

DEFINITELY DEAD

An Empty Nest Mystery

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ONE

“Is he dead?” As I forced the words out around the hand I’d firmly clamped over my mouth to stifle a gag reflex, I inched away from the body sprawled at my feet. The blood pooling beneath Client Number Thirteen, one Mr. Sidney Mandelbaum, followed me, creeping along the asphalt like some B-movie sinister slime out to get me. *Euw!* I jumped to my left to avoid contact.

Blake crouched into a catcher’s position, felt for a pulse, and nodded. “Definitely dead.”

I backed up another step. “You’re sure?”

“Bashed-in skull. Knife sticking out of his heart.” He turned his head and spoke to me over his shoulder. I noticed his skin had taken on a slightly green tinge, but maybe that was a trick of the halogen lights that had switched on to illuminate the twilight-bathed parking lot. Or maybe it was a reflection of my own queasiness. “Yeah, Gracie, I’m sure.”

Green tinge notwithstanding, both Blake’s eyes and the quirky slant of his mouth conveyed *The Look*, the one he saves exclusively for me. And just so there wasn’t any doubt in my mind, *The Voice* accompanied *The Look*.

When I met Blake, he was researching early Fifties television. Although he won’t admit it, I suspect he was first attracted to me because I reminded him of Gracie Allen. Along with a shared name, I bore an uncanny resemblance to the comedienne, including the eerie coincidence of having one blue eye and one green eye. The one difference being that although we were both born dark brunettes, the other Gracie had opted to go blonde.

Most importantly, though, like Gracie Allen, I tend to segue into slightly off-kilter rambling discourse that always makes sense to me but not necessarily to anyone else. The difference? Gracie Allen was acting; I’m not.

Now, after a quarter century of marriage, I’m still a brunette, although a slightly weightier one, still rambling to the tune of my own off-key and off-kilter symphony, and still Blake’s Gracie. I’m not complaining.

His sarcasm aside, Blake Elliot is as sharp as aged Vermont cheddar. So if he said Sidney Mandelbaum was dead, I believed him. I crept a bit closer. Keeping Blake between Sidney and me, I peered over my husband’s broad shoulders. The unfortunate Mr. Mandelbaum lay spread-eagle on the macadam. “Maybe we should have skipped

from Client Twelve to Client Fourteen,” I said. “Like the way floors are numbered in hotels and office buildings.”

Blake stood and brushed his hands together. “Thirteen certainly wasn’t Sidney’s lucky number.”

“Or ours. He said he was coming out for a smoke.” I pointed to the unlit cigar and book of matches floating in the center of a blood puddle. “I’ve got a prospect waiting to meet him.”

“Somehow I don’t think he’s up to it, sweetheart.”

I swatted Blake’s arm. “How can you joke at a time like this? Someone murdered one of our best paying clients.”

Blake raised both eyebrows. “Me joking? What about thirteen?”

“I was serious.” I pointed to Sidney. “This proves how unlucky the number thirteen is.”

Sidney Mandelbaum was a serial *schmooser*, and if you believed him, a serial *schtupper*. Like many single men his age, he’d entered his second randyhood thanks to the marvels of a little blue pill, which made him a desirable commodity among widows and divorcees of a certain age. And thank God for that because we needed the money. Sidney’s murder was a definite financial setback for us.

The loss of Mandelbaum Moolah aside, Sidney wasn’t just dead. I could fool myself into thinking his bashed in skull might be courtesy of a fall down the steep flight of concrete steps at the back of the Moose Lodge, but natural causes hadn’t plunged a knife into his heart. “Omigod!”

Blake reached for me. “What?”

“What if the killer is still here?” I shuddered, quickly scanning the area for any movement, any lurking shadows.

“Go inside. Tell Mrs. What’s-Her-Name—”

“Goldenberg.”

“What?”

“Her name is Goldenberg. Ethel Goldenberg.”

“Tell her he came down with a sudden case of—”

“Of what? Death?”

Blake waved his arms in the air as if he expected someone to slap a logical explanation into his hands. “Of food poisoning. The flu. Menstrual cramps. I don’t know. Think of something. Before she comes looking for you.” He pulled his cell phone from his coat pocket. “I’ll call 911.”

I stared at my normally levelheaded and always logical husband. “Menstrual cramps?”

Blake pointed to the door and mouthed, “Go.”

