

DEATH
on
LILY POND
LANE



1



MONDAY NIGHT

Warner was too stunned to think clearly. He stumbled out of the bathroom in a frantic effort to reach his cell phone. His heart was pounding and his hands shook as he tried to dial 911.

“Come on, come on,” he coaxed.

The call wouldn’t go through. Why the hell was it so hard to get service in East Hampton?

He hurled his phone on the bed in frustration and ran out of the room. Warner knew he was in a race against time. He was about to make a left to try the landline in the maid’s room when he heard the back door slam in the kitchen right below him. He paused and cocked his ear, his heart thumping wildly. Suddenly, he heard footsteps on the back stairs.

Shit. He’s coming.

Warner changed tack and raced quickly down the hall towards the master suites. He made a left into Eleanor’s room

and his eyes searched frantically for a phone extension, before zeroing in on a portable phone on the desk. He grabbed the receiver and moved into bathroom, crouching down next to the toilet. His entire body was shivering with terror. He couldn't believe this was happening; couldn't believe what he had just witnessed.

The cold tiles felt like ice against his feet and his wet hands shook so violently that it was an effort to even punch the numbers. Warner only managed to press 9 before he sensed a presence at the door.

He glanced up in fear, raising his hands in an ineffective gesture of protection, calling out "No!" just before a massive blow landed on his head.

Then it all faded away.

2



TUESDAY

*E*ast Hampton has come back to life; there is no doubt about it, thought Antonia Bingham with excitement, as she maneuvered her blue Saab out of the Main Beach parking lot. The morning sky was a palette of milky pastels. Soft shades of baby blue, faded pink and a blush of pale yellow smeared into each other like a child's water color painting that has been held up before it could dry. It made Antonia recall one of the first things someone had told her about East Hampton: the American impressionists had chosen it as their place of work and residence because the light so closely resembled that of Giverny, its European counterpart. Here, nature's sparkling hues came to life, shimmering and essential. The winter had been frigid—replete with temperatures hovering near freezing, gusty winds, and icy sleet. But now it was a distant memory, replaced by spring's burgeoning foliage blossoming on the trees. When she made the left onto Lily Pond Lane, Antonia was thrilled to

see the bright yellow forsythia bushes blooming, speckling the landscape with much needed color. In a few more weeks the hedges would thicken, gradually making it more and more difficult to peek into the multi-million dollar properties that lined this notable road.

On this early morning, the still-bare branches of the sycamore trees waggled in the breeze and few people were out. That was to be expected on a Tuesday in mid-May. Most of the residents in this part of town (“South of the Highway”) used their houses primarily in the summer or on weekends. Their six-to-eight-to-ten bedroom “cottages” were in fact second homes that were occupied less than half the year. Antonia didn’t live in this neighborhood. She owned the historic Windmill Inn on Main Street across from the cemetery, and inhabited the cozy ground-floor apartment in the back. She actually preferred her location; there was something thrilling about being in the center of what was arguably the most picturesque village in the United States. Her street was dappled with historic windmills, lovingly restored century-old houses, small—mostly one-story—meticulously maintained storefronts, and two equally distinguished yet stylistically divergent churches—the regal stone Episcopalian with its traditional English gothic architecture and the white clapboard Presbyterian church whose spire loomed high above the treetops. In the center of the village green was a sparkling pond that permanently hosted a family of swans. Antonia loved the small town familiarity of her neighborhood and had grown accustomed to the everyday busy hum of people driving by on their way to and from work. This leafy

enclave was the destination of power players in the summer, but in the off-season it was merely a quaint historic town where people led normal working lives with the occasional celebrity spotting.

This morning Antonia had just completed her morning walk along the beach. When she had moved to East Hampton roughly a year and a half ago, she promised herself to make it a daily ritual to do so every morning, and it was a definite challenge for her to force herself outside on colder days. At least it had been until she met *him*— but Antonia quickly erased that thought from her head. She couldn't think about her friend from the beach. It was a waste of time. A stupid fantasy.

She drove by a distinguished-looking older man walking a red-leashed Wheaten Terrier and waved. He gave her a nod and a look as if he were trying to place her before she sped by. Antonia passed him each morning but didn't know his name. At this time of year, she'd wave to everyone she saw, as the population dwindled in the absence of the summer people. But when the season commenced and the second homeowners and tourists poured in, waving at strangers on the road was no longer the norm. Everybody was rushing about, determined to get in their share of beach time, tennis, golf, biking or whatever was their fancy, and waving to strangers was not part of the plan. That didn't matter to Antonia; she still did it anyway. She refused to be “pocket friendly” as her mother would say, which was her funny way of describing the act of putting kindness deep in your back pocket rather than on your face.

In addition to owning the inn and serving as chef for its

well-reviewed restaurant, Antonia also moonlighted as a ‘caretaker’ of sorts for two sprawling houses in East Hampton. Business could be slow at the inn during the off-season and she had enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to supplement her income. She also didn’t mind looking after houses; the work was fairly easy. Her role was to visit each house once or twice a week and confirm that nothing was amiss. And it was always a pleasure to have a reason to visit this part of town, with the beautiful houses that mostly stood empty.

