



If Hooks Could Kill

A CROCHET MYSTERY

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IF HOOKS COULD KILL

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BETTY HECHTMAN



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ALWAYS LEARNING

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CHAPTER 1

I have done a lot of embarrassing things, but this morning I topped even myself. . . .

I watched as the detective walked out of the small blue stucco house down the street from my best friend Dinah Lyons's house. Everything about him gave off the vibe of somebody who'd been up all night chasing down evidence. His face featured a day-old beard, his tie was pulled loose from the collar of his pale blue dress shirt, and he gave out a weary sigh as he sauntered down the three steps to the front walk and moved toward the black Crown Victoria parked at the curb.

He was almost to the street when a man in a hooded sweatshirt with a baseball cap on top of his hood darted out from behind a large red oleander bush. The morning sun glinted off the gun in his hand. As he raised his arm and took aim, something triggered in my mind, really someone, named Barry Greenberg. I'd given up trying to find the right title for Barry. It was enough to say he was my ex-boyfriend, he was a homicide detective and he'd recently been shot. I wasn't about to let that happen to someone else.

Without a second of hesitation, I rushed up behind the guy with the gun. If all the adrenaline hadn't been pumping I never would have had the force to knock him over. And maybe I would have noticed a few things like the detective's shirt had no wrinkles. And he was definitely wearing makeup. And there were cameras, lights and lots of people standing around.

"Cut," a tall man in black jeans and a loose taupe-colored tee shirt yelled as he rushed onto the grass. He glared at me and waved to the uniformed officer hanging by the curb. "Get her out of here," he muttered, pointing to me as I rolled off the presumed assailant. The man I had tackled got up and dusted himself off, and the throng of onlookers surrounded me as I got back on my feet. But they parted for the officer who came through the crowd, linked his arm with mine, and pulled me to the edge of the sidewalk.

"Pink, what have you done now?" Adele Abrams rushed up behind me as Dinah Lyons started explaining to all who would listen why I had done what I'd done. No, this wasn't some kind of bad dream, though at the moment I was wishing it was and hoping I'd wake up twisted in the sheets of my own bed. I admit to often finding myself in trouble, but usually it's for something real. This was a make-believe.

It was summer in the San Fernando Valley and the area had become a back lot for TV and film productions. Caravans of white trucks were on streets all over the Valley. Street corners had yellow signs with arrows to direct the cast and crew to the location. They always disguised the real name of the production with some cryptic phrase, so no one would have guessed by the sign on Ventura Boulevard that the area around Dinah's house had become the set for *L.A. 911*.

If this were a TV show or movie, it would freeze-frame right now. Then I'd step forward and explain that my name was Molly Pink and that after my husband Charlie died, I'd started a whole new chapter in my life that included getting a job as the event coordinator at the bookstore Shedd & Royal Books and More, which was just up the street from all this activity. I might mention that I was also in charge of the yarn department we had recently added.

You might wonder about a yarn department in a bookstore. The yarn department was added because the local crochet group, the Tarzana Hookers, met at the bookstore and quite frankly the owners, Mr. Shedd and Mr. Royal, were looking for more revenue streams. I think that's the right term. Actually,

with a crafting table and available yarn, the Hookers didn't just meet at the bookstore—they almost lived there. Mrs. Shedd liked to joke that if we had cots, the group would probably sleep there, too.

Adele Abrams, the person who just called me Pink, worked at the bookstore, too. There was a little tension between us. She thought she should have been promoted to event coordinator instead of Mrs. Shedd hiring me. As a consolation prize, she had been given the children's department to oversee. Adele didn't really like kids, though she did like to dress up in costumes for story time.

Then, when the yarn department was added, Adele thought she should be in charge of it. Adele, Dinah and I were all part of the crochet group, and no one would dispute that Adele was far superior with a hook, but she had this small problem. All of the Tarzana Hookers thought crochet was the best of the fiber arts, but Adele took it a step further. If you so much as showed her a knitting needle she would throw a hissy fit. Personally, while I know she had a real reason for being nuts about knitting (she'd had a bad stepmother who was a needle head, as Adele called her), I thought it was time she accepted a world where hooks and needles could get along.

Having a needle hater running a yarn department wasn't a good idea—not if you wanted a knitter business. So, even though I was somewhat of a novice at crochet, Mrs. Shedd wanted me to handle the yarn department.

But none of that explained what I was doing hanging out at a TV shoot. Actually it wasn't planned. Adele, Dinah and I were on our way to one of the newer Hooker's houses to pick up some crochet stuff. Her house was around the corner from Dinah's and we'd had to pass the caravan of trucks and trailers to get there. Even though seeing a set on the street wasn't new, I still found it exciting. It was fun to see what they'd done to the front of the modest stucco house they were using for a location. They'd carted in trees and bushes and arranged them so that the other houses on the block weren't visible and so you couldn't see the open-air tent set up down the street that was acting as a dining room for the cast and crew. A catering truck was parked in the street and the smell of the barbecue wafted down the block.

This is where the freeze frame would end and the action would pick up again. The uniform who grabbed my arm had gotten me to the edge of the crowd. Adele followed close behind. "Pink, you better thank my boyfriend Eric for saving your skin." Now that we'd reached the sidelines, Eric let go and apologized if he'd been too rough.

"It was fine," I said to the barrel-chested man who towered over me. Eric Humphries was an LAPD motor officer and was using his vacation time to work security on the production. In case there was any doubt, he was also Adele's boyfriend. "Thanks for saving me from the angry mob," I said looking back at the crew as they tried to set up the shot again. Adele glanced around, saw that no one was watching and touched Eric's arm in a possessive manner. He responded by beaming a big smile her way. It was embarrassing to watch them making googie eyes at each other. But at least this time the romance wasn't all in Adele's imagination.

They made an unusual pair. Adele, with her wild clothes and say whatever attitude, was a sharp contrast to the very proper and polite motor officer. He rode his motorcycle with ramrod straight posture and took his security work at the set very seriously. "Cutchykins," he said, winking at her. "I'm glad you stopped by. You look lovely as always."

