

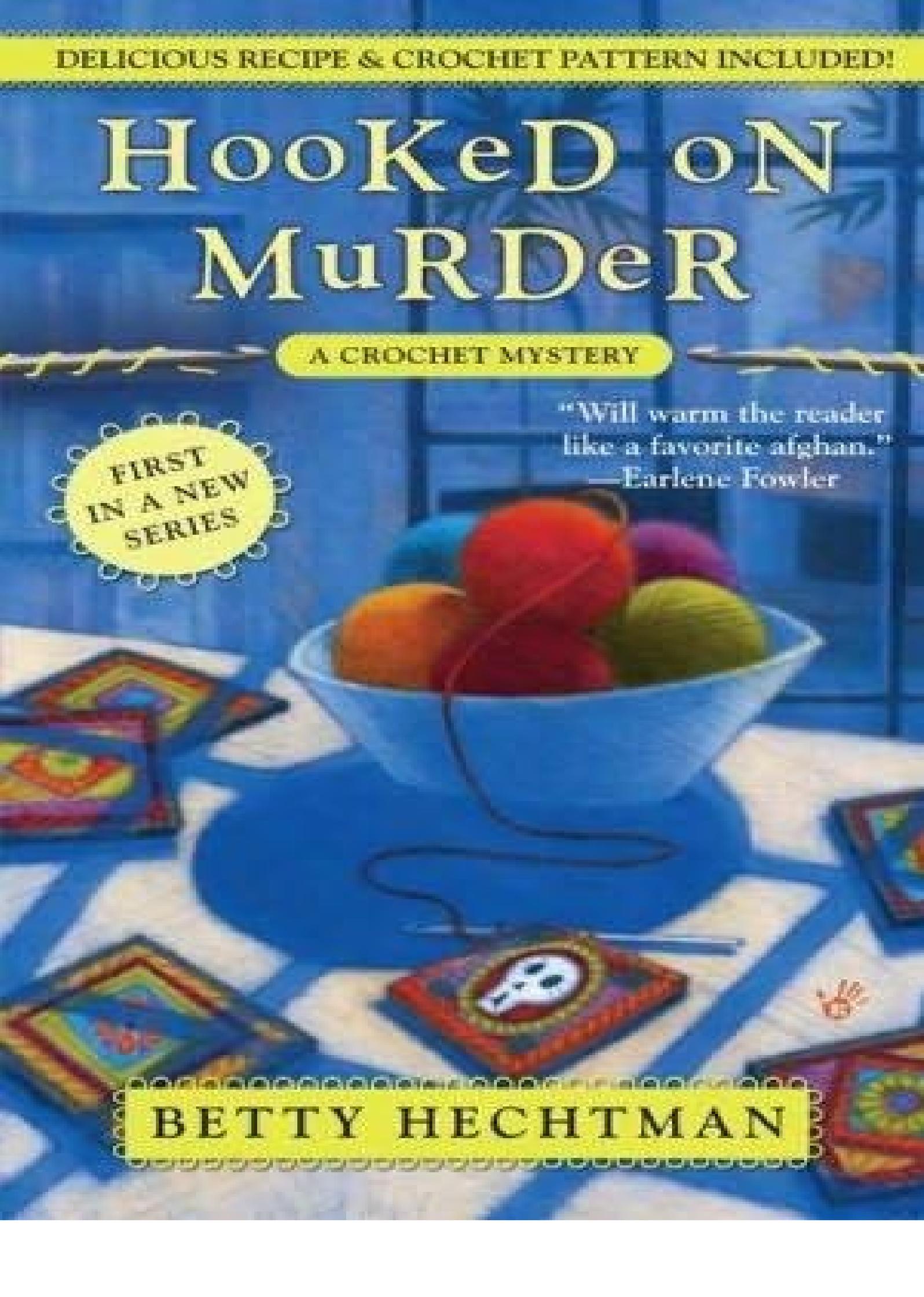
DELICIOUS RECIPE & CROCHET PATTERN INCLUDED!

# HOOKED ON MURDER

A CROCHET MYSTERY

FIRST  
IN A NEW  
SERIES

"Will warm the reader  
like a favorite afghan."  
—Earlene Fowler

The background of the cover is a photograph of a table covered with a white and blue patterned tablecloth. In the center, a light blue bowl is filled with several balls of yarn in various colors: red, orange, purple, and green. A red yarn ball is in the foreground, with a strand of red yarn trailing across the tablecloth. Several crocheted afghans are scattered around the bowl. One prominent afghan in the foreground features a white skull design on a red and purple background. Other afghans have various colorful geometric patterns. The overall scene is cozy and craft-oriented.

BETTY HECHTMAN

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# HOOKED ON MURDER

BETTY HECHTMAN



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME. NEW YORK

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# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CeeCee's Granny Square Washcloth](#)

[Helen's Pound Cake](#)

[Buttercream Frosting](#)

## **“We can do things with crochet that you knitters only dream about . . .”**

Detective Heather appeared a little stunned by Adele’s barrage, but quickly shrugged it off . . .

“As long as I’m here, I’d like to ask you all something. Was it common for Ellen to forget her hooks?”

“Not at all,” CeeCee began. “I was surprised when Molly told me. It was completely unlike Ellen. She was highly organized and into detail . . .”

“Really,” Detective Heather said, taking out her notebook and pen. “So, then you saw the bag of hooks after she left?”

CeeCee shook her head. “Not me.”

The detective looked toward Adele, Meredith and Sheila. “You must have seen the bag of hooks?”

They all shook their heads.

“Hmm, so, Mrs. Pink, you were the only one who actually saw the bag?”

This wasn’t sounding good. I didn’t like the way Detective Heather was staring at me. I thought about what I’d said to Dinah about how it wasn’t my job to find out who killed Ellen. I’d just changed my mind.

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*For Burl and Max.  
You guys are the best!*

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I can't forget my cheerleaders, Roberta Martia and Judy Libby, who have been joined by Betty Mehling and Diana Lang.

Although, like Molly, I did teach myself how to crochet with a kids' kit, Alice Kan and the Tuesday group helped me get past the basics. Paula Tesla broadened my crochet horizons and became my go-to person. She also taught me about the generous spirit of crocheters, who really do make things to raise money for charity or to give to those in need.

Crocheters rule!

Joan Jones, Linda Bruhns, Jan Gonder and Jack Warford met Molly first and gave her a thumbs-up.

And thank you to my cake tasters, Burl and Max, even if you couldn't wait until it was cool enough for the icing.

## CHAPTER 1

---

When I stopped by Ellen Sheridan's house to drop off the crochet hooks she'd left at the bookstore, I expected to be in and out with maybe a thank-you and a few brownie points. I certainly didn't expect to end up in handcuffs.

Finding her front door open, I assumed she was bringing in groceries. I did a courtesy knock and said a few hellos and went on in. I called out her name as I continued down the hall to the living room. It looked out on the backyard, and I was so intent on seeing how the landscaping had changed since I'd been there last, I didn't look down—not at first, anyway. Not until I screamed at the shock of stepping on something other than floor. I screamed again, even louder, when I realized I had stepped on Ellen's leg and she might not be alive. She was sprawled across the champagne-colored carpet with a fireplace poker next to her head.