I wasn’t keen on leaving my husband alone with a dead body and a possibly loitering killer, but I could see the merit in keeping a heavy steel door between Mrs. Ethel Goldenberg and the man I had spent little more than five minutes convincing her to meet.

I ran up the steps as fast as my Kate Spade kitten heel mules would carry me, which admittedly wasn't all that fast. With a grunt and a yank, I opened the back door and went in search of the double-D cup retired bookkeeper who'd taken Client Number Thirteen's breath away—that is, while Client Number Thirteen still had breath.

Crap!

All I wanted to do was sit at my computer and write romance novels while Blake sat across the room and two-finger pecked away at *Pop Goes the Culture*, his epic tome on twentieth century culture and counter-culture and its influences on the media. Or vice versa. It was a real chicken-and-egg sort of thing as far as I was concerned, even if it was my husband's passion. Anyway, dead bodies weren't part of our empty nest blueprint.

I'd formulated a seven-step strategy for the next stage of our lives, going so far as to cross-stitch my plan and frame it over my desk because I believed in keeping both eyes on the prize. It's one of those management mantras they taught us at the mandatory team building retreats I used to attend back when I was gainfully employed as a fabric designer. Who would have thought you could outsource creativity to some Third World nation?

The sampler still hangs above my desk, but now it's more a taunt than a plan, an example of fate spitting in my eye.

PLAN FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE

1. Take early retirement.
2. Collect sizeable pension.
3. Pay off mortgage.
4. Write romance novels.
5. Sell romance novels.
6. Collect enormous royalty checks.
7. Live happily ever after with Pulitzer prize-winning husband.

Not that Blake had yet won a Pulitzer, or even been nominated for one, but I haven't given up hope. We need that prize money. Especially now.

But you know what they say about best-laid plans—they're bound to rear up and bite you in the tush. Six months later, when my unemployment compensation ran out and I still hadn't sold a book—since in most cases you actually have to write a book before you can sell one, and I was nowhere near finished—Blake informed me that I'd have to find a job.

“Or we can sell the house and move into an apartment over an auto repair shop in Newark,” he said. “With double college tuitions, we can't afford your handbag bills, let alone much else on one income.”

Just my luck I had to fall in love with a college professor instead of Warren Buffet or Donald Trump.

Since the smells of gasoline and car exhaust make me queasy and I have a deep-seated, must-own compulsion for every handbag du jour, I sat down at my computer and perused the postings at every online jobsite. I quickly struck out. No one wanted me.

I had just about resigned myself to spending the rest of my days working a minimum wage retail gig, where I'd at least get an employee discount, when I happened to come across an article about a phenomenon called Wing Women, an introduction service where women pose as longtime female friends to help guys meet other women.

That's when inspiration struck. Within two weeks *Relatively Speaking* was up and running, and I became a wing woman of sorts to the senior set.

I did mention I was creative, didn't I?

"So where's this handsome uncle of yours?" asked Mrs. Goldenberg when I found her piling a huge spoonful of ambrosia onto her already overflowing plate.

We had taken Sidney to the monthly five-dollar all-you-can-eat early bird social at the local Moose Lodge. Traditional twenty-something wing women escort their clients to trendy New York clubs. I take mine to various wildlife-with-antlers lodges, houses of worship, and senior citizen centers throughout New Jersey where elderly women usually outnumber the men by at least ten-to-one.

So why do the men need me? My job is twofold. I run interference between my clients and all the women they don't want zeroing in on them, and I offer assurance to the women. As desperate as they may be, they don't want to get hooked up with septuagenarian serial killers or gigolos.

Mrs. Goldenberg was one of three women "Uncle" Sidney had shown an interest in meeting that evening. But she was first on his list.

"The blonde with the casaba melons on her chest," said the none-too-subtle Sid, waving his unlit cigar in Ethel Goldenberg's direction. "Go. Do your thing, kid. She looks hot to trot, and I'm not getting any younger, you know."

He sent me off with a wink-wink and a pat to my tush that I was glad Blake didn't notice. My husband hadn't taken much of a liking to the boorish Sidney Mandelbaum.

Then again, neither had I, but at fifty dollars an hour with a three hour minimum, I could put up with the chauvinistic old coot for as long as his bank account held out. I had romance novels to write, and besides supplying the funds that allowed me to write them, Mr. Mandelbaum was juicy character research. Because Mr. Mandelbaum was quite a character.

