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# Begging for Trouble

A  
DOG WALKER  
MYSTERY



NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF DEATH IN SHOW

# JUDI McCOY

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*Begging  
for Trouble*  
A DOG WALKER MYSTERY



JUDI McCOY



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

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# Praise for the Dog Walker Mystery Series

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“Ellie is wonderful, insightful, and her special way of communicating with her charges makes the reader laugh out loud.”

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“McCoy deserves a blue ribbon herself for coming up with such an entertaining paranormal-spiced mystery and then perfectly seasoning the plot with just the right dash of romance.”

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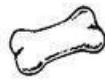
—Fresh Fiction

## **Also in the Dog Walker Mystery Series**

*Death in Show*  
*Heir of the Dog*  
*Hounding the Pavement*

*Begging  
for Trouble*

A DOG WALKER MYSTERY



JUDI McCOY



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

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# Chapter 1



“Swear to God. Ellie, next year you’re getting flowers, candy, perfume. Hell, I’d even go to one of those prissy operas before I’d let you drag me to one of these so-called extravaganzas again,” groused Sam Ryder, as he hunched forward in his seat.

Ellie ignored his complaint and people-watched instead. She’d never been to a show like this before and was looking forward to the antics predicted. Sam had been behaving like a spoiled brat for the past week over this one night, and she’d simply pooh-poohed his griping. In fact, she found the idea that a crack homicide detective on the NYPD force was uncomfortable in these surroundings to be pretty entertaining in itself.

Vivian smirked. “Excuse me, Detective. Did you say ‘drag’? Because I thought I heard you announce that this wasn’t your idea of fun entertainment.”

“Ha-ha.” Sam loosened the knot in his necktie, as if the very air in Club Guess Who was choking him. “If Vince or any of the guys find out I was here, I’ll be the laughingstock of the department for the rest of the year.”

“Poor baby,” said Ellie, patting his fistled hand. She grinned at Viv and Dr. David Crane, the couple sharing their table. “Tell me, Dave, how do you feel about being here?”

The placid veterinarian smiled adoringly at Vivian. “It’s not my first choice for an evening out, but my lady wanted to attend, so why not? I’m secure in my masculinity.”

Vivian winked at Ellie, then focused on Sam. “A little bird told me that you’ve done nothing but complain about tonight since you heard about the tickets, which, by the way, didn’t cost you a dime. It’s a free show at the most trendy playground in Manhattan. Why not sit back and enjoy it?”

Sam slouched in his seat, his expression that of a five-year-old waiting to see the dentist. “I’d rather pay a couple hundred bucks for two tickets to a Broadway flop than suffer through this—this fiasco,” he answered. “A production like this belongs in Miami or Vegas, not anywhere near where I live.”

Ellie suppressed a sigh. Rob Chesney, one of her clients, had given her passes for the opening night of his new drag show, and the event was a sellout. It looked like everyone in Manhattan wanted to see a host of female impersonators strut their stuff in a fun show filled with one-liners, songs, and plenty of dancing.

“You live in the Big Apple, and Manhattan has hosted a lot of things more outrageous than this. Remember the revival that got rave reviews on Broadway this past December? Everybody in the production was naked, even Scrooge, or so the newspaper said.”

Ellie had read the show’s description with her mouth open. She’d even thought about going, but figured if her mother found out she’d attended, she would never let Ellie forget it. It was going to be difficult enough having to explain to Georgette why she was here tonight. “Just be glad I didn’t push for those tickets as a Christmas gift.”

Sam growled . . . actually growled. Jeez, what a grouch.

Resting a forearm on the table, Ellie sipped her glass of white wine and continued scoping out the cavernous venue. The deep tiers seemed to go on and on. With fourseater tables clustered side by side, the place reminded her of a nightclub on steroids. And the customers seated around her were a show all by themselves.

She’d never been to this kind of performance, but Rob had given her the tickets as a peace offering after he realized that he’d offended her when he didn’t inform her of his unique profession. By the time she’d convinced him it wasn’t *what* he did for a living that ticked her off, but the fact that he hadn’t clued her in, he’d already committed to the freebies and passes to the backstage party when the show finished.

Considering that her ex had never done more than send her a dozen roses or a gift certificate to her favorite spa for Valentine’s Day, Sam’s dinner at one of Bobby Flay’s restaurants, Bar Americain on West Fifty-second Street, and a carriage ride around Central Park made this the best sweethearts’ holiday she’d ever celebrated.

“When the hell are they going to get this business moving?” said sweetheart ground out, drumming his fingers on the table.