Despite the absence of cars on the road, Antonia clicked on her right blinker to turn into the Mastersons’ gravel driveway. She was surprised to see that Warner Caruthers’s BMW SUV was still parked in the driveway. Warner, a friend of the Mastersons’ son Luke, was staying at their house while he filmed a documentary about the Hamptons. He was supposed to have left by now. He had even called her the previous evening to ask her what he should do with the keys, and she told him to leave them on the counter next to the telephone.

Hmmm, Antonia wondered. Why is he still here?

Antonia turned off the ignition and glanced at herself in the rear-view mirror as she applied some lipgloss. Big blue eyes reflected back at her. Her cheeks were flushed from the beach wind; red and rosy. If she were to analyze her looks, Antonia had always believed that a first, quick glance of her produced the best impression. She had glossy black hair (inherited from her Italian-American mother), creamy white skin (from her English father) and plump red lips. There was something youthful about her appearance, despite her thirty-five years. It was only

when one took a further look that the cracks appeared. Lines were marching across her face, particularly on her forehead. Her nose did not produce the best profile. And she was a good fifteen pounds overweight, (okay, twenty) which she carried primarily in her mid-section, the part of her body that she ironically referred to as ‘the bread belt’.

It is what it is, Antonia always told herself. She snapped her lip-gloss shut and exited the car. Time to find out why Warner hadn’t left.

The Mastersons’ house never failed to take her breath away. The mega-cottage had been built a hundred years ago, and was fitted with the standard design elements that were fashionable at that time—shingled façade, gambrel roof, wraparound terrace, multiple chimneys and functional shutters—features that have been heavily imitated along the Hamptons coastline in recent years. Situated one leafy road from the beach and enclosed by a weathered split-rail fence, the house glowed in the vibrant reflection of the well-manicured landscape that surrounded it. It was so lovely, and exactly the sort of architecture that appealed to Antonia. She was originally from Southern California, the land of schizophrenic structures and oversized eyesores. But it had never felt like home to her. So, at a particularly low point in Antonia’s life when her friend Genevieve announced she was quitting acting and leaving L.A. to return East to the place where she had spent her childhood summers, Antonia decided to make a radical change and follow suit. It had paid off; she adored the place. Sure, it had been a little bumpy in the beginning, well, a lot bumpy with a homicidal bookkeeper who

wanted kill her in order to take over the Windmill Inn, but that was in the past, thankfully.

When Antonia closed her car door there was movement in the side yard that caught her attention. Turning to her right, she scanned the grounds. She didn't see anything out of the norm. Perhaps it had been a deer. The town was now overrun by these brazen beasts who seemed determined to chew up everyone's landscaping.

After unlocking the back door to the house, Antonia stepped into the immaculate kitchen that was equipped with every possible appliance.

"Warner?" asked Antonia into the empty room.

The hum of the refrigerator was the only response.

Antonia flicked the lights on and looked around appraisingly. The room was spotless, as usual. Per Antonia's recommendation, the Mastersons employed two of the same cleaners that Antonia used at the inn: Angela and Rosita Diaz. Not only were they excellent housekeepers, they were also excellent people. Antonia's bond was greater with Rosita because they both shared an unfortunate marital history: they had kicked violent ex-husbands to the curb and survived. But that was part of the past that Antonia tried not to dwell on.

There was no sign of Warner in the kitchen or the mudroom.

"Warner? Are you here?" asked Antonia into the emptiness, knowing that she was talking to herself. "Are you sleeping?"

Antonia had met him only on two brief occasions when he stopped by the Windmill Inn, and found him to be charismatic

and charming. A tall, slight young man with a mop of strawberry blonde hair, an aquiline nose and thin lips, he possessed the same optimistic exuberance and naïve arrogance that she had found in most twenty-somethings fresh out of college.

With a sigh, Antonia hastily walked through the pantry towards the dining room. She stopped and abruptly retraced her steps. A white paper bag perched on the edge of the counter near the bar had caught her eye. She carefully opened it and found a cold untouched slice of sausage pizza.

“Interesting breakfast,” murmured Antonia.

Unless it was a discarded dinner? In any event, it meant that Warner was still around. She was a little dismayed that he had breached his agreement with the Mastersons and overstayed his welcome.

She did a hasty sweep of the living room and dining room, which revealed nothing out of the norm. There was a tacit understanding between the Mastersons and Warner that he would not use the formal rooms on the ground floor or the family’s bedrooms upstairs. As far as she knew, he had adhered to this agreement. She wondered why he hadn’t adhered to the plan to be gone by yesterday.

Antonia stopped short at the foot of the grand front hall staircase. Her palm gripped the edge of the mahogany banister and instantly felt clammy. She wasn’t sure why, but something gave her pause. She glanced around. The grandfather clock ticked softly. Its pendulum was the only movement in the room. Her eyes moved to the front door but she could see it was still locked. The outside lights were off. Shaking her

head, Antonia continued up the carpeted front staircase to the second floor.

A clicking noise sounded. Startled, Antonia whipped around.

“Hello?” she asked.

She was met by silence. Then just as suddenly, a burst of hot air rushed forth from the vent above her. Antonia smiled. It was only the heating. The temperature was always set to maintain 60 degrees.

At the top of the stairs, Antonia took a left towards the guest quarters. If Warner were asleep, she would rouse him and send him on his merry way.

There was a hall door between the guest quarters and the family’s bedrooms. It was closed, which was unusual. Joan Masterson liked to keep the doors open for air circulation. The door was somewhat warped from the sea air, so Antonia had to bang it on top to loosen it before turning the door handle. If he hadn’t been awake before, he would be now, Antonia mused.