Just so you don't get the wrong idea, I don't run a dating or escort service. All I do is mingle and chat with potential prospects, usually breaking the ice with a compliment—often the most difficult part of the evening, given most of these women wear polyester pantsuits and orthopedic shoes, carry vinyl (shudder!) handbags, and haven't updated their hairdos since Jackie Kennedy held court in the White House. After verifying their single status, I steer the conversation to my "uncle" or "father" or "my grandmother's second-cousin-once-removed on my mother's side." If the woman shows an interest, I

introduce her to my client.

It's up to the client to do the rest. If the gods of second-time-around are smiling on him that night, he may go home with a few phone numbers and the promise of a future date. These are not people who meet in bars and hook up for one-night-stands, no matter how much the very recently departed Sidney Mandelbaum boasted about *schtupping live wires*. *Wink-wink*.

"I'm afraid Uncle Sid isn't feeling quite himself," I told Mrs. Goldenberg.

"Stomach trouble?" she asked. "My Arnold, may-he-rest-in-peace, had stomach trouble like you wouldn't believe." She rolled her eyes heavenward as she placed a liver-spotted hand on my arm. "What that poor man went through. And what I went through with him. The stories I could tell you—"

"It's not his stomach," I said, hoping to extricate myself from Mrs. Goldenberg before she launched into a graphic telling of *The Tales of Arnold's Intestines*.

"Oh, dear, not his heart, I hope." She removed her hand from my arm and placed it over her own heart.

I offered her a worried frown. "Afraid so. Stabbing pain." At least it wasn't a lie.

When I was four years old, my mother washed my mouth out with soap after I told her my sister had helped herself to the platter of brownies mom had baked for that night's PTA meeting. Too bad the evidence was spread all over my face and hands. To this day the very smell of Lifeboy makes me want to hurl.

Mrs. Goldenberg craned her turkey wattle neck, scanning the room behind me, no doubt, in search of a man clutching his chest. "Where is he? Have you called an ambulance? I should go to him."

As she set her overloaded, flimsy paper plate onto the crowded buffet table, a blob of marshmallow-topped orange Jell-O slid onto the roast beef platter. Mrs. Goldenberg made a *tsking* sound and brushed the ambrosia off with a wadded napkin. "Let's go," she said.

I reached for her arm. "I'm sure the ambulance is already here."

"But he shouldn't be with strangers at a time like this."

I started to remind her that *she* was a stranger, given I never had the opportunity to introduce her to the now dead senior Don Juan, but instead I said, "My husband is with him, and I think it's best we don't crowd the EMTs, don't you?"

Mrs. Goldenberg sighed. "Yes, I suppose you're right." She rifled through her purse until she found a pencil stub and a grocery receipt. "You give your uncle my number. Tell him to call me as soon as he's feeling up to it. I'll visit him in the hospital if he'd like. Every day. I'll make my chicken soup. My dear Arnold, may-he-rest-in-peace, said my chicken soup could cure the warts off a witch's nose."

I took the scrap of paper from her. "I'm sure Uncle Sidney will appreciate that," I said before hurrying toward the back exit.

By the time I slipped out the door, the parking lot was swarming with police. A tarp

draped Sidney's body. Blake and two of the police officers stood off to the side next to a beat-up blue Oldsmobile.

Everyone turned at the sound of the metal door slamming shut behind me. Blake waved me over.

"This is my wife," he said to the officers. "Mr. Mandelbaum was her client." He gestured to first one, then the other. "Detectives Menendez and LaMotta."

Both nodded toward me. "Mind if we ask you some questions, ma'am?" asked Menendez, the older of the two, a woman about my age and height but easily fifty pounds heavier, all in muscle. She looked like she could bench press me without working up a sweat.

LaMotta, a head taller than Menendez, looked like he could bench press her. I was glad they were the good guys.

I rubbed my arms against the cool late summer breeze that had kicked up since I'd left Blake alone with the body. On the other side of the parking lot, stray trash blew up against the chain link fence. Ever the gentleman, Blake removed his navy summer blazer and slipped it over my shoulders. He left his arm draped around me.

"What would you like to know?" I asked Menendez.

The two of them peppered me with questions. How well had I known Sidney Mandelbaum? When had we met? Exactly what was our relationship? (That one caused some raised eyebrows and a bit of explanation.)