My eyes started to roll on their own. Didn't the man have eyes? Adele was wearing a one shoulder sundress made out of multicolored granny squares with a red crocheted flounce at the bottom. She looked like she was wearing an afghan. And Adele had crocheted herself a big brimmed cream-colored hat. It had turned out to be a little too floppy in the brim area, and kept dipping down and cutting off her line of sight.

Dinah rejoined us and Eric went back to his post. "Don't worry, I took care of everything," she said. I had no doubt she had. Dinah was a community college English instructor and her specialty was

freshman English. She knew how to take charge of an unruly group, no matter who they were. I figured she'd done the same with the production group. "As soon as I explained about your connection to Barry and how he was a homicide detective, and that he'd been shot, and that you were still so sensitive to the whole thing that you'd lost your mind temporarily, they all understood. That Nora Adams was particularly nice," she said sending back a glance to the seasoned, tall, dark-haired actor who played the homicide detective I'd tried to save. "He even offered to talk to you and help you with 'this difficult time,' as he put it. And the guy who played the shooter seemed to take it as some kind of compliment to his acting ability."

"You said I lost my mind?" I said, skipping over everything else she'd said. "Great, now they think I'm crazy." Normally I might not care what strangers thought of me, but I was probably going to see these people again. The bookstore was just up the street and even though the production was self-contained, providing meals and snacks, the cast and crew still drifted up to the bookstore to hang out, buy books, get coffee drinks and scoop up our barista's great cookies.

"We better go," I said. "We've still got to pick up Kelly's crochet items."

"We don't all have to go," Adele said, reminding us that she was more or less in charge of the crochet group. It was more in her mind and less in reality. CeeCee Collins was technically the leader but her acting career was so busy right now it was hard for her to handle the group as well. So Adele had jumped in as de facto leader.

"Well, none of us really has to go," I said. "Kelly doesn't know we're coming and we can just wait until she comes to one of our meetings."

Adele snorted. "Maybe you can wait, Pink, but CeeCee and I have our doubts about Kelly's crochet ability. She keeps saying she's going to come to a meeting and she keeps saying she's going to make things for our booth at the Tarzana fair, but I haven't seen anything to make me believe it's true."

"What about the scarf she showed us that she was making?" I said.

"Okay, so she can make a scarf, and so she came to a couple of meetings, and so whenever we see her at the bookstore she says she's been making stuff at home for the fair. But I want to see proof."

It was useless to argue with Adele, so Dinah and I traded nods and kept silent. It was just a short walk up the street to Dinah's house, which was on the corner. Kelly lived around the next corner on the street that paralleled the one the production company was using. As soon as we got on the other street, it was much quieter. The houses were set on orderly little plots, close to the street. This part of Tarzana had sidewalks and seemed more like a neighborhood than where I lived.

"I don't know why Kelly has to be so difficult," Adele said with a harrumph in her voice. It was a relief Dinah and I could do to keep from laughing. Adele practically wrote the book on causing a ruckus. Apparently immune to our stifled laughs, Adele continued. "If she's going to be one of the Hookers, she ought to follow the rules."

"Rules?" Dinah repeated with surprise. "What are they, the ten commandments of crochet?"

"I don't know if there are ten, but there should be something that says if you join the Hookers, you have to go along with the group, and show up to the meetings," Adele said as the breeze caught the brim of her hat and pushed it down, covering her eyes. She flipped it up and tried to make it stay. "Come along with the group? Did Adele hear what she was saying? She never went along with anything."

As we continued down the block, I noticed that the street was crowded with cars and commercial vehicles. Generally it was empty at this time of day. But then I realized they were all part of the production and probably just being kept there until they were needed. I noticed a truck with open slats up ahead, parked in Kelly's driveway. The back of the truck was filled with greenery in pots and two men in jeans were standing next to it.

Since Dinah's house was just up the street from Kelly's, which made them neighbors, my friend knew more about Kelly's business than the rest of us. "She's got her hands full," Dinah began. "You

know both she and her husband have kids from previous marriages. It's always a changing cast of characters in that house. His kids, her kids, no kids. You can't just pick up and hang out at the yard table when you have kids out of school for the summer, and you have to cart them around to activities."

Adele spent some more time fighting with her hat as we got closer. She didn't seem impressed with Dinah's explanation. "And there's her husband's business," Dinah continued. "Maybe she helps out with his store."

The store was Hollar for a Dolllar, Tarzana's first dollar store. Dinah had heard that Kelly's husband was hoping to make the one location into a big success, so he could develop it into a chain. "He went up and down the block and gave us all goodie bags of merchandise and ten-percent-off coupons to entice us to go into the store."

I'd seen the goodie bags. The specialty factor of Hollar for a Dollar seemed to be that it had almost all name-brand stuff. Dinah's goodie bag had contained Uncle Len's rice, Suckers strawberry jam and Wiggly's spearmint gum.

As we got closer, I noticed a woman standing on the sidewalk, watching the action with the truck. She had her hand on her hip and you didn't have to be a body language expert to know she was annoyed. As soon as she saw us, her expression sharpened and she stepped toward us.

"Coming to complain, aren't you," she said focusing on Dinah. "Well, I'm with you. It's not enough that we have that production company around the corner, but thanks to Kelly Donahue, it's going to be on this side of the block, too. That is, unless we do something to stop it."

I knew not everyone found having a production company on their street exciting. To some it was nothing but a nuisance. Apparently this woman was one of those.

Dinah nodded a greeting at her. "Hi, Nanci. I don't think you've met Molly Pink and Adele Abrams." Nanci's angry expression broke for a moment as she acknowledged us, and Dinah told us that Nanci Silvers was Kelly's next-door neighbor and PTA president-elect at Wilbur Elementary.

Nanci definitely acted the part of PTA president. In all the years my sons had gone to school, the names and faces of the PTA presidents had changed, but the personas had stayed the same. The words bossy and controlling came to mind. Nanci's champagne blond hair was cut severely short with asymmetrical long dagger-shaped strands on the side that did nothing to soften her sharp features. There was something businesslike in her attire. The black slacks and short-sleeved jacket seemed like a suit. The jacket was embellished with a cluster of bloodred crocheted flowers. I noticed she'd started tapping her toe as one of the jean-clad men pulled a palm tree in a big black pot out of the truck. He nodded a greeting at our little group before continuing down the driveway toward Kelly's backyard.