Ellie checked her watch. “Any second now. Don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind and you actually want to see it.”

“The sooner it starts, the sooner we can leave.”

As if on cue, a drumroll sounded from the band situated at the rear of the stage, and the audience’s raucous laughter turned to an expectant murmur. Then the bright red curtain closed, a trio of colored spotlights arced across the forefront, and a man wearing formal dress, complete with a top hat and tails, glided from the wings to the center of the stage.

Bowing to rousing applause, the snazzy dresser grinned and began a stand-up routine that started out tame and built to a bawdy climax. His parting words, “And now, ladies and gentlemen, and everyone in between, please give a warm welcome to the drag stars of tomorrow,” rewed the crowd, and the orchestra struck up introductory music. Then the lights dimmed and the curtain parted.

Ellie gazed openmouthed as a sea of men dressed in feathery boas, five-inch stilettos, and sequined costumes in every color in a paint chip display stomped, strutted, and high-kicked across the stage. The music, more exhilarating than what she remembered from *A Chorus Line*, brought the performance to life. Minutes later, the band changed tempo and seamlessly segued into the second number, a slinky rendition of an old vamp song accompanied by a second group of dancers.

“Wow,” Vivian said as she watched. “Who knew men could do women better than women?”

“Certainly not me,” said Ellie. She gave Sam a sideways glance and breathed a sigh of relief. His body posture was less rigid and his scowl had morphed to a thin-lipped grin. “Don’t tell me you’re starting to enjoy this,” she whispered, leaning into his shoulder.

“If you imagine the performers are real women, then yeah, it’s an eye-popper.”

To Ellie, half the fun was knowing that the stage was filled with men dressed like women, but she didn’t want to ruin Sam’s fun. She wondered about Rob’s role in the show, and recalled their first meeting, when Randall, the doorman in one of the buildings housing her dog-walker clients, had sent her to Rob’s apartment to interview for the job of walking Bitsy, his Poodle-Chihuahua mix.

She’d guessed then that he was some sort of entertainer, but had believed he’d been born a female. It was a complete surprise when he showed up last November at a neighbor’s party in an Armani suit that declared him to be undeniably male.

After patiently sitting through several dances, Ellie was sure that her client had been stretching the truth. Each of the four numbers had been

big, brash, and beautiful, and one of them included Rob. Then, when the troupe bowed to applause and left the stage, rolling platforms split the orchestra in two, and a spotlight shone on a set of stairs. The comedian dressed in the top hat and tails entered from the right and the audience grew quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our first feature player of the evening. I give you Miss Bobbi Doll."

Rob stood in the spotlight's glow wearing a formfitting red sequined gown, a feathered headpiece that had to weigh ten pounds, and a pair of slingback pumps with stiletto heels. As he glided down the steps, Ellie smiled and poked Sam's shoulder. "It's Rob," she whispered. "The guy who gave us the tickets."

"Yippee."

"Pay attention. I've been waiting to hear him sing for three months now."

"Yeah, me, too."

"Sam, be nice," she warned. "I plan to introduce you at the backstage party later."

"I can't wait," he said in a smart-ass tone. "It'll be a perfect end to the night."

Bobbi Doll stopped at the foot of the stairs and gave a sweeping gesture of welcome. After a clever intro, she—or was it he? Ellie still had no idea which pronoun to use when talking about a cross-dresser—began a stirring rendition of "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend."

She sat back, amazed at the sound coming from Rob's mouth. The tone was pure Marilyn Monroe, his body movements identical. The crowd roared encouragement when Bobbi finished and strutted off the stage as dancers returned dressed in fresh costumes for the next number.

"That was your guy?" Vivian asked her.

"Uh-huh."

"I'm impressed. He was even better than Kylie Minogue doing Marilyn. What do you think?"

Ellie had never heard Kylie Minogue's impression of the iconic blonde, but she had seen Marilyn in the classic movie and Rob—er, Bobbi Doll—was better at doing Marilyn than Marilyn had ever been. Unfortunately, if she confessed the bit about not knowing Kylie to Viv, it would give her friend another reason to lecture her on getting in tune with the entertainment of the twenty-first century.

"I still wish he'd told me he was a female impersonator as soon as we'd met," Ellie said, showing her naïveté.

"The way you explained the meeting, I can't believe you didn't know," answered Viv. "I wonder if he'll do Christina Aguilera."