"Did you see anyone follow Mr. Mandelbaum outside?" asked LaMotta.

I gasped. "You can't possibly think one of the other seniors killed him! It had to be a random mugging, right?"

"We're just collecting information at this point, Mrs. Elliot. Please answer the question. Did you see anyone follow Mr. Mandelbaum outside?"

I shook my head. "No, but I really wasn't watching. I went to speak to Mrs. Goldenberg."

"And how long would you estimate Mr. Mandelbaum was gone before you went in search of him?" asked Menendez.

I thought for a moment. "Ten minutes? Maybe less."

"You're sure it wasn't longer?"

"No, Mrs. Goldenberg was quite interested in meeting Mr. Mandelbaum. When I couldn't find him anywhere in the lodge hall, I figured he was still outside, puffing away on his cigar. Blake and I came to get him."

Menendez and LaMotta stole a glance at each other. "Why both of you?" asked Menendez.

"Mr. Mandelbaum had wandering hands," Blake offered.

"And since those hands were helping feed us, I didn't want to risk losing a client by having to deck him," I added.

"So he was a dirty old man?" asked Menendez, raising an eyebrow in need of a good

plucking.

I shrugged. “Sidney dabbled in borderline inappropriate behavior. You know how old people are, not necessarily up on the latest political correctness.”

In truth, Sidney’s flirting fingers bothered Blake more than they did me. The textile industry, where I had worked my entire adult life, is rife with guys like Sidney Mandelbaum, and I learned early on how to deal with them without threatening sexual harassment lawsuits seventeen times a day. There’s more than one way to skin the Sidney Mandelbaums of this world.

Blake’s world was different. In academia, political correctness had turned into a zealous religion. Consequently, I have a higher tolerance for such nonsense than my husband. As long as Sidney kept himself to an occasional quick tush pat and didn’t progress to groping, I was willing to put up with his coarseness in exchange for all the business he gave me. Life is a matter of trade-offs.

Menendez and LaMotta exchanged another glance. I wished they’d stop doing that. It reminded me too much of *The Look*. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. My shouldn’t-have-bought-them-but-they-were-on-sale-and-a-steal-so-who-could pass-up-such-a-bargain Kate Spade kitten heeled mules, the gold ones with the rhinestone trim, were pinching my bare, bordering on frostbitten, toes.

After a few more questions that seemed pretty inane and meaningless to me, Menendez and LaMotta finished their interrogation. Menendez handed me her card. “Call me if you remember anything else,” she said.

Once they headed inside to question the assorted seniors, lodge members, and catering staff, I collapsed against my husband’s chest. “Poor Mr. Mandelbaum,” I said.

“Yeah, poor sleazy old Sid.”

I sighed. “But he was a very well-paying old sleaze.”

“I wonder who did him in,” said Blake as we headed to our car.

I glanced up at my husband, surprised that I wasn’t getting a now-do-you-see-why-I-didn’t-want-you-getting-involved-in-this-cockamamie-idea-of-yours? lecture, but he was probably in shock over Sidney’s murder. The lecture would come after the shock wore off.

Blake can be very overprotective. I think he sometimes wishes he’d taken a different career path, one that would have allowed his wife to stay in the kitchen baking cookies all day. But then he probably would have worried I’d burn down the house. Blake is an oxymoron—an unflappable worrywart.

“Not you, too? Come on, Blake. Sid was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, thanks to his need to light up. Knowing Sid, he tried to bargain the mugger down, and it cost him his life.” Muggings were rare in the New Jersey suburbs, but they did happen from time to time and often to the elderly who are easy marks.

Blake clicked the button on his key fob to unlock our Camry. “I don’t think so. And from what I gather, neither do the police.”

I stopped and turned to face him as he held the car door open for me. Have I mentioned my husband is a gentleman? How many twenty-first century men open doors for women? I have to thank my mother-in-law for raising her son right. “Come on, Blake, you can’t think someone deliberately set out to kill Sidney Mandelbaum.”

Blake let go of the door handle and grasped my shoulders, holding me at arm’s length. “After you went to speak to Mrs. What’s-her-name—”

“Goldenberg.”

Blake sighed before starting over, but to his credit he didn’t give me *The Look*. “After you went to speak to Mrs. Goldenberg, the police found Sid’s wallet in his pants pocket. Gracie, the guy had over six hundred dollars on him. This was no mugging. Unless he interrupted a drug deal—”

“In the Moose Lodge parking lot?”