“Warner, it’s Antonia.”

She didn’t want to surprise him. She glanced right into a maid’s room and bathroom and confirmed that they were untouched. She made a left to enter the room Warner was staying in.

“Yoo hoo?” Antonia asked.

The bed was made, and with such precision that Antonia guessed Warner hadn’t slept on it since the cleaners were here yesterday. She’d be very surprised if he could make a bed as well as Rosita. Antonia glanced left and noticed a black mono-

grammed duffel bag propped against the wall on the floor. It was unzipped, revealing a jumble of wrinkled and discarded shirts and pants.

Resting on the desk was an open folder. Antonia cocked her head to glimpse at it (a little peek never hurt anyone.) One side of the folder was stuffed with loose notes, pages ripped out of a white spiral notebook and scrawled mostly in a black ballpoint pen. On the other side was a typed cover sheet that stated in over-sized font: *Too Rich To Behave: a documentary by Warner Caruthers (with Hayes Rutherford)*. Tantalizing title, thought Antonia. She wondered what it was about.

She left the guest quarters and made the long walk down the narrow hallway, past the framed family portraits, to check on the bedrooms.

“Warner?” Antonia asked.

But there was no response.

Antonia glanced into the bedroom that belonged to Eleanor, the youngest Masterson child, and at once felt something didn't seem right. Her eyes flitted past the king-sized bed to the lacquer desk that held a computer and a telephone. When she found nothing amiss, she glanced at the skirted vanity. Poised atop were the usual knickknacks: various makeup bottles; monogrammed jewelry boxes in varying sizes; an old watch in a ceramic dish alongside a Tiffany china piggy bank. Antonia wasn't quite sure what was giving her pause.

She ventured a step into the room and turned to face the back wall. She glanced around again; the bookshelves gave no indication of tampering. Everything in the room was the same

as it always was. That is, until Antonia looked down at the pink carpet. Bingo. In the thick fluffy surface, there were impressions—footprints.

Warner's? Antonia wondered. What was he doing in here, when he was specifically told not to use the master suites? But then who else? Rosita, who was responsible for cleaning upstairs, was very particular about marks in the carpet. She would leave no trace of her existence after she vacuumed, in essence, vacuuming herself out of the room. Antonia's eyes followed the footprints to the door of Eleanor's bathroom, which was closed.

That was odd.

Antonia walked to the door and hesitated.

"Warner?" she demanded.

She was met by silence.

Antonia hesitated before turning the handle. She watched the brass knob twist, as if in slow motion. She pressed open the door cautiously, tentative of what she might find behind. Her eyes first met the rack of yellow towels hanging on the wall. Eleanor's initials were embroidered into them in a swirling white font. Antonia pushed the door open further and caught her own reflection in the mirror. She stared at herself before pressing on the door until the toilet was revealed, then the shower, and finally the bathtub.

It was there that she saw him.

He was naked. The top half of his body was bent back in a half-filled tub, while his legs were splayed: one of them dangling over the side, the other weirdly contorted underneath him. There was a stream of dried blood that had dribbled down

from the back of his head and pooled in the now bloody pink water. His left hand rested atop the shower curtain, which was yanked off several rings, the fabric gathering around his head and torso. His right arm, on which he wore a Rolex watch, was submerged in the water. His eyes looked heavenward, unblinking; his face was bloated and puffy.

Antonia felt her heart sink. There was no doubt about it: Warner Caruthers was dead.

3



STILL TUESDAY

Hours later as Antonia pulled out of the Mastersons' driveway, a man stepped from the shade of the trees and in front of her car. Antonia jammed on the breaks. She lurched forward into her seatbelt and fell back into her car seat. Disoriented, she glanced around. Her eyes narrowed into hostile slits when she realized who had stopped her.

Larry Lipper gave her an obnoxious smile. He slowly walked around to the driver's side and tapped on Antonia's window. She reluctantly rolled it down.

"I've been waiting for you to get out of there."

"I almost killed you."

"You would never kill me, Antonia. We still haven't had sex yet."

"And we never will. Why did you stand in front of my car? I could have run you over."

"Ah, but I knew you wouldn't." Larry walked over to the passenger side of Antonia's car and got in.

“What are you doing?”

“We need to talk,” said Larry. “Pull the car to the side of the road, we don’t want to get into an accident.”

“Oh, now you tell me.”

After being detained most of the morning with the police, the last thing Antonia wanted was to deal with Larry Lipper. Each officer had grilled her as they arrived on the scene, forcing her to retell her discovery ad nauseam. She’d repeated countless times that she saw no signs of forced entry, nothing was amiss other than the fact that Warner was dead in Eleanor’s bathroom, and she had no reason to believe it was foul play, or anything more nefarious than simply an unfortunate accident in the bathtub. There were so many cops that they all blended together, with the exception of Sergeant Flanagan. She could tell he was good at his job because he was the only one who seemed to sense that Antonia was not being entirely truthful when she insisted she had not removed anything from the crime scene. The fact was, she *had* removed something. It was so unlike her to do anything like what she had done, and quite honestly, she was stressed about it. The whole situation made her sick. But the only thing that gave her sanity was that she knew it had to be done. It’s like a white lie—sometimes you have to tell a lie in order to make everyone feel better. Nonetheless, she had been tempted to confide in Sergeant Flanagan—it was literally on the tip of her tongue—but then she remembered her past experience with the police. And although Sergeant Flanagan seemed decent enough, he was a cop, and as far as Antonia was concerned, cops couldn’t be trusted.