"Kelly rented out her yard to the production company." Nanci went on to explain that Kelly's yard was directly behind one of the houses they were using on the other block. "Not only that, but she signed her house up with a location service." Nanci gritted her teeth. "She's got dollar signs in her eyes. This isn't her first marriage, you know. And I think it won't be her last. That woman will do anything to make a buck. And she didn't even consult her husband. I want to take up a petition to stop her before our street becomes like that one." She gestured toward the street behind us.

"Kelly just doesn't get it about rules," Adele interjected.

Nanci nodded in agreement. "Kelly doesn't understand about being part of a group or neighborhood. It's all about money with her."

I knew what Nanci was talking about. Renting out your house to a production company could bring in a nice profit. Sometime back when Charlie was alive, someone had tried to hire him to do PR for their house. Yes, a house. It had become quite a star because it was Todd Jenkins house in the family saga *The Jenkins*. It had also been used as the home of the matriarch in *Our Family and Friends*. Though a family lived there when it wasn't being used for a show, it had been built with the idea of

renting it out to productions, so the interior was designed with an open plan, which made camera setups easy. Charlie had shown me the house and I had laughed when I saw the kitchen. It was designed for cameras not for cooking. I mean, you practically needed a golf cart to bring the dishes from the dining room to the sink.

After getting an assurance that Dinah wasn't thinking of listing her house with the location service and being noncommittal about signing any sort of petition, Nanci let us go, but I noticed she followed us as we walked up to Kelly's house. Kelly's place had been given an overhaul since it was originally built. Someone had taken the basic stucco house and added a second story. To me, it looked like a cream-colored box with a red-tiled roof.

Kelly answered the door with a cordless phone to her ear. I guess she was used to people just showing up at her door because even though we hadn't called ahead she didn't seem surprised to see us. Whenever I saw her, I thought of the phrase *cute as a button*, though the saying didn't really make much sense. How was a button cute? But Kelly definitely was. She smiled at us and the two dimples on her cheeks appeared and then quickly disappeared when she saw Nanci lurking in the background. Kelly put her hand over the phone as Nanci fussed about the truck in the driveway and insisted that it was ruining her view. Kelly listened with a tired sigh; clearly she'd heard this before. "It is not ruining the driveway," Kelly reminded Nanci in a pointed tone.

Nanci made a huffing sound, turned abruptly and left. The cuteness came back into Kelly's face and while she apologized for the interruption to whoever she was talking to on the phone, she gestured for us to come in. Her chestnut brown ponytail swung from side to side as she led the way. The beige capri pants and loose ivory linen top were casual, but something in the fit and the texture of the fabric said expensive. Still listening to the phone call, she pointed to some small brightly colored blocks in a box and mouthed *watch out*.

Not only did Adele watch out, she picked up the box and examined the side. She pushed it on me with a knowing nod. The front had the words LUGO Blocks printed in big letters and showed some scary looking pictures of things you could build. Whoever had written the copy clearly wasn't too good with English. Did anyone really say, "One thousand and one funs," or "Let's block"?

As Kelly hung up, she saw me reading the box and made a disparaging sound. "Sorry about the blocks. My kids were here last week and Dan brought the blocks home from the store for them. He doesn't understand that kids care about brands. LUGO?" she said with a snort. The phone rang in her hand and she went to answer it. "Go on into my workroom. I'll be in there in a minute." She put the phone to her ear as the three of us went in the direction she'd pointed. Adele pressed ahead mumbling something about wanting to see if there were any crochet supplies.

Dinah pointed at the "No Kids Allowed" sign on the door and gave me a quizzical look. Dinah was all about teaching kids and young adults how to behave, not excluding them. We passed through the door into a large room at the back of the house. A sliding glass door looked out on the backyard, and there were the men we'd seen before, walking around the yard measuring things.

"Hmm, let's just see what she's got," Adele said as her hat brim flopped in front of her face. She lifted it away from her eyes and quickly began to look around the room.

I was less concerned about finding proof that Kelly really crocheted than with checking out the whole room. We all loved seeing each other's craft rooms, hoping they'd be as messy and yarn filled as our own.

Kelly's was neither a mess like mine, with bags of yarn all over the place threatening to trip anyone who walked in without watching their step, nor super perfect looking like the ones I'd seen that were set up like yarn stores. Kelly seemed to favor plastic bins over shelves or cubbies. There were piles of them along the wall and Adele rushed toward one to check the contents. She seemed disappointed when the first one she opened contained yarn. And not just any yarn. When Adele held up a handful of

skeins, I recognized the labels as high-end expensive yarn.

The room had a different feeling than what I'd gotten in the rest of the house, where the furniture seemed modest and utilitarian. The living room couch and chairs were plain and could probably live up to the abuse of the assorted kids who stayed there. But Kelly's crafting room was filled with nice things. There was artwork on the walls and all the furnishings were tasteful and eclectic. Her computer sat on a beautifully refinished library table and the Victorian dining chair pushed into it had a dusty rose cushion to soften the back. A Victorian-style love seat was covered in the same dusty rose material. An old trunk served as a table in front of the love seat and held a silver tray with a silver teapot for service. I guessed that the Mission-style easy chair was Kelly's seat of choice judging by the magazine facedown on the small table next to it and the full-spectrum floor lamp arranged to illuminate it. I was admiring the doll-size figure of a knight next to a small silver bowl of dried rose petals when Kelly came in the room.

"You found my knight in shining armor," she said with a smile. Adele let go of the lid of the plastic bin she was snooping in and turned quickly, no doubt to hide what she'd been doing. The brim of her hat flapped down over her face blocking her view, and Adele suddenly lost her balance and whirled across the room. The burst of wind from her movement flipped the brim back up and Adele reached out to steady herself and almost knocked over a lamp with a leaded glass shade sitting on the end of the computer table. I grabbed the brass base just in time to steady it and knocked a small book to the floor instead. I replaced the book, noting it was some kind of guide to coins.

"That glass shade wouldn't have taken a tumble well," I said. When I asked about the Tiffany-style lamp, Kelly laughed and said it was just a copy. "Just like everything else in here," she said, making a sweeping gesture with her arm. "Is there a reason for your visit?"