My feet suddenly seemed unable to move and my mind unable to focus. The only thought that kept going through my mind was to check her pulse on the chance that her condition wasn't as final as it looked.

With my heart pounding, dry mouthed and light-headed, I kneeled next to her. Just as my fingers landed on her neck, I heard a rustle.

"Freeze." The voice was male and full of authority. I followed his command, turning my head even so slightly to look over my shoulder and see who the voice belonged to. An LAPD officer with a crew cut and a grim expression had both his hands on his gun, and it was pointed at me.

"Hands on your head," he ordered. Without hesitation, I complied, though as I did, the tote bag on my wrist slid down my arm.

Only later did I find out how this moment of supreme bad timing happened. All afternoon, the Neighborhood Watch captain had been concerned about the open door. He thought it looked suspicious when I went in, and called to report it. The cop had been down the street, staking out a stop sign that was notorious for being ignored. He'd answered the call and been approaching the famous open door when I started to scream.

Not taking his eyes off me, the officer stepped toward Ellen, crouched down and, releasing one hand from the gun, put two fingers on her neck. He was close enough for me to see that the name on his badge was Steven James.

"That's what I was going to do." I hoped that would make it clear that I was trying to help Ellen. After a moment he stood up and shook his head with an even grimmer expression.

"This isn't the way it looks, Officer James. I just got here. I was dropping this off." I moved my elbow to show off the red tote bag. I had taken his command to freeze seriously and was still on my knees.

"Drop it," he commanded, then realized the impossibility of the order with my hands on my head and told me I could move my arm to let the bag go.

As soon as the tote bag hit the floor, Officer James pulled it away with his foot and I put my hands back on my head. He stepped behind me, and the next thing I knew, he'd used his free hand to slap a pair of cuffs on me.

"What are you doing?" I squealed.

"Ma'am, I need to secure the scene, and I can't do it if I have to worry about what you're doing." I promised I'd stay put if he took off the cuffs, but he didn't budge.

With me restrained, he holstered his gun and got busy on his radio. The truth of what had happened

really hit me when I heard him say “homicide.” Someone had killed Ellen. My knees felt weak, and I was glad I wasn’t standing. Otherwise I might have collapsed. My stomach began to do flip-flops, and I pulled against the handcuffs.

When Officer James finished on the radio, he slid on a pair of rubber gloves, opened the red tool bag and dumped out the contents. A pile of red, green and blue metal rods hit the carpet with a jingling noise. He eyed them suspiciously. “Ma’am, you want to tell me what these are?”

“Crochet hooks,” I said. “They’re for making scarves, and blankets and those cute little cloche hats. Not that I know how to crochet. I work in a bookstore, so the only yarns I deal with are tall tales.” The kneeling had become uncomfortable, and I asked if I could stand up. He agreed and even helped me up. I was glad to see my legs had recovered.

“Hmm, so then that’s what that is.” He gestured toward Ellen’s hand. A wooden crochet hook lay across her palm, with a small ball of beige yarn next to it.

I nodded. “I think that’s one of the fancy kind. Her name is Ellen Sheridan. She leads”—I faltered—“make that *led* the crochet group that meets at Shedd & Royal Books and More. That’s the bookstore where I work. I’m the event-coordinator-slash-community-relations person. I handle author events and book signings, and usually arrange for groups to meet at the bookstore. But Mr. Shedd is the one who invited the crochet group.” I took a breath. “I know I’m rambling. It’s what I do when I get nervous, and I’m really nervous for obvious reasons. And I’m afraid if I stop talking I might throw up.” Officer James’s serious expression shifted momentarily, and now he looked nervous. He fluttered his hand quickly to encourage me to keep going with the chatter. “I’ve never been in the middle of anything like this before, and . . .”

“I have to check out the rest of the house,” he said, apparently realizing that the only way he was going to get a word in was by talking over me. He took my arm. “And it looks like you’re coming with me.”

“Check the rest of the house? For what? Why do I have to go?” It came out like one continuous sentence. I couldn’t see much of his face, since he was standing to the side and just a little behind me, but I heard him let out an impatient snort.

“First order of business is making sure it’s safe. I have to make sure there isn’t somebody with a shotgun hiding somewhere. Second order of business is to make sure there aren’t any more bodies. And it’s safer for you if you’re with me.”

After hearing the shotgun part, I was glad to go along.

As he took my arm to steer me away from the living room, it registered for the first time that it had been trashed. Cushions were strewn around with their stuffing coming out, and the coffee table had been upturned. Papers were scattered over everything. Officer James seemed to notice it, but not react. I shuddered.

He didn’t seem bothered by going through the house, either. But, then, dealing with crime scenes was his business. It certainly wasn’t mine, and I felt uncomfortable and intrusive going into the private areas. The worst was Ellen’s bedroom. Did I really want to know that she had left her bra hanging on the door to the bathroom? Or that she had a pile of *Hollywood Reporters* next to the bed that she was never going to get to read? The hardest were the photos of her children on the dresser. Her son and daughter had played soccer with my boys. Somewhere they were going through their day just like any other, only it wasn’t.

I was relieved that we didn’t find anyone hiding in any of the closets or under any of the beds. There were no more bodies, either. The rest of the house appeared untouched until we got to what looked like an office. The floor was a chaotic mix of papers, office supplies and furniture.

“What do you think that means?” I said, continuing with my rambling. “She must have interrupted the burglar before they had a chance to go through the whole place, huh?”

He didn’t answer, and I’m not even sure he heard me as he pulled open the door to look into the powder room. Apparently, letting me blather on didn’t include listening. I’d probably lost him “crochet hooks.” Though he did give me a couple of nervous looks when there’d been a lull in my one-sided conversation.

Maybe his not listening wasn’t such a bad thing. In my nervousness I had veered off the topic of Ellen and started giving way too much personal information about my husband, Charlie, dying a little over a year ago and how hard it was to start a whole new chapter of my life. I imagine a shrink would have a heyday with where my rambling had taken me.

We made a brief tour of the kitchen. No one hiding in there, though coffee mugs, cereal bowls and even cereal were still out on the counter. Who would have thought the Sheridans ate wild-berried marshmallow puffs? I’d have figured they were more the shredded-wheat types. I also changed my opinion about Ellen’s being a neat freak.

As Officer James continued to lead me back to the front hall, a flurry of activity interrupted the eerie silence of the house. Two paramedics were walking in, along with a cop carrying a roll of yellow tape. Suddenly a petite ball of energy with spiky salt-and-pepper hair roared through the door.

“Molly?” Dinah said, stopping short. Her eyes grew wide when she saw my handcuffs. “What’s going on?” She glanced back toward the living room and noticed Ellen’s body. She had the same response I’d had, and screamed.

Officer James let go of my arm and stepped in front of her, trying to block her further entry. “You can’t come in here.”

“Too late, I’m already in,” she said, holding her ground.

