough call, though. I stayed silent as he headed for the bedroom.

I gave him a moment or two and followed. The closet doors and bureau drawers had been left open. Paul was staring at the leather hood in his hand. He turned and looked at me. The anguish in his face was almost too much for me.

“She was into S&M?”

I nodded. He let the hood drop out of his hand and back into the

drawer, then walked out of the room. He leaned against the wall on the landing, his hands behind him.

“I knew she was outside the boundaries, I just didn’t know how far. Whoever killed her left her out in the open for everyone to see?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.” I sighed. God, there were times when I wished I was a computer technician, or a hairdresser. Anything, rather than having to tell people things they didn’t want to hear about people they’d cared about.

“How do you do this work?” It was an echo of my own thoughts.

“Well, this doesn’t happen often.” I started downstairs and he followed. “We don’t have many homicides here, that is of the premeditated sort. I mean most of them are straightforward – domestic things that went too far, people who’ve had too much to drink and try to rearrange one another’s body parts. In fact this is the first case of this type I’ve dealt with – in West Rapids, that is.”

“You were on the police force in London?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think of going back?”

Endlessly. “Oh, at times. I have an investment here, though.”

“In what?”

Gavin, the memory of him. “I have my house.”

“Which is beautiful.”

“Yes and I like my work.” All true and yet . . . I walked to the front door. It was time to change the subject. “Are you really shocked? By what you’ve found here?”

He shook his head and I was reminded of just how attractive that head was. If he ran a hand through that floppy hair, I was not sure what I would do – I felt as if I were betraying Gavin in being so attracted to Paul. Perhaps I should write to an agony aunt and sign my letter “Dazed and Confused.” “No. I told you, Ingrid had no limits.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard from several quarters.” There was something he wasn’t telling me. I knew it as surely as I knew his sister had too complicated a sex life and that I had to solve this case. It was something that he had to tell me under his own steam. Timing is everything.

“I’m going to get those boxes,” I told him.

“Thank you. I think I’ll pack up the stuff in her files, go through them just in case there’s something I need for settling the estate. I’ll destroy the leather and other stuff.”

I had to tell Paul that they were evidence until the DA’s office said they weren’t.

“When they’re released then.” His voice was hard, distant. “Arrange a power of attorney through her lawyer. I’m never stepping foot in this house

again. I'll sell the place as soon as possible. It gives me the creeps."

Yes, well, properties that are the scene of a murder can cause that reaction and not only on the part of relatives of the deceased, but on future buyers as well. However, this wasn't the time to share my theories of what affects the resale value of residential property.

Paul started upstairs and I was halfway out of the door when I stopped, remembering Herb's instructions. "Paul?"

He turned. "Yes?"

"This is just a formality of course, but where were you when Ingrid died?"

From the way he took a beat to answer I knew I wouldn't like what I was about to hear.

I was right.

Chapter 30

He cleared his throat. “I was with someone until about 9:00 on Saturday morning. I can give you her name.”

I took a deep breath. “Yes, you need to do that.”

Well Herb would be happy, but I awarded the boss points in the Con column for making me ask.

I helped Paul with his chores as quickly as we could load the boxes with Ingrid’s stuff. The shade of her dominated and we were conscious of being intruders –without having to say a word to one another about it. It felt so unsavory to be rifling through her possessions. The faint scent of her was everywhere.

We made polite noises, both feeling awkward as hell. The professional conflict loomed like Godzilla. It hadn’t helped a burgeoning relationship for Party A to ask a question that was highly personal of Party B, who gave a response that knocked the stuffing out of Party A.

We parted politely without setting up a meeting for the future, then walked off to our mutual cares. The sun had taken off for Florida and the rain hurtling down completed the unhappy tableau. The uniformed cop had not arrived, but next door Geraldine was keeping an eye on things for us in her unofficial capacity as snoop.

I waved to her and left it at that.

There was not a lot of joy on the work front, either. Rome burned and we did not have a thimbleful of water to throw on the fire. My colleagues had discovered nothing that advanced the investigation, but then again, Dodo’s Diner is not the best place to gather evidence. I couldn’t blame them, with the media carrying on as if Jack the Ripper was loose again with the police looking like nothing but dopes on the march. Disheartening to say the least. We had almost nothing of any forensic interest and a bunch of purported suspects who appeared to have been busy, busy, busy while both victims were being dispatched – and they could prove it in triplicate.

The true state of affairs was that we had never moved off square one to any degree that mattered. We had information without insight – a clutch

of mismatched facts and nothing more. Now I sat moodily at my desk, being careful not to let Herb catch sight of my twiddling thumbs by using same to go through Ingrid's financial files. They told me only that the lady paid her bills on time and in full. I didn't have a clue, literally. I was beginning to think that the killer was more likely to die of old age than be apprehended by us.