I noticed that one of the men had set a potted feathery palm tree in front of the sliding glass door. The other man looked at it and shook his head. The first man pulled it away.

Before Adele could stick her foot in her mouth, I told Kelly we'd come to pick up anything she made for our booth at the Jungle Days Fair. Kelly's phone rang, interrupting us. She answered it and listened for a moment before turning to the group.

"I have to go pick up my kids and take them to their father's house. I still have a little finishing to do with the pieces I made. I'm really coming to the group meeting tomorrow. I'll bring everything then." She ushered us toward the door. "I promise."

When we got outside, Adele gave Dinah and me a knowing glance. "I'll believe it when I see it."

CHAPTER 2

“That was a waste of time,” Adele said as we walked into Shedd & Royal. The bookstore seemed abuzz with business and Mrs. Shedd was standing at the front near the cashier station watching the activity with a big smile. Dinah had left us when we passed her house. She was teaching summer school and had to get her things together.

“At least you believe Kelly crochets now,” I said.

Adele rolled her eyes with consternation. “Pink, I just saw some skeins of yarn, which doesn’t prove a thing. I still say she’s a crochet pretender. And she was sure in a rush to get rid of us.”

“She had to pick up her kids and we did arrive unannounced,” I said.

“Watch, if she does come to the meeting tomorrow, she’ll have another excuse.”

It was useless to argue with Adele. Crochet pretender? Adele was too much.

“I hope they stay forever,” Mrs. Shedd said, gesturing toward the crowd in the café and bookstore. I knew the *they* she was referring to was the *L.A. 911* production.

The production had set up shop a little over a week ago and was using the whole area. I’d heard they were filming a number of episodes and would be there for weeks. It looked like Mrs. Shedd was going to get her wish, for a while anyway.

“If it weren’t for my Eric,” Adele said. “Molly might have messed all that up for you. She almost got arrested.” Adele waited a beat before she added “Again.”

There was no use denying it. I did seem to walk into trouble a lot, though it was hardly intentional. Mrs. Shedd gave me a stern look.

“I already heard about the incident,” my boss said. “Molly, please don’t ruffle their feathers. We don’t want to chase their business away.” She watched two people as they headed for the cashier each holding several books. “In fact, we want to do the opposite. We want to make them feel at home.”

Adele mumbled something about spreading the word to the crew. “Everybody knows me, thanks to Eric,” she said before heading to her domain. I watched as she made her way across the bookstore to the kids’ department, greeting people from the production with nods and pointed fingers in what she seemed to think was some sort of hip gesture.

Was I the only one who saw that Adele got puzzled stares in return? “Mrs. Shedd, I promise I’ll be good,” I said before moving on. I know she’d told me I could call her Pamela and Mr. Royal, her partner, Joshua, but it felt too weird to change after all this time of calling them by their last names.

When I glanced toward the entrance of the café, I noticed the actor who’d played the homicide detective I’d tried to save had come in. He was carrying a cup with a fluff of white foam on top. Our eyes met as he got closer and his lips curved into a teasing smile.

“I suppose I should thank you,” he said. “I heard you were trying to save me from him.” He pointed toward the actor who’d had the gun. I barely recognized him now. He’d taken off the hooded sweatshirt and didn’t appear threatening at all as he laughed and talked to one of the extras. It must have been a relief to get out of the jacket. Summers in the Valley always sizzled, but lately it had been hovering around one hundred. It was dry heat, but still one hundred was hot however you looked at it. “I don’t think we’ve met. After what you did, it seems like I ought to know your name. North Adams,” he said, holding out his hand. He was still wearing his costume of a suit and dress shirt, but his demeanor had changed. Gone was the weary cop face, and now he seemed affable and relaxed.

“Molly Pink,” I said, with an embarrassed flutter of my eyes. Of course, I’d recognized him without the introduction. ~~North Adams was a well-known actor who’d been in a number of successful series~~ over the years. I liked the sprinkling of gray in his dark hair and I suspected it was planned by some stylist to make him look serious. When he was younger his features had been almost too even and too handsome. But time had put some character in his face. Still the azure blue eyes were startling in a person. His head was slightly too big for the rest of his body, but that seemed common in actors. I guessed that abnormality made them appear better on camera. “I don’t usually go around tackling people. I am truly sorry and I hope it didn’t cause you a lot of delays.” I hadn’t realized that Adele had come out of the kids’ area and was standing directly behind me.

“It was because of what happened to her boyfriend,” Adele said. “Correct that to the person who was her boyfriend.”

I had taken offense at the “boyfriend” title the whole time Barry and I had been involved. It just sounded too sock hopish for a man in his fifties—the same way saying we were dating sounded silly. But now I just let it go. It was irrelevant. I heard Adele begin to tell the story of what happened. Dina had just offered the broad strokes when she tried to smooth things over at the shoot, but Adele was going into every detail and I really didn’t want to stand there and hear it again.

Without a backward glance I escaped into the yarn department and started straightening the skeins that had been left all over. It was surprising that none of the Hooks were hanging out at the table, but I was just as glad for the peace. I noticed the crowd from the production company begin to thin out, so I was surprised when North Adams walked into the yarn area.

“Now I understand,” he said with sincerity in his voice. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“What exactly did Adele tell you?” I said as he turned to go.

“Everything. Maybe even too many personal details,” he said before he left.

CHAPTER 3

I was surprised at what Mason Fields said when he called suggesting we get dinner. Well, I wasn't surprised about the dinner part. We had been doing that a lot lately. But he said he had some kind of problem. Mason had always been the person who fixed problems. If he'd had any before, he'd never told me about them. But then our relationship was a little odd.

I liked to think of us as friends, though since I'd broken up with Barry, Mason had been trying to knock it up a notch—to what, friends with benefits? It was hard to tell exactly because Mason compartmentalized his life. Other than knowing he was divorced and had two kids, his family had always been off limits to me. In fact that had been the stumbling block to us having more than a friendship before. While we both agreed we weren't looking to get married, I needed a little more than he seemed willing to offer. Mason was in the middle of my life, but I felt like he kept me on the sidelines of his.