He gave her a dirty look. “Okay, fine. But now you can’t leave until the detectives talk to you.”

“What are you doing here?” I whispered to Dinah. She explained that she had been driving by and had seen my car out front. It’s a real standout, a vintage—i.e., old—Mercedes in teal green. The color of the 1993 190E was so rare that when I saw another one, the driver and I shared a wave of solidarity.

“When I saw the police cars, I had to find out what was going on,” she said, glancing down the hall again. “Is that Ellen Sheridan?” she stammered.

I nodded, and she gulped. I think Dinah is somewhere in her fifties, though she won’t tell anyone, including me, her best friend, exactly where, insisting that people peg you when they know your age. She’s an instructor at the local community college, and she claims that teaching freshman English to kids who still act like they’re in high school has prepared her for anything, but apparently not this. Suddenly appeared a little green around the edges as she pulled at the burnt orange scarf wound around her neck. Dinah goes for the arty look, lots of layers and scarves and dangling earrings.

Just when I thought Dinah was going to lose it, Officer James escorted us into the front yard and then began draping the yellow tape across the entrance. Ellen’s house was a one-story white wood-frame house that took up most of the width of the lot. A tall pepper tree shaded the front yard with its lacy leaves. The grass grew on either side of the half-circle driveway, and the white picket fence that marked the front of the yard was lined with coral roses. It didn’t look like a murderhouse. It looked like the kind of place that gave out big candy bars on Halloween and had nice parties with rental tents in the backyard and A-list caterers. It just showed you couldn’t go by appearances.

Beyond the low fence, it was beginning to look like a street fair. More cop cars and news crews were parked on both sides of the street. A police helicopter was circling, and there was the loud *thwack* of news helicopters in a hover pattern. And since all this activity was not a common sight

the upscale area, the neighbors had come out to see what was going on. I saw more than one familiar person look at Dinah and me and shake her head in dismay.

I thought things were turning around when I saw a black Crown Victoria pull up and Barry Greenberg get out. That's Detective Barry Greenberg, who just happens to be my sort-of boyfriend. Though the sort-of part was in my head. He saw us as a sure thing.

Barry would get this all straightened out and have me uncuffed. Then Dinah and I'd be out of there.

I didn't like the way his expression darkened when Officer James walked up to him and pointed at us. There was a lot of talking and head-shaking, none of which looked like the easy fix I was hoping for. Finally Barry walked over to us, holding up his hands apologetically.

"Sorry, but I have to step down."

"What?" I wailed, expecting him to tell the uniforms that he knew us and he'd take over.

Barry is your basic tall, dark and sexy in a mature sort of way. He was dressed in his detective outfit of a suit, white shirt and subdued gray-tone tie. He made a call on his cell with his back to us. When he clicked off, he turned toward Dinah and me.

"I can't handle this case. You just can't be the lead detective when your girlfriend was found hanging over a dead body."

"It works for me," I protested.

"Well, any defense attorney would make mincemeat of the prosecution if he knew that's what we're talking about. I could lose my job."

"All right," I grumbled. It wasn't as if I had a choice in the matter anyway, so I might as well agree. There'd be another set of detectives in no time, he promised, and no, he couldn't take off my handcuffs. The new detectives would.

When I saw who the new detectives were, I almost choked. Detective Heather Gilmore and her partner took over. It wasn't her partner, Rick Allen, I was concerned about. It was Detective Heather.

Though Barry insisted it wasn't true, I knew she had the hots for him and a death wish for me. We had run into her at a beachfront restaurant, and it had been totally obvious to me how she felt about him, though Barry seemed mystified when I brought it up. All her hair-twirling and leaning in close to share some little cop story was just Heather being friendly, as far as he was concerned. All the hot looks she gave him didn't register, nor did the North Pole stare she gave me.

Detective Heather was darling. She was slender and young, and had white-blond curls that framed her face. Even in her dark suit, it was obvious that she had curves. I was a little soft around the edges with nice brown hair but no flowery word to describe the color. Still, Barry preferred me.

I thought it might have something to do with my cooking. You knew Detective Heather was a microwave-heater of store-made stuff, at best. I was all about cooking from scratch, slow-cooked roasts with scalloped potatoes, cakes with buttercream icing. Not that any of this was going to help me now.

"Don't worry. She'll just ask you what happened and let you go," Barry said as he headed over to speak to her. Even at a distance I could see how her face lit up when he got close. It got worse as they were talking. Barry's back was to me, so I couldn't see his reaction, but she leaned in close and touched his arm. It was even worse than the hair twirling from before. Barry said something to her and they both looked my way. He kept talking and she kept staring at me with a hard expression, though she wasn't that happy with what he was saying.

I was getting more and more uncomfortable.

Finally she seemed to agree to something and turned back to face him. I couldn't believe what she

did next. She flicked her hair back from her face in what had to be the most obvious flirt move in the book. ~~As he turned to go, she touched his shoulder, and I groaned.~~

He glanced back at me and gave me a smile and a thumbs-up as he headed for his car.

Detective Heather took charge immediately. She sent Dinah off with her partner and then focused on me. I hoped she'd suggest we talk on one of the nice benches along the fence in the front yard, but she had other ideas. She led me to the backseat of one of the black-and-whites and gestured for me to get in.

"It's more private," she said.

And a lot more embarrassing.

She waited until I was about to slide into the car to remove the handcuffs. "The officer was within his rights, you know. His first duty was for his own safety and then to secure the scene. He can do whatever he has to, to anyone he sees as a threat."

I had a hard time with the last part. On what planet did I look like a threat? And I didn't buy her privacy comment. If that was really what she was after, there was always her black Crown Victoria. Even though it never showed in her even expression, I knew she was enjoying my discomfort. She stood next to the open back door and took out a nice-looking black ballpoint pen and a black reporter's notebook.

Not only was it claustrophobic with that cage separating the front from the back, but the seat itself was some kind of indestructible plastic that gave me the willies. It seemed way too easy for her to merely shut the door and signal a cop to take me away.

She started by asking the correct spelling of my name, as if there were many ways to spell Molly Pink.

"Aren't you supposed to read me my rights?" I asked warily.

She stopped writing and looked at me. "Only if I was going to arrest you." She paused for a beat and then leaned toward me. "Unless you think I should arrest you." Her perfectly shaped eyebrows rose into a question. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

I rolled my eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. It was just a matter of bad timing."

I explained my Good Samaritan act.

I pointed to the red tote bag some investigator was bringing out. "Those are the hooks. You do know what crochet hooks are?" I asked.

She nodded and gave me a withering look. "Of course I recognize crochet hooks."

She held up her handbag. It had wooden handles, but the body was made out of a variety of stitches of blue yarn. I had seen something like it in a fancy store at the mall, with a fancy price tag to match. "Looks just like that Balboa bag, doesn't it? I made it," she said proudly.

"Oh, then you crochet," I said, thinking our conversation had turned friendly. But her eyes flared.

"No, I knit." She pointed out the intricate cable stitches that gave the purse its sculpted shape.