“Alright, lady. I’m ready for you,” said Larry.

“You know, you’re really infuriating,” said Antonia, her voice rising.

“But you love me,” he responded smugly.

“I know you think that’s true,” responded Antonia.

Larry Lipper covered the crime beat for *The East Hampton Star*. He was excellent at his job and she knew he would squeeze her for information. To Antonia, he was not unlike one of those annoying yap dogs that keeps barking and barking at everything and everyone until you tune them out and grow totally immune to their noise. Antonia attributed it to Larry’s short stature: he stood about five feet two inches high, which was amazingly small considering the powerful personality that lurked inside.

“Thou doth protest too much. Always telling me how you don’t like me when every interaction between us is simmering with sexual tension.”

“Simmering with queasiness is more like it,” said Antonia.

She recalled the time in November when she had (reluctantly, after much cajoling) agreed to attend an event with him socially. They were standing watching the concert one minute and then the next he had shoved his tongue down her throat making a break for her esophagus. It was so revolting that it took her a second to regain her senses; when she finally did, she glanced down and saw that Larry was standing on his tippy toes. Antonia had pushed him away in disgust. Larry shrugged off her rebuff, always taunting her that she would come back for him. She was amazed that he thought so highly of himself.

She would feel *slightly* flattered if he didn't have this weird rapport going with several other women in town. He was hedging his bets.

Antonia put the car in park and turned and stared at him.

"What do you want from me? I'm tired and late and have to return to the inn."

"You found the body. This is your lucky day. I want to hear all about it."

"I have nothing to add."

"That's not going to work. I've already lined up Page One."

Antonia sighed. "I can't go through this again."

"Quit your complaining! A little murder now and then spices up everything in this dreary town."

"You just want to get a book deal."

"You know I'm relentless. And this is a major story! A suspicious death on *Lily Pond Lane*? This is not some domestic dispute in Springs or some loony nobody killing local innkeepers. This is rich people, the most expensive real estate in the United States, the most beautiful beaches in the world. This is the stuff of TV movies."

"That's gross."

"You know it's true. It's "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" over here. And anything about them is a juicy read and you know it. We locals love them and hate them. They're our bread and butter but they also have so much entitlement when they waltz into town and take up our parking spaces and gobble up all the beach permits."

"I don't feel that way . . ."

“Of course you don’t! You own an *inn*. You rely on these vultures. But there are a lot of people who resent the summer people.”

“You make it sound like “West Side Story”.’ That’s hardly the case. People are annoyed by traffic for sure, but I can’t name one local who has that sort of anger towards a summer person.”

“Because you’re not looking.”

“So you’re saying some disgruntled Bonacker killed Warner? He didn’t even live here. He was a guest.”

“I don’t know who killed him. Right now it’s game on. This guy wasn’t popular with anyone. I’ve already got enough shiz on this dead A-hole to write a book.”

“He wasn’t an ‘A-hole,’ Larry.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

Antonia was genuinely surprised. She shook her head. “I don’t believe you.”

“Whoa, you two must have been pretty tight for you to be so defensive. Were you sleeping with him?” Larry leered.

“We weren’t tight,” Antonia corrected him. “Or sleeping together, for God’s sake. But he was best friends with Luke Masterson, who *is* a fantastic kid. There was no way Luke would be friends with a jerk. And my *limited* interaction with him was very pleasant.”

“Maybe he was pleasant to you, but he was a problem.”

“How so?”

“Oh, *now* you’re not so tired,” said Larry with a maddening smile. “Well, tit for tat, lady.”

“Then you go first.”

“It’s not even noon and I’ve already tracked down a whole bunch of people that were pissed off at him.”

“Really?”

Larry started to rattle off his information. “Warner Caruthers and Sidney Black loathed each other. In fact, they both filed restraining orders against each other.”

“Hang on a second. Sidney Black? Who’s that?”

“Some corporate raider who makes Bernie Madoff look like Santa Claus. He owns Black, Black and Kendall. Swoops into little family-owned companies, promises to help, then destroys them.”

“What does he have to do with Warner?”

“Has a house out here. Warner claimed Black was harassing him. Black denies it, filed charges against Warner saying *he* was harassing him.”

“Does it have to do with the documentary?”

“Yes. What do you know about this documentary?”

“The police asked me the same question. But the fact is I really don’t know anything about it other than Warner was convinced it would be a big deal. I admit, I tried to gently cajole him into telling me what it was about, but he was pretty tight-lipped. I think if I had a little more time with him, I would have gotten him to talk . . .”

“Now that he’s dead, I’ll let you in on the secret: it was about embarrassing the rich people in East Hampton. Making them say ridiculous stuff. Now granted, they are responsible for their actions but this guy had one agenda: to make them

all look like assholes. They probably deserve it, but talk about biting the hand that feeds you.”

“Are you sure?” It was hard for Antonia to reconcile the animated and enthusiastic young film student with a cynical, nefarious mini-Michael Moore.

“Yes. Warner had been bugging everyone. Just the other day, security threw him off the grounds of the Dune Club. Members caught wind of what he was doing and shut him down. They do not like that sort of thing there.”