When he wasn't spending time with me, Mason was a top-flight attorney to the stars. He was the one naughty celebrities turned to to get out of trouble. Mason was very good at getting people out of trouble. He'd done it for me a number of times.

With the summer days still long, it wasn't completely dark when I walked out of Shedd & Royce. The evening had cooled off only slightly and the air still felt balmy. I drove the greenmobile home. I was beginning to see my son's point about the car. It was a 1993 190E Mercedes in a color I called teal green and while I thought of it as a classic car, it was beginning to show its age. I left it in the driveway and didn't go in my house. To go in was to get sucked into a vortex of animals and things to take care of and never get out and I could see Mason had parked on the street and was leaning against his car, checking his BlackBerry. He put it away as soon as I got close, and his face broke out into a happy grin before he hugged me in greeting.

He was still dressed in his work clothes. The light color of the taupe suit made it seem summer. All of his suits were custom tailored and made out of a fine wool that draped perfectly. His blue dress shirt had the collar opened. As usual a lock of his dark hair had fallen across his forehead. I always thought it made him look earnest and hardworking. And I thought the sprinkling of gray made him look distinguished.

"What's up?" I said as I got in the car. "You said you had a problem." I might have seemed a little too eager, but it was the first time he was letting me into his life.

"It can wait," he said as he steered the car onto the street. "Tell me about your day. I could use a little diversion."

I made a face. Was he backing down? But then I fell for the bait. I mean, who doesn't want to talk about their day?

We ended up at a neighborhood Italian restaurant. Tarzanians had been eating there for decades thanks to the good food and friendly atmosphere. We took a table by the window and picked up our menus. I didn't know why I bothered looking at mine. Mason always did the ordering. He knew what I liked better than I did.

When the waiter came by, Mason ordered a Caesar salad for two. They made their own dressing and it was delicious. When Mason ordered several appetizers for us to share, it was like he'd read my mind. With the hot weather and late hour, I didn't feel like anything too heavy.

The waiter had just brought us a basket of hot homemade bread and I was pouring some olive oil on my bread plate, when I noticed someone come in from the back. Kelly walked through the tables, up the counter, obviously there for food to go. I started to wave, but she didn't see me and I let it go.

"You know her?" Mason said.

"Not exactly," I answered. I started to explain about going to her house, but then realized it was better to start at the beginning of the whole thing. Mason's eyes widened when he heard about me trying to tackle the actor. Then he laughed.

"I wish I'd been there for that. Anybody I know in the scene?" The Caesar salad had come, and I divided it up on our plates, and asked for fresh pepper.

"I don't know the name of the actor I tackled, but North Adams was the guy I was trying to save."

Mason nodded. "He's a client of the law firm. I know him from charity events and such, but he never needed my services. At least, not so far."

I mentioned our real destination had been Kelly's. "There's something weird there," I said. Mason's grin widened.

"Great. I love it when you play detective." I rolled my eyes in response. But after being involved in solving a number of murders, I'd developed some skills. I had started to notice things more and infer things from them. I did it at the grocery store all the time and tried to figure out what the people were shopping for by what they were buying. Like the time I figured out someone was having a barbecue and one of the guests was a vegetarian because they had a bag of charcoal briquets, six Spencer steaks, and one frozen vegetarian entree. I'd actually asked the man and he'd told me I was right.

Mason laughed when I told him about the LUGOs. "I saw the store," he said vaguely gesturing toward the street. "How's it doing?"

"I think they're struggling. The neighbor mentioned Kelly would do anything to make some money."

"So tell me Sherlock what did you notice about the Hollar for a Dollar people's house?"

It had gotten to be kind of a game with us. I told him about Kelly's room and how it seemed like a haven. "It was different from the rest of the house and had nicer furniture and doodads." I described the refinished library table she had her computer on. I mentioned that I'd seen a chair like her Mission-styled one in a store for a couple of thousand. "Adele knocked into a leaded glass lamp. Even the modern copies of those aren't cheap. I wouldn't think much of it if the rest of the house, or what I saw of it, went with the things in her room." I stopped for a moment and in my mind's eye, I was seeing it again. "And it wasn't just the furniture. It was the yarn, too."

Mason knew what a mess my craft room was. More than once he'd almost skidded across the floor after getting his fancy shoes caught in a grocery bag full of yarn. "No bags of any kind," I said. Her stuff was all in plastic bins stacked neatly against the wall. I pictured Adele opening one of them and visualized the yarn she'd held up. "I recognized the brands. It was all pricey stuff." Mason still looked a little puzzled.

"The point is, instead of a hodgepodge of stuff like the rest of us have, Kelly's looked like stock. She had a whole container of the same kind of yarn." Mason kind of shrugged and urged me on.

"So what do you think it means?"

"I don't know. We don't even know if she really crochets or is a crochet pretender as Adele called her. Either way, it seems odd she would invest so much money in yarn. It was funny, too, that she didn't have any samples of her work sitting in the room."

"So maybe Adele is right and she's a fake. A fake with fancy taste," Mason said.

"What's the difference if she is or isn't, anyway," I said. We'd started on the thick slices of fresh mozzarella with tomatoes and basil, along with the stuffed mushrooms and grilled asparagus done with garlic and olive oil. "Now you tell me *your* problem."

Mason's face changed. The grin faded and he set down his fork. He took a deep breath and sat back in his chair. "You know my daughter is getting married and you know the wedding invitations have gone out." He watched as I nodded.

As I was agreeing, I was thinking that I didn't even know either of his daughters' names. He just called them my youngest and my oldest. And about those invitations— I hadn't gotten one. I had dropped enough hints, but he'd shrugged them all off. As far as I was concerned not getting invited to the wedding was a definite sign our relationship shouldn't be moving to the next level.

"I just found out the wedding planner declared bankruptcy. It seems her assistant was embezzling money and never paid the deposit on the ballroom at the Belle Vista hotel, which is listed on the wedding invitations. No deposits were paid for flowers, food, the cake, the band . . ." His voice trailed off and I waited for him to say more. He looked at me intently. "Do you know what that means?"