Then lady luck – speaking metaphorically – did her thing.

Janet strode into the office, punching the air with her left hand and yelling: “Yes, yes, yes!”

Herb was out of his office like a shot. “This had better make my day.”

From Janet's triumphant posture I guessed it would, but I crossed my fingers anyway.

“She had a computer file labelled Household Purchases.”

“If you say so.”

“Household Purchases, my booty. It was in code.”

Oh. My. God. I had actually told myself that something like this would make my day the first time we had been in her house.

“And I broke Ingrid Spoto's code,” Janet told us, grinning from ear to ear. That is to say, Janet had done so with her friend Revlon's help.

“You have a friend called *Revlon*?”

She nodded, grinning. “On the team with me, a gal from Detroit. Mom was a model – hey, you'll be interested in this, Detective Pimlott, she was an extra in a Fellini movie. Was on a shoot for a commercial in Rome – .”

“Stop it,” Herb told her.

“Not a problem. Anyway, Revlon has this thing about the Enigma Code, know what I mean?” I did. God knows, I'd seen it cracked in enough movies. That was the code the Germans fooled the world with in World War II – until a bunch of nerds invented a decoder. A bunch of English nerds, I should add. They weren't called nerds then of course. They were called “boffins” but it meant the same thing. Indifferent taste in clothes and food and talking to them was hard going.

“So, what did you find out?” Herb said. He sat in the chair opposite my desk, legs stretched out, gigantic hands linked across his taut stomach.

Janet put the laptop on my desk. “Need to boot this up. I bet you want to know about code breaking?” She sounded thrilled with herself.

I gave the rug a tug from under her great big feet. “There needs to be a key that sets the alphabetical and numerical values, am I right?” I said, “An arbitrarily designated value to each letter of the alphabet?”

Janet looked deflated but only slightly and Herb looked irritated. “If you knew that, why didn't *you* figure out the damn code?”

I shook my head. “I know the theory. Doesn't mean I know how to put the theory into practice. I would get bogged down by permutations – of which

there are millions.” I turned to Janet. “So?”

Janet wrote something down and handed it to me. I studied it. “KRNOGG. Well, this is a wild guess, but I’d say it’s my name.”

“How’d you do that?” Janet asked and Herb grinned.

“It’s the double G. Probably stands for the double T in Pimlott.”

I threw Janet a bone. She’d done wonderfully. “I still don’t get it though, but thank God you did.” I said. I did too. Really.

“You split the alphabet and work forwards then backwards. A becomes Z and so on until you get to M and N which are reversed.”

I nodded. “That’s the kind of stuff we used to do in school for secret clubs and things.”

Janet agreed. “Yeah, it’s not that complex, but dizzying enough that no one would pick up on what was going on immediately.” She paused for a well-earned dramatic moment. “Interesting household purchases that’s for sure. The lady was playing with fire.”

I crossed my fingers and I could have sworn Herb was holding his breath.

Janet pulled up the file. We crowded behind her, adjusting the angle of our vision to read off the screen. “Ingrid Spoto was into digging the dirt on her nearest and dearest. What a hobby.”

“Specifics?” I asked.

Janet pointed at the screen. “Barnett Pazderka slept with a fifteen-year-old.” I bet he told her in the throes of passion and she enjoyed twisting the knife later. Maybe the shouting outside her house had less to do with romance than with her knowing something he didn’t want her knowing.”

“Hmm, I like it.” What a woman Ingrid had been – speaking only in terms of gender, of course. Ingrid’s behavior had put her in a generic category all her own. “What else?”

“Oh, she left no rock unturned – a whole lot of stuff with the same smell. Face it, she liked having dirt on her lovers. Lee Il Kwon serviced some guys for cash. Vera was gangbanged in high school.”

Janet was quiet in a way that led me to believe that something was up.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“Something that stands out only because it concerns someone who wasn’t a lover. She scrolled down the screen and a name caught my eye.

Oh, hell, now I knew something about someone I didn’t want to know.

Dredging through past crimes and misdemeanours is a dirty job, but proverbially, someone has to do it. Now I would have to prod and push a woman who seemed like a regular type, and about something very private. As demoralizing a prospect as showing a brother the unappetizing side of a sister’s life, or having to ask that same man for an alibi. You always ended up

looking and feeling like not so nice a person.

Herb was not suffering any of the pangs with which I wrestled.

“Now we’re looking at a motive. Get on this. Now we’re getting somewhere. Someone knows a whole lot more than they’re telling.”

I had suspected that but, up until now, I had not connected the dots.

Janet was on her feet.

“I think I should do this on my own,” I said gently.

She nodded, but I could tell she was disappointed. “This was wonderful work, Janet. You may have gone a long way to breaking this case.”

She nodded. “Not a problem.”

For the first time I was not annoyed by that comeback. I walked out to gusts of rain, driven by the wind from hell.

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