The Dune Club, established 1899, was one of the oldest and most exclusive clubs on the East End of Long Island. It had an eighteen-hole golf course, twenty grass tennis courts, an Olympic size swimming pool and a big chunk of beachfront. Antonia had only been there once in January after it had closed down for the winter when her friend, Len Powers, the head of security, gave her a brief tour.

“I’m sure private clubs nail people all the time for trespassing.”

“There’s more,” said Larry, licking his diminutive index finger and turning the page of his notebook. “I’ve also got a pool guy two houses down saying he saw Warner sneaking through the neighbor’s hedge.”

“Really? That seems weird.”

“Makes total sense to me. The guy was a voyeur.”

“Pot calling the kettle black.”

“I’m a reporter,” said Larry defensively.

“A nudge, more like it.”

“This is a murder case, fair and square.”

Antonia remained silent. The police hadn't confirmed anything, but Antonia had been around cops enough to know they would look at all the angles. Nothing would be determined until the autopsy, but perhaps that's why they had pushed her so hard with their questions. She made a mental note to ask Len Powers what happened with Warner at the Dune Club.

When Antonia didn't respond, Larry continued. "Warner was making problems, poking around houses, going through people's garbage, no doubt, looking for incriminating stuff. Someone got tired of it, and took action."

Antonia sat for a minute, digesting this information. She was still quite certain that Warner's death was an accident, and she had proof of that. But the fact that Warner had a set of powerful enemies here in town was a new twist. A knot formed in her stomach. Maybe she had been hasty removing something from the scene if it really was a crime scene? Antonia couldn't believe it.

"I don't know, Larry. Just because Warner annoyed people doesn't mean they would kill him."

"Sure it does. Karma is a bitch." Larry turned and gave Antonia one of his obnoxious grins. "So, now tell me what you saw. And start from the beginning."

* * * * *

Antonia was stressed out by the time she returned to the inn. Just as she was pulling into the driveway her cell phone rang. She slid into her parking spot, turned off her car and answered.

“I’m FREAKING out.”

It was Genevieve. Of course she had heard; it was hard to keep anything quiet in a small town, let alone, a possible murder. And Genevieve did always claim to be “the eyes and ears of the Hamptons.” Antonia was so relieved to hear her voice, a friendly buoy bobbing in the midst of such an awful day. She slid back in her seat.

“I know. I’m still shaken. I mean, I can’t believe it! It’s surreal. What a nice guy . . .” Antonia let her voice trail off.

“I know! And so hot. I mean, without his shirt on, *mamma mia*.”

Antonia thought back to Warner in the tub. She hadn’t even noticed his body, so horrified was she by the fact that he was dead. “I guess.”

“Oh no, I’m telling you. Rocking bod.”

“I’ll take your word for it. I wasn’t really looking at that, I was more shocked by the whole thing.”

“I’m shocked, too. After three solid weeks of pursuit, I crept into the house and got him.”

Antonia felt her stomach drop. “Wait, what?”

“Let’s just say that when I was through with him he was naked and not moving. Not even breathing!”

Antonia shot upright. “Genevieve, what are you saying?”

“Oh, I forgot, you’re little miss conservative. Don’t always be so prissy, Antonia.”

“Genevieve, what did you do to Warner?”

There was a pause. “Warner? You mean that guy who was staying at the Mastersons?”

“Yes, the guy whose body I found dead in their bathroom this morning.”

“WHAT?” screamed Genevieve so loud that Antonia had to hold the received away from her ear. “He’s dead?”

“Yes, isn’t that who we were talking about?”

“No! I was talking about Carl!”

“Carl?”

“Carl? That hot guy I met at Citta Nuova? The one who works in real estate? I’ve only been obsessing over him for two weeks. What the hell happened to Warner?”

Relief flooded Antonia’s body. It was a classic Genevieve and Antonia misunderstanding.

“You almost gave me a heart attack, yet again, Genevieve,” said Antonia.

They were unlikely friends: Antonia, the maternal, mature and organized mother hen type and Genevieve, the free-spirited, childish and disorganized party girl type. But when they had met as fellow caterers years before in Los Angeles something had clicked. Genevieve made Antonia laugh and despite generally being flighty she had been a rock in Antonia’s darkest hour; in return Antonia was the eternal stable presence in Genevieve’s life.

After filling Genevieve in on everything that had transpired with Warner, an emotionally wrought Antonia returned to Genevieve’s news for a happy distraction.

“So tell me about Carl.”

“He’s awesome. Took me to dinner last night at 1770 House.”

“Fancy.”

“I know. Then we went to the Talkhouse and shut it down. Didn’t sleep a wink all night, if you know what I mean, then he left around nine for an appointment to show a house. Not until I ravaged him one last time, though. He literally had to escape my clutches, I didn’t want him to go!”

Antonia frowned. Genevieve always came on a little strong and scared the men away. “I hope you played a little hard to get, Gen. You know what happens . . .”

“No, this is different. I can tell he’s into me because he wants to take me to dinner tonight! I suggested your restaurant, so make sure there is a table.”

“For you, always.”

“Thank you. Now I have to go shower and make myself get to work. And sorry to babble about myself, are you sure you are okay? I can’t imagine what this is like for you. Do you think he was murdered?”