I had a pretty good idea, but I let him say it. "It means we have no location for the wedding. It means two hundred or so guests are going to show up and find somebody else having a birthday party in that ballroom. The food and the rest of it, is fixable. But finding a location at the last minute"— Mason threw up his hands. "And here is the worst part—my ex has known this for weeks. She was going to take care of it and then tell me. Take care of it?" His voice started to rise. "Jaimee took care of it all right," he said sarcastically. "If she'd told me when she first found out, we might have found another place. But now? It's just about impossible."

I'd never seen Mason so upset. Instinctively, I put my hand on his as a sign of sympathy. He squeezed it and sighed. "Sunshine, I knew you would understand." So now I at least knew his ex-wife's name. And I began to wonder about all the stuff he'd told me about them having an amicable divorce.

"I could get buses to take the guest somewhere, if we had a somewhere to take them." He picked up his fork, then dropped it in frustration. "I could just kill my wife."

He said it rather loudly and several diners looked toward us with surprise.

Then Mason pulled himself together and asked if I wanted cheesecake. When I nodded, he ordered us coffees and a piece of cheesecake with extra strawberries to share. "I'm sorry for venting this on you. I suppose you've figured this isn't the first time my ex has made a mess of things and dropped them in my lap to fix."

"So your wife's name is Jaimee," I said with a teasing smile. "My first peek behind the curtain. How about telling me your daughters' names instead of calling them the youngest and oldest." I had gotten through to Mason and his mouth slipped into a grin as his anger dissipated.

"Thursday is the one getting married and her sister's name is Brooklyn."

"Thursday?" I said.

"It was Jaimee's idea to give her a unique name." He rolled his eyes. "And Thursday is happy with her name. Go figure that."

"See, it isn't so hard to let me into your life."

Mason was back to his usual self and chuckled. "I have been keeping my family separate for so long—it takes time to change. I have to take baby steps," he said. "I suppose you want to know why we got a divorce."

From what he'd just said about Jaimee, it wasn't too hard to figure, but I let him explain anyway. It was another baby step and I was glad he was taking it.

"For a long time I was all work, work, work and we barely spent any time together," he said. "The day when my daughters went off to college and I finally had younger lawyers working for me to handle a lot of the grunt work, I started spending more time with Jaimee." He shook his head with disbelief. "I'm not sure if she changed or if I just didn't know her in the first place, but I started not wanting to go home." He beamed a big smile my way. "She wasn't any fun like you are."

After he paid the check, we walked down Ventura Boulevard holding hands. All the stores on the main street were closed and we looked in at the illuminated display windows as we headed back to the bookstore parking lot where Mason had left his car. Traffic had thinned out and the air had gotten the typical evening chill that made the summer weather so tolerable. You always needed a blanket at night and could turn off the air-conditioning and throw open the windows.

Mason pulled the car in front of my house and cut the motor. "Shall I come in?"

He'd been asking me that same question every time he brought me home and the answer had always been the same. We both stared at the front of my house and I said something about it not being a good idea.

"When?" he said, which surprised me. He'd never pushed before. I made a helpless shrug.

"When he's gone," I said. "I know what you're thinking. I should have my head examined." I looked toward the front window and just then I saw a familiar form standing in front of it, peering out.

CHAPTER 4

Even though it was a shorter distance up the walkway to my front door, I took the driveway and went through the backyard to my kitchen door. Inside everything was quiet. Even the dogs and cats didn't rush to greet me.

My plan was to quickly make myself a cup of herbal tea and take it to my room before anyone caught sight of me. I was filling my mug with hot water when Barry Greenberg, my former boyfriend, suddenly walked into the kitchen. It was a relief to see him not in a wheelchair, not in a cast, not on crutches and not leaning on a cane. He was beginning to seem more like his old self, though he was still favoring his left knee.

"You're coming home kind of late." He leaned his tall frame against the counter as I took out the tea things and gave him a dark look. I had to force myself to keep from saying that it was none of his business.

This was awkward with a capital A. There always seemed to be an undercurrent of anger when you saw an ex-boyfriend. But if he was living with you—well, not living *with* you, but under the same roof and recovering from something terrible, how could you not feel guilty for the anger.

A videotape began to play in my mind. It was a combination of what I'd been told about Barry shooting and what I'd seen on TV. It had been just an ordinary day, shortly after Barry and I broke up. Barry was loading his car after a shopping trip to Walmart when he noticed a couple of uniformed cops taking out a pair of teenage boys in handcuffs and figured they'd been caught shoplifting. One of the cops was helping one of the suspects into the backseat of the cruiser when suddenly the other kid started to struggle with the officer handling him. Without hesitating, Barry rushed in, flashed his badge and tried to help.

This was the part when I had to stop and swallow a few times. How could that kid have been so stupid to go from a shoplifting charge to attempted murder? Somehow he'd managed to get hold of the arresting officer's gun, even with his hands cuffed behind his back, and began shooting wildly. Barry wasn't wearing a Kevlar vest. It was all so unexpected, he couldn't even move. He'd been shot three times. Once in the chest, one in the thigh and once in the knee. Even now, I shuddered just thinking of the pain.

It had been Barry's son Jeffrey who'd called to tell me about his father and to tell me that Barry was asking for me. It was all touch and go then. Barry was delirious, but still worried about his son. I was the only one he wanted his son Jeffrey to stay with. It didn't matter what had gone on between Barry and me, I loved Jeffrey. I'd taken him home with me from the hospital.

Barry's condition kept getting upgraded and eventually he was ready to go home, but there was a problem. His condo was a two-story place and he couldn't manage stairs. So what did I do? I offered to let him recuperate at my house. What was I thinking? I know what I was thinking—that he would never accept. It was Barry who'd been all or nothing about our relationship, insisting either we get married or were done, and I mean, completely done, not even friends anymore. But he had accepted my offer anyway, saying it was because of Jeffrey. The kid had been through a lot and he seemed happy at my house.

Mason tried to talk Barry into getting a chairlift put in his condo and even offered to get it done, but Barry stuck with staying at my place. As a last ditch effort, Mason suggested both Barry and Jeffrey

stay at his place. He lived alone with a toy fox terrier in a huge ranch house. I wasn't surprised when Barry turned that down. Though the two men knew each other, I'd hardly call them friends.