"Knit, crochet, it's all the same, isn't it? Yarn, metal things." I tried to sound light. She shook her head with a boy-are-you-stupid expression.

"No, they're not," she said in a clipped tone.

Who knew she was so serious about her yarn work?

She scribbled some notes in her notebook and then asked if I had noticed anyone outside when I got in.

"Oh, you mean like the burglar?"

“What makes you think there was a burglar?” She moved just a little closer to me as if she wanted to hear my every word.

“I’ve seen enough cop shows to recognize a burglary scene. There was stuff all over the place. Obviously Ellen Sheridan walked in on them and they clobbered her. The fireplace tool was right next to her head.”

Heather’s blue eyes locked on me. “Or that’s what somebody wanted us to think.” Something about her look made the hair on the back of my neck stand at attention. Did she think that somebody wanted me?

After a moment she straightened and asked for my personal information. Though she explained that it was just for identification purposes, I thought there was a certain curiosity factor, too.

She began with age. I knew I wasn’t under oath or anything, but I gave her the truth, forty-eight, which compared to her perky mid-thirtysomething probably seemed ancient. If she asked for my weight, I was going to knock off a few pounds, which I doubted even counted as lying. But she skipped right to my marital status, and when she heard “widowed,” I half expected her to ask if I planned to marry again. Instead she just muttered an automatic “sorry.” It was in the same tone someone says “you’re welcome” after you say “thank you.”

Finally she asked for some samples from me, so they could separate my fingerprints and hair from the others at the crime scene. One of the investigators showed up and took my fingerprints and a few strands of hair. Then, to my great relief, Detective Heather let me go.

I was thrilled to get in the green mobile and head for home.

The phone was ringing when I walked in. I grabbed the cordless and started walking around the house turning on lights.

“Mother.” The word stretched into a sentence of disapproval. “Why didn’t you answer your cell phone? Are you watching the news?” It was my older son, Peter’s, shorthand for “turn on the TV.” I checked my cell in my pocket as I headed to the den. It had once again set itself to silent. I flipped open the flat-screen and swallowed hard when I caught the image of myself in the police car. Detective Heather certainly photographed well. I couldn’t say the same for me. I looked like I’d felt, rumpled, and upset.

“How could you?” he said, and I could just picture him looking heavenward.

How could I what? Did he really think it was part of my afternoon plan to trip over Ellen Sheridan’s body and end up on TV so I could embarrass him? Peter’s a William Morris TV agent and very concerned about his image. He’s been the uptight Brooks Brothers type since he was a kid. He’s a little short in the sense of humor department, though you’d think someone with a name like Peter Pind would have one.

He wasn’t happy until I apologized—for what, I’m not sure. Then, when he’d heard the whole story, he asked me if I needed a lawyer.

“I hope not,” I said with a shudder.

Call waiting beeped, and I hit the button. It was a frantic Dinah. The detective had let her go almost immediately, and she wanted to make sure I was okay since, when she’d left, I’d been sitting in the cruiser. I assured her I’d made it home unarrested.

Before I could click off, another call came in. It was my younger son, Samuel.

“Ma, are you all right?” There was concern rather than disapproval in his voice.

I was surprised he had even heard about my recent escapade, since he rarely watched television. It turned out Peter had called him.

“I could come over,” he offered. Samuel was totally different from Peter, softer, less judgmental. But, then, he was a musician. Though he was head barista at a coffee place to pay his rent.

“Peter said you were in trouble.”

“‘Trouble’ is kind of a strong word. I had kind of a bad day, but it’s over now.” Samuel had taken his father’s death hard, and I knew he was worried something might happen to me. I had to reassure him that I was fine. Well, I was, almost.

After hanging up with Samuel, I took a shower and changed my clothes, but I couldn’t seem to wash away the image of Ellen sprawled on the carpet.

Blondie, the terrier mix I’d recently adopted, was sitting by the back door, staring at her leash. Her world was a lot less complicated than mine, and obviously she didn’t think my finding a dead body was an excuse for skipping her walk. I thought it might do me some good, anyway. But I was still tense when we returned. Blondie had a catlike personality and went off to the bedroom to sit in her chair.

I tried watching TV, but it didn’t help and I only made myself more nervous by constantly flipping through channels. I needed to do something. I wandered around the living room, feeling at loose ends. Normally I loved my house, even if Peter was trying to get me to sell it and move to a condo. I couldn’t understand why I needed all this space now that I was alone.

But tonight nothing felt right. I didn’t even enjoy the way the whole back of the house looked out onto the yard. The flower bed and the orange trees barely registered. If Charlie had been here, he’d have known what to do to get me out of this funk. But, then, if Charlie had been here, none of this would have happened. I wouldn’t have gotten the job at the bookstore, and I wouldn’t have known anything about Ellen and her damn crochet hooks.

There was only one antidote to my nerves that always worked—cooking. I went into the kitchen, considered my options and chose caramel corn. I’d make it and watch an old movie and try to forget about everything.

None of that paper-bag microwave stuff for me. I poured oil and popcorn into the bottom of a saucepan, stuck on a lid and turned on the fire. The room filled with the smell of it popping, reminding me of movie theaters and events with the kids. I emptied the finished product into a bowl and got ready to make the caramel part. The candy thermometer was already stuck onto the side of the pot, holding the butter and sugar, ready to go. The butter portion looked a little scant. I opened the refrigerator, and my gaze stopped on the six-pack of Hefeweizen. I had noticed it on sale and without thinking bought it for Charlie. He loved the wheat beer very chilled with a slice of lemon.

I felt my eyes tear up. “I’m past this,” I said out loud, and then doubled the amount of extra butter.

Once the caramel mixture reached the hard ball stage, I poured it over the popcorn. While it cooled, I looked through my DVD collection and found a frothy Audrey Hepburn movie.

Popcorn in hand, I hunkered down in the den and started the movie. By the time it was half over, I stopped thinking about Ellen’s body, and made a serious dent in the candy-covered popcorn. Was it my imagination, or were my khaki slacks already a little tighter through the hips? I really needed to find an outlet for my nerves with fewer calories.

Just as Audrey sat down at her typewriter and William Holden began to dictate a love scene, I heard my kitchen door open and shut, and Barry called a greeting. A moment later he came in the den. He was still dressed in his suit, and was pulling off his tie.

“You bought Hefeweizen?” he said, holding up a bottle before taking a sip. “I didn’t know you drank beer.”

There was an odd moment. I almost wanted to say, "That's for Charlie." Then logic kicked in. Charlie wasn't going to drink that beer, and neither was I.

"I bought it by mistake," I said, finally.

Barry's dark eyes clouded, and without my saying any more, he understood. He set the bottle down and didn't pick it up again. He eyed the bowl of caramel corn.

"Have some."

"There's no connection to Charlie with that, is there?"

I shook my head, and he grabbed a handful. As soon as the flavor kicked in, he got a look of ecstas

"Better than beer, anyway." He dropped his tie, took off his jacket and sank down next to me on the couch. "I wanted to make sure you were okay. Last time I saw you, you didn't look so good."

"I think stepping on the leg of your dead neighbor will kind of do that."