“Exactly. Which means—”

“Someone intentionally killed Sidney Mandelbaum?” Every nerve in my body began to shudder and kept shuddering as I slid into the car. “Maybe someone interrupted the killer, and he didn’t have time to find Sidney’s wallet.” But I found it hard to convince myself of that, let alone Blake. Wouldn’t this fictional someone have run into the Moose Lodge for help?

I made three abortive attempts at fastening my seat belt before Blake took over and snapped the metal tongue into the slot for me. He might be the worrywart of the family, but his hands never shake.

Thinking sleazy old Mr. Mandelbaum had been the unfortunate victim of a mugging gone wrong was bad enough. Contemplating his death may have been at the hands of someone who specifically wanted him pushing up daisies was more than I could handle. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths.

“You okay?” asked Blake after he settled himself behind the wheel.

“Not really.” Aside from a case of uncontrollable shakes, my stomach felt like Mike Tyson had used it for a practice bag. I lowered my head into my lap and continued to inhale a few more deep breaths. “He was a harmless old man, for God’s sake!”

Blake placed his hand on the back of my neck. “Do we really know that?”

I lifted my head and stared into my husband’s deep teal eyes. Blake’s eyes were what first attracted me to him nearly thirty years ago. I was a lowly eighteen-year-old freshman; he was a twenty-four-year-old first year assistant professor assigned to teach English Comp to fifty art majors who wanted to be anywhere but in his classroom.

Luckily for us, there were no rules about student/faculty fraternization back then because a week later I was spending more time at his apartment than my dormitory room.

Teal always was my favorite color.

“Whatever. So maybe we didn’t know all there was to know about Sidney.” Everyone has secrets. I hardly expect my clients to divulge all of them to me when they fill out their application form. Still, Sidney didn’t deserve to end up with a knife in his heart. “We

have to find out who did this,” I said, my newfound resolve overcoming my trembling limbs and sucker-punched stomach.

“*We?*” Blake raised both eyebrows and shot me *The Look*. “*We’re* going to let the police handle this, Gracie.”

“But—”

“No buts. I’m serious. This is totally out of your league. Don’t go pulling an Anastasia Pollack on me. We’re not characters in some book or TV show where there’s always a happy ending on the last page or at the end of the hour. This is a real murder with real blood and a real killer.”

“I know that.”

“Good. Then think of me. Think of the twins. What would we do if anything happened to you?”

“The twins are nearly nineteen, off on their own most of the year, and you’d grab one of those Size Two coeds who are always throwing themselves at you.”

Did I mention besides those deep teal eyes, Blake bears an amazing resemblance to Hugh Jackman? Albeit, Hugh Jackman after that sexy shock of hair of his turns silver and his face develops deeper laugh lines around the corners of his eyes and mouth.

Forget all that feminist propaganda about God being a woman. If God were a woman, women would become distinguished as they aged, and men would just grow gray and wrinkled. Between that and women being the ones to suffer through the birthing process and menopause, God has to be a man. Any sensible woman would have figured that out a long time ago.

Blake’s permanent laugh lines deepened into a scowl. “Have I ever given you any indication that I want one of those Size Two asses?”

I raised an eyebrow. Unlike Detective Menendez, I did take the time to pluck out any strays that threatened my perfect arch. “Not even in a fantasy or two?”

He leaned over and planted a kiss on my cheek. “From the moment I set eyes on your ass I wanted it starring in all my fantasies.”

“Even though it’s several sizes larger now?”

He settled back into his seat, started up the car, and shifted into reverse. “Even when you drive me crazy. Like now.”

Of the two of us, Blake is the sensible one, the solid, staid, left-brained academician who analyses situations to death before making a decision. I’m the harebrained, right-brained partner who dives into the deep end head first, even though I can’t swim. He’s George Burns; I’m Gracie Allen—the poster couple for *Opposites Attract*.

And as much as I love my husband, I’d never been very good at taking orders. Anyway, I had a book to research. Thanks to Mr. Mandelbaum’s untimely demise, my romantic comedy was quickly transforming into a romantic suspense. Now all I had to do was figure out who and why. If I happened to uncover Sidney Mandelbaum’s killer along the way....

I smiled at Blake. "I'll be good," I said. And if I couldn't be good, I'd be careful. Careful not to let Blake know what I was up to.