You didn't have to be a brainiac to figure out Mason's motive. He was campaigning for our relationship to be something more than pals, and having Barry staying at my house would definitely be an obstacle.

At first it had worked out okay. My son Samuel had moved back home awhile ago and I gave Barry and Jeffrey rooms down the hall from his. Mine was on the complete other side of the house. I knew there was a constant flow of people coming and going to help Barry out, but I was barely affected by it. We were just ships occasionally passing in the kitchen.

Whoever had designed this house must have known that someday, somebody would need to get away from it all without leaving home. Once I shut the door to the den behind me and entered the short hall, I could forget about everyone and whatever else was going on in the rest of the house. The master suite was really a suite and far away from the other bedrooms. I had a huge bedroom with a fireplace, a generous-size bathroom and a hall area that was like a sitting room. I'd moved some of my crochet stuff and brought in a comfortable chair to work in. I had all the electronic essentials—TV, video player and computer. I'd brought in a stack of romantic comedies and had a pile of books I wanted to read. It had become a habit for me to come home and shut myself in my little haven.

Now that Barry had progressed from a cast with crutches, to just crutches, to a cane and now was down to a small limp, I was even more grateful for my refuge. He was up and around more and I never knew quite what to do when we ran into each other. I was looking forward to his going home. I'd have the run of my house back and we could permanently shut the door on our relationship.

The air filled with the scent of peppermint as I swished the tea bag around in the cup a last time before discarding it. I was all set to grab the cup and my things and head across the house, when Barry started to talk.

"I just want to thank you again for letting me stay here. I know it's been great for Jeffrey." That wasn't the first time Barry had thanked me. I nodded and said I was glad he seemed to be healed. I waited, expecting him to say something about moving home.

"I don't know if you know, but I went back to work," he said. He was watching me from across the room. I was all befuddled about where to look. It was normal to face someone speaking to you and glance up from the mug of tea. He must have changed out of his work clothes into the faded jeans and soft blue tee shirt he was now wearing. He'd looked pretty bad when he first got to my house, and I was glad his face had lost the gaunt look. I might have had a little residual anger about the way things had worked out for us, but I still cared about him. I was having a hard time making sense of it, but I thought the best way to deal with it, was by keeping a distance.

"You must be glad to get back to it." I picked up the mug but still he didn't move.

"I'm not exactly back to my regular job." He held up a blue binder that had been tucked under his arm. "I'm easing back in by working cold cases." He glanced toward the steaming cup of tea. "That smells good. What kind of tea is it?" I wanted to take the tea and go, but it felt wrong to just rush out and the way he was looking at my mug, it was obvious he wanted some, too. I certainly wouldn't begrudge him a tea bag. I pointed to the cabinet and told him to help himself.

Without the slightest hesitation, he grabbed a mug and found one of the tea bags. As I made another move to go, he said, "Maybe we could have our tea together. To toast my going back to work."

I was going to beg off, but it was just a cup of tea after all, so I agreed. Barry didn't wait for me to have second thoughts and led the way to the living room.

"Seems like old times," Barry said looking at the couch. When we'd been a couple, we'd spent a lot of time sitting there together. The idea of sitting there now felt strange and uncomfortable. I just wanted to drink my tea fast and escape.

“Let’s sit outside,” I said, making an abrupt turn. Barry followed me through the kitchen and out the door.

The yard was filled with the night sounds of crickets chirping and birds calling to each other. My gardenia plant was covered with creamy white blossoms and they filled the air with their heady scent. The floodlights along the back of the house illuminated the patio area and I noticed that Barry still seemed a little stiff as he lowered himself into one of the patio chairs. Above us the sky was midnight blue and the full moon peeked through the orange trees.

“It’s nice out here,” he said setting the mug of aromatic tea on the small glass table between our chairs. He stretched his leg into a more comfortable position. I asked where Jeffrey was and he said he’d gone to bed.

In a certain way, Jeffrey had benefitted from his father being laid up. Barry’d had to let go a little and his fourteen-year-old son had started using his bike for transportation. Jeffrey loved the freedom of getting around the area on his own. I might have kept my distance from Barry, but Jeffrey kept me up-to-date on what was going on in his life.

“The important thing is that you’re better. It looks like it’s all healed up.” I glanced toward his outstretched leg. “I’m sure you’re anxious to move back home and get on with your life. So, what do you think it will be? A few days, a week?”

Was it my imagination or did Barry’s expression falter. “I don’t have an exact date. I’m still getting physical therapy and I’m not feeling ready to tackle all those stairs.” As if to make his point, he moved his leg and seemed to feel a twinge of pain. “But if we’ve overstayed our welcome, I’ll try to make some other arrangements.”

“No, no. Stay until you can run up and down the stairs,” I said. I wanted him to go, but at the same time I didn’t want to push him out while he was still healing. What difference did a little more time make, anyway? I drained my cup and prepared to make my exit.

Before I could say anything along the lines of good night, Barry laid the binder he’d been carrying under his arm on the table. “It’s the murder book for one of the old cases I’m working on.” He’d never even mentioned a murder book before, let alone put one in front of me. We both stared at it for a moment before he invited me to have a look.

I’d become a bit of an amateur sleuth and happened on a number of bodies, but I wasn’t prepared for the photos. I guess I’d been lucky, the bodies I’d encountered hadn’t been that gory. I gasped at the photo of a man’s body sprawled in a pool of blood.

“That’s from a murder five years ago. There were no suspects and it seemed like a home-invasion robbery gone bad. The guy worked at a liquor store. He did a lot of deliveries. The girlfriend said he didn’t have any enemies, and that all the customers liked him and sometimes invited him to join the events he’d delivered for.”

Part of me wanted to close the book and go inside. But I couldn’t stop looking at the photograph. I noticed a band of skin on his wrist that was lighter than the rest of it. “It looks like they got his watch,” I said.

Barry smiled. “Very good, babe, I mean, Molly. The girlfriend said he’d recently gotten a fancy watch. She wasn’t very good about listing what was missing. She thought some household goods had also been taken. The only thing she did say was that something had happened to change things for the guy. He had never given her details, just that he’d recently had some kind of uptick in his life. And that he’d also recently purchased a gun.” I gazed at the picture again and noticed something odd on the carpet. It looked like a plastic juice bottle, but there was black tape around the mouth and the bottom seemed to be missing. There was a plastic number next to it, I knew they used to mark evidence. I asked Barry about it.