Despite their closeness, Antonia didn’t want to reveal to Genevieve that she had taken something from that bathroom that would prove that Warner had fallen. Genevieve was not the most discreet person when it came to information like that. And Antonia was now becoming increasingly afraid that she had really messed things up. If only she could leave things alone. But that wasn’t her character. “I hope he just fell. What I really hope is that maybe he had an aneurysm or a pre-existing heart condition. Something that nothing could have been done about anyway, so it wasn’t an accident . . .”

“Or murder.”

“Right.”

“I guess. I’ll see what I can find out today around town.”

“I’m sure you will,” said Antonia.

After hanging up the phone, Antonia made her way through the reception area and dropped her handbag on the desk in her office. She quickly scanned her messages before walking down the hall to the mudroom. The Windmill Inn, built in the late 1840s, was a rambling white-shingled house framed by green shutters. It stood three stories high and boasted eight guestrooms, as well as one suite and several public common and dining rooms. The décor was cozy and inviting, and the architecture full of nooks and crannies where guests could curl up with a great mystery novel and spend hours relaxing. Antonia tended to spend most of her time in the kitchen, which is where she was supposed to have been hours ago.

In the mudroom, Antonia exchanged her Merrells for a pair of pink Crocs. She could almost hear Genevieve groaning. Genevieve insisted Antonia would never land a man if she walked around town in those ‘ugly excuses for footwear that completely cancel out your great boobs.’ Antonia would retort that she had “no interest in landing a man right now, thank you very much.”

As she reached for a double-breasted chef’s jacket there was a soft stirring outside the side door to her left. It led to a little used patio that backed up to the corner hedge. Antonia moved towards the door and listened. Only the soft chirp of birds could be heard. But suddenly she heard the sound of footsteps on gravel. They were becoming fainter. Antonia whipped open

the door and looked to her left. No one. She glanced right. She saw someone turn the corner quickly, but all she could make out were dark pants and a dark jacket. Perhaps it was a lost guest? She wasn't going to sweat it. Today had been full of enough anxiety.

When Antonia entered the kitchen, Marty, her sous chef, already had things underway with assistance from Kendra, the station chef and Soyla, the prep cook. As Executive Chef, Antonia's responsibilities included menu creation, plating, and management. Marty was her second in command. He was a cantankerous old goat who drove her crazy; still, he did a fabulous job.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded.

"You're not going to believe it—I found . . . Did you meet that young man, Warner Caruthers? He came here a couple times. Well, I found him . . . dead."

Soyla and Kendra glanced up with surprise.

"What?" exclaimed Kendra, eyes ablaze.

"You okay?" asked Soyla nervously. She was Rosita's cousin and her husband Hector was the head gardener, who also helped with maintenance. "You want to sit down?"

Marty shrugged. "Ah, come on. Cry me a river. You've seen one dead body, you've seen them all."

"Well, I had never seen one before," Antonia announced.

"Congratulations! Let's buy you a goddamn medal," snapped Marty. "Now while you were out earning your First Dead Person badge, I was here making the unpleasant discovery that those idiots from that goddamned organic green grocer

you insist on using forgot the freakin' ramps and artichokes! Oh, and not only that, but that fish recipe that Kendra came up with? It's goddamn disgusting. That's why you can't take suggestions from a fattie who likes to eat everything."

"I love you too, Marty," shouted Kendra before returning her attention to Antonia. "Who was Warner?"

Kendra crinkled up her pug nose and waited for a response. A small gold stud protruded from her left nostril. Antonia wondered for the hundredth time why Kendra would want to draw attention to the least attractive feature on her face.

"A guest at one of the houses I look after."

"How'd he die?"

Antonia paused. "It looks as if he slipped."

"That's a good way to go," Marty exclaimed. "He can't complain."

"Well he was only twenty-five!"

"Ya win some, ya lose some," Marty barked.

Antonia shrugged. She felt as if in a daze. She walked over to her mise-en-place and glanced around the kitchen. "So, everything is running smoothly," said Antonia, eager to change the subject.

"What are you talking about? I'm in the goddamn weeds here!" snapped Marty.

Antonia knew that Marty's grumblings meant nothing and the kitchen was under control. She wondered sometimes if her presence was superfluous. That was good to know; if anything happened to her, everything would carry on. Antonia rolled up her sleeves and went to work, zoning out their banter. For

the next two hours she methodically peeled shrimp, simmered broth and chopped vegetables. Flashes of Warner lying in the bathtub danced in her head. She thought of Larry's information that Warner was reviled. And there was the peculiar fact that Warner was in Eleanor's bathroom. What was he doing there? As far as she knew, he had used the guest bathroom provided for him. It was so strange.

At five o'clock Antonia put down her knives.

"Break time," she announced.

Kendra and Marty went outside for cigarettes while Soyla kept working. Antonia could never get her to take a break; the woman had more energy than anyone she had ever met.

Antonia set off to meet her friend Joseph in the parlor. As with most of the inn, the cozy parlor was royal blue with burnished mahogany paneling. Over the past few years, Antonia had returned the antique windows and door fixtures to mint condition, reupholstered plush armchairs of varying sizes in batik and ikat fabrics, and refurbished the bathrooms with imported Moroccan tiles and converted marble top sinks. Her vision was to create a British style country manor with a modern twist, and as a result, she amassed a collection of mostly English antiques—dressers, sleigh beds, writing desks—as well as rare leather-bound books to adorn every room. Antonia's accountant had desperately tried to reign in her spending but to her it was the little details that mattered most: the rare hand-cut crystal vases with fresh flowers; the gold-framed maps of Long Island from the 1900s that lined the stairs; and the brass and crystal lamps that graced every

table in the dining room. She wanted people to feel like they were at home.