"Yeah, they always say your first body is the toughest."

"First body!" I squealed. "How about first, last and everything-in-between body? I don't want repeat performance."

"And why exactly is it you were standing over said body?" he asked.

*Here we go again.* I repeated the story about being a nice guy and returning Ellen's hooks. "Next time I think I'll just call," I said when I finished.

"You understand why I couldn't take the case."

I nodded halfheartedly. "Well, Detective Heather ought to take herself off it, too. She's personally involved. She'd like to buy me a ticket to the moon so she could have you all to herself."

"You flatter me," he said, putting his arm around me and pulling me close.

"No, you're just blind." I reminded him of the scene in the Sheridan front yard. He didn't seem to have any memory of the hair flicking or arm touching.

"She's a good detective, fair and impartial. Besides, you didn't do it, did you?" he said, his mouth sliding into a grin.

I rolled my eyes. "Does the phrase 'all's fair in love and war' mean anything to you?"

Blondie ambled in and looked at Barry.

"Some watchdog," he said, shaking his head. "Doesn't she know how to bark?"

"When the mood suits her," I said, reaching out to pat her head.

"You shouldn't leave your back door open. You never know who might drop in," he said, leaning in to kiss me. "Got to go."

He didn't have to explain. I knew it was something to do with his son. Barry was divorced. His son lived back east and had had sole custody of him. Jeffrey was thirteen and had recently come to stay with Barry, who was very serious about the father thing. It cut into his social life and mine. But he always reminded me that if I was willing to kick up our relationship a notch, by moving in with him, getting engaged or, even better, getting married, then things would be different.

I got up and packed the rest of the caramel corn to go. We'd been over this before and again I told him I would rather have a chopped-up social life than a relationship I wasn't ready for.

"Sorry, babe," Barry said. "But for me the few months we've been seeing each other are enough. I know I want to move on to something more. I understand you still need more time."

It wasn't just because of getting over Charlie. It seemed like all my life I'd been setting aside what I wanted, for somebody else. My older brother was conveniently always gone, leaving me to deal with

my mother, the original diva. Her profession was backup singer, but she was all star at home. My father, the skin doctor, was either at work or quietly letting her be the center of attention. I felt more like her road manager than her daughter.

Charlie and I had married young. Peter and Samuel came along soon after. Whatever I had thought of for myself somehow went out the window after that. I loved doing all the PTA stuff, going on school field trips and attending every game either boy played in. I was glad to keep things together for Charlie at home and help him out at work. But then when he died, something had happened. Once I was semifunctional and realized I had to rebuild my life, I saw it was just that: my life. For the first time there was no one to defer to, and even with the occasional loneliness, I discovered I liked the freedom. I could do laundry at midnight, fall asleep on the couch reading or have ice cream for dinner and not have to answer to anyone.

All those years I'd been the wind beneath everybody's wings. Now, for the first time, I was the one doing the flying. It was scary and exciting.

I walked Barry to the door and handed him the bag.

By now the fluffy feeling of the movie had worn off, and I had a stomachache from the caramel corn and was back to thinking full-time about Ellen's body and Detective Heather. There was something I'd forgotten to mention, or maybe I hadn't wanted to mention it. Either way, I'd said nothing about it. Ellen and I had more of a connection than crochet hooks.

## CHAPTER 2

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SHEDD & ROYAL BOOKS AND MORE FACED VENTURA Boulevard, which was the main drag along the south end of the San Fernando Valley. Some city planner types had gotten the idea of trying to make Ventura Boulevard look different as it passed through the different Valley communities. Thanks to the Tarzan connection, the strip going through Tarzana had been designated “Safari Walk.” They’d hung metal silhouettes of giraffes, lions and other animals from some of the streetlights and stuck some topiary elephants, giraffes, etc., along the sidewalks. The final touch was an occasional brick sidewalk square with a boulder stuck on it.

The bookstore had a topiary giraffe out front. The only time anyone seemed to notice it was when a red Ford Focus had jumped the curb and run into it. That ivy-covered animal was pretty tough. The picture in the newspaper had shown it on its side, unscathed except for the loss of a few leaves. The car, however, had been a mess.

The actual status of Tarzana was a little confusing. Along with Encino, Studio City, Sherman Oaks and the multitude of other Valley communities, it was technically part of the urban sprawl of the city of Los Angeles. But in most people’s minds, there was the City and the Valley. The City side of the Santa Monica Mountains was more temperate, thanks to the ocean breeze, and made up of odd-angle main streets that had started out as cow paths to the ocean. It had Hollywood, Westwood, Brentwood and the supertrendy shopping streets frequented by celebs. Some people considered it hipper.

The Valley had plenty of houses with rural-style mailboxes, and you could still find a lot big enough to have a horse. The streets were wider and mostly on a grid pattern. It was hotter in the summer and colder in the winter, but we had more trees, more parking, more sushi restaurants and the lure of mountain walks just minutes away.

I had been working at the bookstore for about six months as community relations/event coordinator. It was my job to bring new customers into the bookstore, and to that end I had placed the event area in the window overlooking Ventura. The plan was that passersby could look in and see something going on, and they’d come in and check it out. Though this morning it didn’t look as though there was much to advertise.

Even from across the bookstore it was obvious that not much was going on with the crochet group. Actually, “group” was a bit of a stretch. There were only three women sitting around the end of the long table. And one of them, Adele Abrams, worked for the bookstore. But, then, it was only their first meeting since Ellen’s demise. As I looked at them, I realized I didn’t know much about the group. I had heard they’d been together for a couple of months, although they’d only started meeting at the bookstore a few weeks earlier. Before that, they’d been meeting Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at the yarn store down the street until it went out of business.

My thoughts turned to Ellen, and I realized that several days had gone by with no further word from Detective Heather. As far as I was concerned, no news was definitely good news. She had just been trying to make me sweat that afternoon and must have moved on to look for the burglar type who had done it. I was glad I hadn’t brought up my history with Ellen.

What would have been the point of telling Detective Heather that Ellen and Charlie had been partners in their public-relations firm, Pink Sheridan? Or what a mess there had been when he died?

I had made the mistake of thinking I could take over his position. It wasn’t as if I had no experience. I had worked with Charlie when he started out on his own, and even after he had gone into partnership with Ellen, I had done a number of things, including setting up events and even some hand holding.

But Ellen was against it from the start. She claimed Charlie's clients were calling her and had no confidence in me. I always wondered whether it was the other way around—like, maybe she had called them and talked me down.

After less than a month, Ellen had dropped a check on my desk and said I could take it and get on with my life, or we could bring in lawyers. She insisted that buying me out was doing me a big favor. Charlie's death was still too raw for me to have the energy to fight her, so, I took the check. Before she had even cleaned out my desk, Natalie Shaw arrived. She wasn't going to be a partner, just an associate, which really meant doing all the work while Ellen got the glory. The firm was still called Pink Sheridan, but all the Pinks had left the building.