“The original notes described it as a homemade silencer,” he said. I knew very little about guns and

even less about a silencer. Barry was only too happy to answer when I asked about them.

~~“The obvious point is to muffle the sound of the gunshot. The homemade ones I’ve seen were made of two-liter plastic bottles filled with Styrofoam peanuts that were taped onto the end of the guns. This one looks like this one was improvised at the last minute from the victim’s own bottle of juice.”~~ I pointed to the mouth of the bottle and said the notes said they’d swabbed it for DNA and it had matched the victim’s. “The original investigators thought, judging by the bullets, that he’d been shot with his own gun, though they never found it.”

I’d gotten so involved with the murder book and hearing what a silencer was, I’d forgotten I was trying to leave. Finally I set the binder back on the table and picked up my mug. “I better go in,” I said, getting up.

“Oh,” he said. “I was going to tell you about the other case I’m working on.” I stopped in my tracks. I wanted to go, but I was curious about the other case. Barry had never shared like this before. And I liked being complimented on my sleuthing skills for noticing the missing watch. I sat back down. What harm could there be from spending a few more minutes with him?

“Are there pictures?” I asked sliding back into my chair as I gazed at the binder.

“I didn’t bring that binder home with me,” he said. “I’ll just have to tell you about it with no visual aids.” He started to tell me the details. The big difference with this case was the detectives who worked the case were sure who did it. The victim was a wealthy man who lived in a gated community in Chatsworth. He was single, entertained often and liked to surround himself with low-level celebrities. He’d been hit on the head with a large geode. This particular one had amethyst crystals inside, not that it mattered. When it had first been investigated, the detectives had found out that the victim had recently accused the housekeeper of taking pieces of jewelry and collectibles, one item at a time. Though she’d denied it, he had fired her. “It appears she came back, killed him and then took a bunch of collectibles and some valuable decorative items. The problem was, the detectives couldn’t get enough evidence to make a case against her, and no matter how they tried, she wouldn’t confess. And none of the stolen items ever surfaced.”

Barry seemed more animated than I’d seen him in a long time. “I’m going to have another go at the housekeeper. After all this time, she won’t be expecting it.” I nodded to show I was listening, though I wanted to make my getaway. I made a move to get up, but Barry continued talking. “I found out some things the earlier guys missed. It seems the liquor store guy delivered to the other victim’s house and there’s something similar about the items taken.”

I heard the clank of the gate by the driveway and a moment later my son Samuel came through the yard. He was carrying a guitar case and looked happy. When he saw Barry and me sitting together with the binder open to a grisly picture, his smile faded. To cover the awkward pause I asked him about his evening.

“I had a gig up at the country club. All sixties music for a wedding anniversary,” he said taking off his sports jacket. Samuel’s move back home was only supposed to be temporary, too, but recently he’d gotten his hours cut on his barista job and his night gigs as a musician were undependable, so I didn’t think he was going to be moving out anytime soon. He tucked the jacket under his arm and focused on me.

“Tell me you didn’t tackle some TV actor with a fake gun,” Samuel said. When I looked embarrassed and made a little nod toward Barry, trying to tell my son that Barry didn’t know and wanted to keep it that way, Samuel rolled his eyes and he shook his head with disbelief.

CHAPTER 5

“Only you would have been enticed by an offer to see a murder book,” Dinah said with a laugh. We met for breakfast at the Le Grande Fromage, the French café down the street from the bookstore, and I’d told her, no strike that, more like confessed, about the cup of tea with Barry.

“I just want him to go home so I can get my stuff back from the storage unit and have my croch room again,” I said. “It’s too confusing with him there. I’m angry at him for being so stubborn. If I wouldn’t marry him, we couldn’t even be friends? What kind of logic is that? I should never have offered to let him stay at my house.”

“It sounds like he wants to be friends now,” Dinah said.

“No, I think he appreciates that I let them live at my place and I think he was bored last night and had no one to talk to. Remember, he’s used to keeping crazy hours. He told me he’s working nine to five now.”

“Did you tell him about the incident on the *L.A. 911* shoot?” Dinah asked as one of the counter people brought over our food. I had a red eye and one of their freshly made cheese croissants. Dinah had ordered café au lait and a plain croissant. As usual, the airy place, with its round tables and black-and-white-checked floor, was busy, and there was a line of people at the counter waiting to place their orders.

“No. I just left a big silence after Samuel’s comment,” I said picking up the red eye and checking to see if it was too hot to drink. “Then I rushed inside and left Barry sitting under the stars.” The coffee drink needed a few minutes to cool, so I broke off a piece of the cheese croissant. “I suppose having the tea was okay. We just talked about the cases he’s working on. It wasn’t like it was anything personal. I’m just as ready to shut the door on our relationship as he is. Once he moves home, that’s it—we’re done.”

“You had a busy night. Dinner with Mason first. How’s that going?” Dinah simultaneously poured steamed milk and hot coffee into her mug. I told her about Mason’s problems with his daughter’s wedding. “But did he say anything about inviting you?”

I made a face. “No.” I tried the coffee again and took a small sip. I started to defend Mason saying he had a lot on his plate, but Dinah interrupted me.

“You know you could just tell him you want to be invited.”

“I want him to do it on his own.” I explained what he’d said about taking baby steps. “At least, he’s trying.”

“I’m just curious,” Dinah began. “You said Barry had a lot of people visiting him while he’s been staying at your place. Was Detective Heather one of them?” Heather Gilmore was a homicide detective and if she was aiming for perfect, she was succeeding. She was smart, beautiful and I heard she was great with a gun. She’d always had an eye on Barry.

“I don’t know. There were all kinds of people coming and going—home health care workers, his cop friends, pizza delivery guys. I think he even got flowers. It’s not my business anyway.” I pulled off another piece of my roll.

A dark-haired man with a quick gait came into the café and went directly to the counter. He grabbed a coffee, and as he headed back toward the door I caught sight of his face and recognized the sharp features of Kelly’s husband, Dan. I didn’t really know him, other than he shopped at the bookstore and

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