And to Joseph Fowler, it was in fact home. He was the permanent tenant of the two-room suite on the second floor that was accessible by a private elevator. The sixty-four year-old widower was an author of some renown, whose historical fiction was intensely research-based and literary. A dapper gentleman, always impeccably groomed and donning custom fitting blazers and a bowtie, he was Antonia's closest confidante.

"Here are the print-outs," said Joseph, motioning to the stack of papers on the antique side table. "I started in as soon as I received your email. I'm sorry you had to spend all that time there."

"So am I. But thank you for pulling these articles. Anything good?" said Antonia, plopping herself into a chair next to the open window. She picked up the papers.

"Google comes through every time."

"I know it works for you, but it just sends me down the rabbit hole every time I search for something. I'll go on to look up a new recipe for crepes and the next thing you know I'm on a page reading about some obscure French artist. I don't know how that happens."

Joseph sat patiently while Antonia read. This morning, while she had waited to be interviewed for the zillionth time by the police, she had sent an email to Joseph asking him to do a little research for her.

"Looks like it's not uncommon for people to fall to their deaths in bathtubs," said Antonia. "Did you find any lawsuits?"

“You’ll see there were several. Usually, it’s people suing hotels because they didn’t have the proper matting, things like that. There is the possibility that the Mastersons could be open to a lawsuit if Warner’s family is the litigious sort.”

Antonia put the papers down and leaned back in thought. “That’s what I was worried about. And it looks from these papers as if there is precedent.”

“You look like you need a drink.”

“A drink? Heck, I need an IV rack of alcohol hooked up to my veins. But I’ll get it.”

“Don’t be silly.”

Joseph, who was mostly confined to a scooter due to the side effects of a childhood bout with polio, slid himself off his chair and on to his scooter. He buzzed over to the bar and poured Antonia a full glass of red wine. He handed it to her and she took a big gulp. He slid back into his chair. Antonia knew he liked to be active, so she never tried to protest when he did things for her.

“Better?”

“Infinitely.”

She closed her eyes and felt the soft cushion behind her head.

Joseph watched Antonia carefully. “There is another article that I found.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“An interesting one,” said Joseph.

Antonia opened her eyes.

“Don’t taunt me. Bring it on.”

Joseph held a sheet of paper in his hand.

“There was a recent case about a bathtub that you may recall. It was all over the news. The wife of a police officer in the Midwest went missing, and the general conjecture is that he murdered her. Upon further investigation, they discovered that his previous wife had died in a bathtub. At the time it was ruled accidental, but when the next wife disappeared, they reopened the case. Turns out it was made to look like a fall. They charged him with homicide.”

Antonia nodded and took a sip of her drink.

“You don’t think he was murdered?” asked Joseph.

Antonia stared at him. “I know for a fact that it couldn’t be true.”

“Oh?”

Antonia leaned towards him.

“Joseph, I have a confession.”

“Of course you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Antonia asked with faux exasperation.

“It means that I know you very well. It is impossible for you to be a passive participant in any sort of drama. I’m certain you stuck your nose in somewhere you shouldn’t have.”

Antonia frowned at him.

“I resent that.”

“Ah, but it’s true. What did you do now?”

Antonia took a sip of her drink that placed it down hard on the coffee table.

“I thought it was the right thing to do, but now I’m really

scared.” She paused to look imploringly into his eyes before adding softly, “I took something from the crime scene.”

Joseph looked nonplussed. “Proceed,” he said calmly.

“A can of disinfectant.”

Joseph arched his eyebrows questioningly.

“I know, it sounds really bad. But let me explain.”

Antonia rose and walked over to the fireplace. She poked the logs before retreating to the windowsill where she perched with her back to the window, wringing her hands.

“So, I found Warner and then I called 911. All by the book, mind you, before you accuse me of anything. Well, you know how out here it doesn’t exactly take the police two minutes to arrive on the scene. So I went back to the bathroom to check on Warner. Obviously, I knew he was dead but it didn’t seem right to leave him up there alone. I stood there for maybe five minutes. It was strange. It was so quiet and the room felt heavy with death. I stood there, taking it all in . . .”

She glanced up at Joseph.

“But then?”

She smiled at Joseph. He knew her well. “But then my eyes fell on this can of Lysol that was lying on its side next to the bathmat, way back behind the toilet. It had clearly rolled there. And suddenly it dawned on me: Warner had probably slipped on the can, and that’s what had caused him to fall and hit his head! And my mind went crazy. Lawsuits. Liability. Then it dawned on me that Rosita would be the one who was blamed!”

“Rosita?”

“Our cleaner!”

“Of course I know Rosita but why . . .”

“She also cleans the Mastersons’ house. *I* got her the job!”

“But if it was an accident, she wouldn’t be in any trouble . . .”