I glanced at the crochet three again and debated what to do. True, it had been Mrs. Shedd who had invited them to move their meetings here, and they'd hardly needed me for the few weeks they'd been coming. But now that they were Ellenless, everything had changed, and I felt they were more my responsibility. They were just sitting there with their balls of yarn and metal hooks lying idly on the table.

"Ladies, how are you doing?" I said, walking up to the group.

"Pink, I've got it covered," Adele said, giving me a look of dismissal. I tried not to clench my teeth at her calling me by my last name. She knew I hated it, which was why she did it. But why show her that it worked?

Adele and I'd had a problem from day one. She had been hoping to get promoted to my job, but when Mrs. Shedd hired me instead, Adele hadn't taken it well. Mrs. Shedd had given her the children's department and story time as conciliation, but it had just annoyed her. Adele wasn't a kind person to begin with, and the idea of having to read stories and be friendly was a real stretch for her.

I ignored her comment and glanced at the other two women. I recognized both of them. Sheila Altman worked as a receptionist at the gym down the street, and it was hard to miss CeeCee Collins' hair. It was that reddish-blondish, slightly acrylic-looking color that never occurred naturally.

"It's just horrible about Ellen. She must have interrupted the burglar," I said, shaking my head for emphasis. Adele gave me a dirty look when she realized I wasn't leaving.

Sheila Altman glanced up, the line between her eyebrows squeezed in tension. "They've already discounted the burglary thing. It was just a setup to make it look like that's what it was." She was drumming her fingers at an amazingly fast cadence on the table. No surprise, really. Sheila had a definite problem with her nerves. She came to every signing we had that featured a book with anything to do with de-stressing, dealing with anxiety, or learning relaxation techniques. None of them seemed to help. But, then, she had a lot on her plate.

We'd first met at the *Dr. Wheel's Guide to Total Calm* signing. I'd been giving out samples of chamomile tea, and when Sheila came back for seconds, she opened up and told me her story. Apparently the grandmother who brought her up had recently died and now Sheila felt adrift. She had a boyfriend, and seemed to be hoping for some kind of happily-ever-after with him, though it didn't sound as though it was going to happen anytime soon. In the meantime, she was juggling her job at the gym with classes in wardrobe design. Her dream was a career at one of the film studios as a costume designer. All she could afford was a rented room in a house in Reseda. It came with kitchen privileges, but as part of the rent she had to babysit the owner's kids on weekends.

Sheila seemed to worry about everything, though, I gathered, mostly about not being good enough at things. And even when I told her that we all worried about that, it didn't help. Something about her seemed like a rubber band that had been pulled too tight and any second could snap.

"How do you know they've discounted the idea of a burglar?" I asked, talking in time to her fingers.

drumming. It was making me nervous.

“One of the gym members’ sister’s husband’s sister works in the West Valley Division of the police department. Everybody was interested in what happened. It kind of busts their image of living in a safe area when burglars go around offing people who get in the way of their business. The women were all relieved to hear it was a setup.” Sheila paused a beat. Thank heavens, she didn’t seem to be able to drum and talk at the same time and had finally let her fingers go still. “Supposedly Ellen was strangled some kind of weird way.” She looked at me. “I can’t believe you don’t know, since you were at the scene of the crime and all.”

“You know, dear, you looked pretty washed-out on television,” CeeCee Collins said, giving me a disparaging glance. Her real name was Connie Collins, but everybody knew her as CeeCee. Easily recognized, she had been on television for years. She had starred in two sitcoms, then become part of ensemble casts on several long-running dramas.

Lately she seemed to be doing only guest shots where she played somebody’s eccentric great-aunt or something, and commercial-spokesperson things. She claimed the spokesperson jobs were just for fun.

“Of course the lighting in the police car had way too much shadow,” CeeCee continued. “I always wear this special makeup when I think I might end up on TV. You know, when you go to an awards show or a premiere. It really does the trick. It doesn’t have that thick orange look in person like so much of the stage stuff does, but it keeps you from looking pasty. I’ll give you the name of it, if you like.”

I thanked CeeCee but told her I didn’t intend to make showing up on the news a regular occurrence. Did she honestly think I cared whether I looked pasty? To my thinking, if I hadn’t looked bad, something definitely would have been wrong.

“What exactly were you doing there?” CeeCee asked. She motioned to the other two. “We really should begin. Ellen would want us to.” She turned back to me and waited for my answer. I rolled my eyes and repeated the Good Samaritan story for the millionth time as they picked up their tools.

“Pink, we don’t need you here.” Adele glared, but I didn’t move.

A thought crossed my mind as CeeCee began working her hook. She was a client of Pink Sheridan.

“This is a double whammy for you. You lost a group leader and a publicist,” I said, touching her arm.

CeeCee’s bright expression dampened, and she put her head down. “Yes, Ellen’s been handling my publicity for years. I don’t know what I’m going to do without her.”

Her hook stopped in midstitch for a moment, as she appeared to blink back a tear. Then she swallowed and resumed by taking some black yarn and joining it to her work. Her dexterity was amazing. In the blink of an eye she had made a border of black stitches around a square with a blue and green pattern. It seemed almost automatic. She did the last stitch and put the square on a pile of similar ones. All had black borders and the same pattern of stitches and open spaces.

Adele was working on some kind of a square, too. But hers was twice as large and also had a black border. The inside was purple, and she was attaching a loopy pink flower. Funny how whoever you are shows up in everything you do. Adele’s square was like her. She was wearing a flouncy full skirt with a pink, yellow and lavender design. On top, she had a hot pink camp shirt. Her voice had a look-at-me quality, too. It carried across the store even if there were all kinds of conversations going on. Of course, her voice was good for story time. Everybody could always hear her.

Sheila had a strip of royal blue stitches in one hand and a crochet hook in the other. She seemed to be struggling, and her knuckles were white. Whatever she was making, it didn’t seem to be going well.

Her face was squeezed in frustration as she tried to force the hook into the yarn.

“Dear, your stitches are too tight again,” CeeCee said in her musical, sugary voice. She shook her head and reached out to touch Sheila’s work.

Sheila pulled it in close. “I can do it myself.”

“I was just trying to help.” CeeCee looked from Sheila to me. “Ellen used to take her work and help her straighten it out.”

“She didn’t help me. She just did it for me. And I hated it,” Sheila said, cradling her work protectively. “It made me even more nervous. She’d be hovering over me, saying I worked too slow and then she’d just snatch it away.” Sheila’s breath seemed uneven as she tried harder to force the hook into the line of stitches.

“What are you making?” I said, hoping to lighten her tension. I made sure to keep my distance so she wouldn’t think I was going to make a grab for her work. The way she was holding that hook, even with its round ends, I had a feeling she might do some kind of damage if I did.

She looked up at me, her eyebrows squeezed together with worry, and held up a picture with a lot of directions under it. It showed a square with an intricate lacy pattern that to my noncrocheting eyes appeared impossible to make.

“Nice,” I said in my best calm voice. Sheila’s face lit up with my tidbit of praise. Adele handed her a smaller hook and suggested she try it.

“Take some deep breaths, dear,” CeeCee said in an encouraging voice. “We can’t afford to have you freak out now. We have a deadline.” She watched as Sheila easily poked it into the line of royal blue stitches.

“Now, make nice loose stitches.” CeeCee said it slowly and stretched the word *loose* out as Sheila looped the yarn to CeeCee’s rhythm. Even I could appreciate the looseness of the first stitch she produced with CeeCee’s prompting. Sheila beamed with pride and started to pick up speed again, but CeeCee stopped her. She repeated the whole *loose* thing again, and Sheila produced another loose stitch. CeeCee kept pacing Sheila until she had picked up the rhythm on her own.

“Pink, it’s under control. Why are you still here?” Adele snapped.

“It’s my job to make sure things go smoothly, and now with Ellen . . .”

“You can’t lead the group. You don’t even know how to crochet.” There was definite triumph in Adele’s voice.

“Actually, I should lead the group,” CeeCee said. She gestured toward the pile of black-edged multicolored squares on the table next to her. “I do have a few more done than you.” She glanced at the two large squares with loopy flowers in the middle. “And more experience. I learned how to crochet during all the waiting on my first show. You probably remember it—*The CeeCee Collins Show*.” She did a few minutes on how they knew how to name a show in the old days. None of the *Friends* or *Entourage* business. They went right for the name of the person who pulled in the audience. CeeCee finished by making sure we all realized her show was still on the Classic Channel; then she got back to the point. “Adele, dear, I know you mean well, but I was really so much better at helping Sheila.”

Adele got a huffy look. “I am the one who gave her the smaller hook so she could get out of the too-tight-stitch trap.”

Were they honestly arguing over who was going to be the leader of the three of them? Talk about a chiefs and no Indians.

Meanwhile, immune to their fighting over who helped her the most, Sheila had settled into a steady

rhythm of looping the yarn around the hook and pulling it through. Even yarn-challenged I could tell she was making loose, even stitches.

CeeCee and Adele seemed to have come to some kind of truce. I suspected that each of them thought they had convinced the other they were in charge, and they had gone back to crocheting. CeeCee took some red yarn and made a little tail of stitches, then joined the ends, forming a circle. From there, she began making stitches around the circle. It was fascinating to watch the birth of a new square. She was like a machine and barely seemed to look at what she was doing.

“What’s with all the squares?” I asked. All three of them turned toward me, apparently surprised that I was still there.

Adele rushed to speak first. “I can’t believe you don’t know. Being that you’re the event coordinator and community-relations person.” The edge in her voice grated on me. “The whole point of the group is that we make things for charity.”

“Yes, dear,” CeeCee interrupted. “Ellen came up with the idea of us making an afghan with all different squares. The only common thread is that they are all edged in black. She donated it in advance to a charity she has”—CeeCee stopped and swallowed—“had as a pro bono client. You’ve probably heard about it: Hearts and Barks.”

Of course I had, and I’d seen the signs for their upcoming fair being held on the back lot of Western Studios, over in the eastern part of the Valley.

Sheila took out a brochure that described the services Hearts and Barks offered.

“I had no idea,” I said after reading how Ruth Klinger had been faced with choosing between her meds and keeping her dog, Fluffy, until Hearts and Barks had come to her rescue. “How wonderful that they not only helped with Fluffy’s vet bills, but her day-to-day food as well.” There was a picture of Ruth hugging Fluffy. She looked so happy and relieved, I couldn’t help but tear up.

“Even though it’s called Hearts and Barks, they help cats, too,” CeeCee offered. “They do a lot of wonderful things, like sponsoring spaying and neutering clinics.”

“They’re going to sell our afghan at the silent auction,” Sheila added.

“Isn’t that four weeks from Saturday?” I asked, looking at the paltry supply of finished pieces.

“It’s actually three weeks,” Adele said.

CeeCee pulled out a sheet torn from a magazine that showed a large throw made out of what she called granny squares. She explained that theirs was going to be different. Instead of all the squares having the same pattern of stitches, they were making all different kinds of squares, and the result would look more like a crazy quilt. Since Adele’s were clearly larger, I asked how they were going to fit in.

“They may be larger, but they’re proportionate. My squares are going to make up the center.” Adele picked up her finished square, laid it in the center of the table and demonstrated how hers were going to be arranged with all the other smaller squares around them.

“Are you sure the three of you can manage all those squares in that amount of time?”

“Ellen made a lot . . . and there’s four of us,” CeeCee said, gesturing toward a woman approaching the table. “This is Meredith.”

I’d seen her across the store but never met her. I introduced myself. She appeared to be in her late twenties and was the youngest in the group. Her long, light brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail and she wore loose white cotton pants, a long top and an amethyst necklace.

Sheila set down her work for a moment and stretched. She acknowledged Meredith with a somber nod.

“It seems so strange without Ellen,” Meredith said, taking out some yarn and hooks. “I just can’t believe she’s gone.” After Meredith finished laying out her work, she looked toward the café. “I’m going to get an herb tea. Anybody else want something?” The other women shook their heads, and she was left to get her drink.

“Meredith used to be a masseuse at the gym,” Sheila said, moving back to the bigger hook.

“Until Ellen found her,” CeeCee offered. “Meredith was already doing this special massage she developed. Ellen showed her how to market herself and introduced her to a lot of people and . . .”

“She got all these big-deal show-business types for clients.” Sheila sounded impressed. “I’ve had her massages, and they’re really great.”

I knew Sheila had tried everything to relax, so her endorsement meant something. CeeCee explained Meredith’s unique hook: She took her massage chair and special aromatic oil to the exec’s office. Her clients had to remove very little clothing and barely even had to stop working. “She calls her massage ‘Refresh, Relax, Renew.’ And that’s how her clients feel when she’s finished,” CeeCee said.

It sounded good to me.

“Has anyone talked to poor Lawrence?” CeeCee asked. Everyone at the table shook their heads.

Hmm, poor Lawrence indeed. He was Ellen’s husband of a million years. When Charlie was alive, we’d been on the regular circuit of award shows and assorted events and run into him often. He was always Lawrence, never Larry. He and Ellen were a real power couple. She had the PR business and he was a talent manager who’d recently added TV producer to his title.

For years, Lawrence had managed a stable of musicians and comedians, all recognizable but not superstars. Then Jed Frank, a singer-songwriter client of his, ended up with a TV show, and Lawrence became a producer. The show was a monster hit, and it had fueled Jed’s music career as well. Suddenly Lawrence was at the top of the heap. Too bad he didn’t have as much charm as he had power.

Meredith returned with her tea and settled in to crocheting.

“You’re doing Ellen’s favorite,” Adele said, looking at Meredith’s square. It was certainly beautiful. The center resembled a scarlet flower, and around it were airy white stitches. Meredith was just adding the black border.

They all fell silent as their hooks moved through the strands of yarn.

Suddenly I felt like an outsider. Adele picked up on it and glanced up at me.

“Told you it was under control.”