“I would hope so. But you never know. We live in a litigious world. And Rosita has enough problems. She’s got this terrible ex-husband. Let’s just say I can identify with that. And she has some visa issues. I don’t want her to get deported or dragged into any sort of investigation. I think it would kill her. She could lose her job or even her kids, if things got really out of hand. Not that the Mastersons are like that, but you never know when something like this happens. And bottom line, I don’t want the Mastersons to have any problems either. They’re good people.”

“So, you were trying to protect them?”

She nodded. “I didn’t want there to be any blame other than he just slipped in the tub. At the moment I was thinking all this, I heard the sirens. Then I just sort of sprung into action. It was impulsive, but I grabbed the Lysol. And I went downstairs and put it in my handbag just as the police were pulling in the driveway. And when they asked me if I had taken anything, I said no. I choose to look at it as a white lie.”

Joseph paused before speaking. Antonia knew his concerned look and thought he was about to deliver a verdict she didn’t want to hear but instead he surprised her.

“Don’t worry, you did the right thing.”

Antonia sighed audibly with relief. “You think so?”

“Yes. It’s just a can of Lysol. I’m sure it means nothing that you took it. Totally inconsequential.”

“Oh my gosh, I’m so glad you agree.”

“A preemptive strike.”

“Right. As you will recall, past faith in the justice system has never worked in my favor.”

“I remember.”

Once upon a time Antonia had trusted the police. Like everyone, she revered them, and regarded them as protectors and caretakers. That was until she married a policeman. Philip was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. She thought she had found someone to give her stability but instead he traumatized her. They had been married for five years, the last four of which were full of increasing abuse. His brothers in arms closed rank around him and were deaf to her pleas for help. One night he kicked her father when he tried to intervene on her behalf, and two weeks later her father died of the complications. After that, she realized nothing held her in California any longer, and with Genevieve’s prompting, she moved to the East Coast to start a new life and used the settlement that she won from him in civil court to purchase the inn. The only external trace of Philip was the scar he had caused above her right eyebrow, but there was much greater internal damage to her heart and soul.

“I’m sure it’s over-compensation, but it took me a while to stand up for myself and I want to make sure I stand up for others.”

“That’s what Margaret would have liked about you: your fighting spirit.”

Margaret was Joseph’s late wife. After she had died of cancer, Joseph had been living alone in their house on Buell Lane. One night he had a terrible fall, which resulted in a trip to the hospi-

tal. At the urging of his son, who wanted to be able to keep an eye on him, Joseph had reluctantly been considering a move to the city when Antonia had offered him accommodation at the inn instead. Joseph had quickly agreed, and the arrangement worked out perfectly for both of them.

“I bet she was an amazing woman.”

Joseph’s smile faltered. It was still difficult for him to talk about Margaret, the loss still raw. He took off his glasses and wiped them carefully with his handkerchief before changing the subject. “What’s on the menu tonight? It’s *prix-fixe* night if I’m not mistaken? That always brings in the crowds.”

Antonia felt the breeze picking up, causing the leaves in the yard to stir so loudly it sounded as if someone were walking outside the window. She rose and after giving a log one last poke, she turned and faced Joseph. Antonia and Joseph had a routine when they met for drinks before dinner. She would tell him what was on the menu, and he would interject his commentary. For her, cooking was a form of performance, and having a welcome audience made it all the more rewarding.

“Come on, my dear, the show must go on,” he gently coaxed.

Antonia smiled. He was right; not only the show, but also life must go on. She stood up, assumed a professional stance and began speaking in a very theatrical manner.

“For our first course this evening, we have a choice of roasted red pepper soup with a lobster wonton; frisee and fava bean salad with pecorino cheese and pears; or warm Vidalia onion and pancetta tart . . .”

“Did you make the soup yourself?”

“Of course,” said Antonia with a smile. They both knew she made all of her dishes from scratch, so this was part of their shtick.

“Then that’s what I’ll have.”

“Very good.”

“And the main course? Better be some red meat in there.”

“We do have a filet mignon with potato leek gratin and sautéed mixed mushrooms . . .”

“Delicious. Save me a piece . . .”

“But for a gentleman who has been advised by his doctors to reduce his cholesterol intake, there is also a potato crusted Sea Bass with mixed spring vegetables . . .”

“What is ‘mixed spring vegetables’? Did you open a bag from the frozen food section and dump them in?”

“Of course not, what sort of an establishment do you think this is?” asked Antonia with mock horror. “We don’t do Birds-eye here, sir. We have local asparagus and fava beans in a lemon sauce . . .”

“Boring . . .”

“And there is also the option of shrimp risotto with English peas and cherry tomatoes.”

“Will the doctor let me have that?”

“Just this once. Don’t forget that shrimp are high in cholesterol.”

“But worth it.”

“True,” said Antonia. “And I might add that the shrimp are very plump and sweet, as are the cherry tomatoes. You won’t be disappointed.”

“Do I qualify for dessert?”

“Berries and fresh cream?”

“Or?”

“Pear pithivier with caramel ice cream and toasted almonds?”

“You’re getting warmer.”

“Warm strawberry rhubarb pie?”

“From scratch too?”

“Yes, sir,” said Antonia. “Everything is from scratch.”

“Then save me a slice,” said Joseph with a wide grin.

Just before Antonia returned to the kitchen, Joseph handed her an additional stack of papers. He had done a full background check on Warner Caruthers.

“It feels kind of morbid to look through them,” said Antonia with a shake of her head.

“Just take them,” he advised and pressed them into her hand. “You may need to refer to them later.”