I hated to admit it, but she was right. There was nothing for me to do. I looked back as I walked away from the table. Sheila had gotten into a rhythm of crocheting. She was mouthing the word *loos*, stretching it out with each stitch as CeeCee had done. Her whole demeanor said *calm*, something I’d never seen in her before. Suddenly I had an idea. If crocheting could relax a jumble of nerves like Sheila, maybe it could help me with my caramel corn problem. Instinctively I pulled at the waistband of my black slacks, willing them to be looser.

There was just one major problem. I didn’t know how to crochet. I could ask Adele. A possible lesson played over in my mind. Adele, with a superior smile, would seize the opportunity to lord her hook prowess over me. She’d hover over me, correcting my every wrong move, which I would undoubtedly make lots of, and do her best to make me feel as though I had two left hands.

No way.

A figure in a dark suit, with white-blond hair, slipped into my peripheral vision. My tension level kicked up a notch, and I was suddenly hungry for caramel corn.

“Mrs. Pink, may I speak to you?”

As if I had a choice.

“Detective Hea—Gilmore,” I said, catching myself in time. Calling her *Detective Heather* sounded too much like calling her *Detective Barbie Doll*, and would endear me to her even less. I lied and said it was nice to see her. Glancing back at the table of yarn ladies, I noticed that all four sets of eyes were locked on me.

“Why don’t we go into the café,” I suggested, moving toward the entrance without waiting for her answer. What bookstore worth its weight in paper didn’t have a café these days? No more not letting people in with food and drinks. Now bookstores made their customers feel as if they were missing something if they didn’t take a latte-schmaatte, decaffoam-only cappuccino or some other whipped-top party drink right in with them while they browsed. We weren’t any better. In all honesty, Shedd & Royal needed the added income.

Before we walked in, the smell greeted me. Our angle was that we baked fresh cookies, and the smell worked like a magnet to pull people in. Detective Heather wasn’t immune. She got that flutter-eyed look as the sweet fragrance of melting chocolate and buttery dough hit her nose. Maybe I could soften her up with sweets.

A batch of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies was cooling on a tray. “How about some cookies and a drink?” I offered as we approached the counter.

“Thanks, but no thanks on the cookies,” she said, eyeing the treats with resolve. “I don’t usually discuss cases over coffee.” She hesitated as if she was thinking it over. “But I suppose it’s all right—as long as I buy my own.” She nodded at Bob, our main barista and cookie baker. “How about a large decaf nonfat latte with a shot of no-sugar vanilla syrup, ice blended.” She smiled at me. “We don’t do donuts, you know.”

It was one of the longest drink orders I’d ever heard and probably was a prizewinner in the hypochondria department. I tugged at my waistband with regret. I bet Detective Heather never had caramel corn evenings, or if she did, it was with no-sugar, no-fat, no-taste caramel corn. I got a plain coffee, and we headed to a table.

She made small talk at first, commenting on how good the drink was, weather was nice for September, etc. It only upped the tension level for me. I wanted the conversation to be like a Band-Aid removal: Rip it off fast and get it over with.

Finally she got to the point.

“It’s come to my attention that you knew Ellen Sheridan more than in passing. I was curious why you didn’t say anything when we talked before.”

*Talked?* Is that what she called that thing in the back of the police car? I had been so freaked out by stepping on Ellen’s leg and being questioned, that at the time I had barely remembered my name, let alone my history with Ellen. “You mean about Ellen being my late husband’s partner?”

Detective Heather nodded and added, “And there was something about you trying to work with her and it didn’t work out.”

My shoulders sagged, and I swallowed hard. “Okay, I admit that when I tried to step into my husband’s position, there were some problems. Ellen forced—I mean, I let her buy me out. But I have tried to put all that behind me, and I don’t really think much about it. Things have turned out really well for me. I have this great job.” I made an expansive gesture toward the bookstore. “And I’ve even dated—” Oops, caught myself just in time. There was no reason to bring up my social life, particularly since I had the social life Detective Heather wanted.

For just a moment, I wondered about Barry’s eyesight. Being this close to her, I could see that Detective Heather had no crinkly lines around her eyes, was obviously smart and a professional, and

as much as I hated to admit it, was in better shape than I was. Yet Barry claimed to notice her only as a colleague. Unless—a dark thought passed through my mind—it was all an act just to throw me off.

Detective Heather wrote a bunch of notes in her black reporter's notebook. It seemed as though she wrote more than I said, which didn't make me feel good. Somehow when I'd thought about what happened when I attempted to step into Charlie's business shoes, it hadn't sounded so bad. But saying it out loud to Detective Heather—well, it sounded like a motive.

"There's just one more thing," she said, keeping her incredibly sparkly blue-eyed gaze on me. She let the comment hang in the air, making my heartbeat kick up. The woman sure knew how to throw me off balance.

"I spoke with Ms. Sheridan's associate, Natalie Shaw. Do you know her?"

Should I answer quickly, or think about it? Which way made me look worse? Too fast and I sounded nervous; too slow and it would seem as though I was trying to hide something. The good part was, she was asking about somebody else.

"Natalie started working for Ellen when I left. I don't really know her." I let out my breath, relieved that the spotlight was off me, but it didn't last for long.

"Well, she mentioned your recent disagreement with Ms. Sheridan."

"*Disagreement* is such a strong word," I began, keeping my tone light. "I suggested something and she turned it down. That's all." I hoped that would satisfy Detective Heather, but of course it didn't.

"Do you want to give me the details?" With her pen poised, Detective Heather looked at me.

I hesitated. No, I didn't want to give her details. I didn't want to talk to her at all.

"You don't have to give me the details if you don't want to," she said finally. "I heard Natalie's version, and I can go with that. I'm just curious how you saw it."

Barry was right. The detective was good at her job. No way was I not going to answer her now. I didn't know what Natalie had told her, but I was sure it made me look bad. I took a sip of my coffee and cleared my throat. "Part of my job is to arrange book signings. Ellen had a client, an actor turned author, who was coming out with a memoir, *Walk a Mile in My Shoes*. Maybe you've heard of him—Will Hunter?"

As if anybody hadn't, including Detective Heather. She unsuccessfully tried to hide her reaction. The guy was hot in a laid-back slacker sort of way, and apparently made an impression even on the perfect detective. I noticed her pupils dilate just a touch at my mention of his name. She nodded and gestured for me to get on with it.

"Celebrities bring in foot traffic. Foot traffic leads to sales, and . . ."

"I got it, I got it," she said impatiently. "Stick to the part about Ms. Sheridan."

I started talking faster. Her impatience had made me nervous, and I just wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. I explained how I'd approached Ellen about hosting his signing and how she had turned me down, preferring to stick to the hip, trendy bookstores the other celebs had been using. I didn't see any reason to mention that I had still hoped to get her to change her mind.

"So, then, you weren't about to lose your job over not landing the book signing?"

I shook my head vehemently. "Of course not. Mrs. Shedd and Mr. Royal are completely happy with me. Besides, one signing isn't going to make or break the bookstore." I finished my coffee and started to get up, thinking we were done. Detective Heather flipped her notebook shut, and then as an afterthought flipped it back open.

"There's just one more thing. . . ."

I pushed back against the chair. Who did she think she was, Columbo, with her *just-one-more*

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