Ellie frowned at the name of another singer who was unfamiliar to her. "Trust me, if you'd seen him the way I did that first day you wouldn't have guessed either. But tonight, well, it's not just the clothes, hair, and makeup. He has the voice and mannerisms of Marilyn down perfectly. I wonder if he does anyone else." She turned to her date. "Sam, care to comment?"

Sam raised both brows. "It was an okay job."

"He did a great job," she countered. "It's hard to believe he's straight."

Vivian sighed. "You can't possibly still believe that."

"But Rob told me so. Why would he lie?"

Sam snorted so loudly that a woman sitting at the next table, who could have passed for a cross-dresser herself, gave him a dirty look.

"You are so narrow-minded," Ellie said, glaring at him. "If a woman wore a tux would you automatically assume she was a lesbian?"

"And please bear in mind that I wore one on New Year's Eve," Viv, one of the girliest girls Ellie knew, reminded him.

"You looked adorable," Dave said, his eyes shining. "It was an honor to be your escort for the evening."

"Aw, you're so sweet," Viv said, blowing him a kiss.

"Get a room," Sam grumped, instead of answering Ellie.

"I'm waiting," she prompted, brushing imaginary lint from the front of her red-and-gray-checked sweater. Viv, of course, was in Donna Karan.

"Do you really believe that what a person wears defines who they are?"

"Okay, okay," he conceded. "But remember the old adage—if it looks like a duck and it quacks like a duck . . ."

The latest dance number wound down and the tophat-and-tails guy returned to the stage. "And now, for your listening enjoyment, I give you Frieda deManeata."

"Holy crap," muttered Sam, "now what?"

"Shh," Ellie told him when the person at the other table again glared in their direction. "For now, this discussion is over," she told him. "But just wait until we're alone."

Sixty minutes later, the show was near completion. After the third headliner, Sheleata Burrito, performed, there'd been a short intermission, which allowed the patrons to order another round of drinks and stretch their legs. Then a second comic appeared, this one in a black bustier, mesh thigh-highs, and the necessary stilettos, and did a risqué skit on the joys of being a girl.

When the applause tapered off, the red curtain opened, the orchestra began another number, and the scantily clad comic introduced Miss Bobbi Doll for the second time. Rob entered from stage left on a gilded pallet carried on the shoulders of four muscle-bound men dressed in little more than loincloths.

Wearing a formfitting gown of ice blue satin, he slipped to his feet, stood in a circle of light, and waved to the admiring crowd. Then he broke into a number Viv said belonged to Christina Aguilera. When finished, he blew kisses and scampered offstage, but the audience continued to applaud. A minute later he came out for an encore and sang a Barbra Streisand tune that sounded very close to the real deal.

"Wow," said Ellie, when Rob left the stage, "who knew?"

"I can't believe you didn't introduce me to him the night we were at Flora's party," said Viv. "Some friend you are."

"If I remember correctly, you were doing more important things that night," Ellie told her. "And I was still shell-shocked from seeing Rob in normal guy clothing." The night had gone to hell in a handbasket, ending with the authorities driving her and their host downtown for questioning in a murder investigation. "Stop complaining. You'll meet him soon enough."

Another troupe of dancers, these performers wearing hot pink and black with twelve-inch-wide headpieces fitted with fuchsia and black feathers, took the stage, and the orchestra played the opening bars of "I'm Every Woman."

Midway through the number, shrieks rang out from a distance and several audience members sat bolt upright in their seats. Seconds later, the music stuttered to a stop and the dancers clustered on the stage, staring into the wings on the right side.

Ellie grabbed Sam's hand when he shot upright in his chair. The scream built to a crescendo, and he stood and scanned the audience. "Stay here, and don't move," he ordered, and took off at a jog.

Jumping to her feet, she watched him thread his way to the bottom of the tiers, where he disappeared through a door she assumed led to the dressing rooms.

"Where are you going?" called Vivian as Ellie raced down the steps.

“Someone’s in trouble,” she shouted over her shoulder. *And Sam might get hurt.* She headed in the direction he’d taken, hit the bottom of the seating area, and stumbled into a dim hallway.

When her vision grew accustomed to the pale light, she noted that the backstage area was teeming with stagehands, costumed performers, and catering staff, who’d been there, she imagined, to set up for the party. Pushing past them, Ellie made for the crowd hovering around an open door on the right. After working her way through the mob, she stopped short in the doorway.

Rob knelt next to a body lying facedown on the dressing room floor, his beautiful gown soaked in blood, the scissors in his hand covered in the same sticky liquid. In a far corner stood one of the dancers, still in costume from an earlier number, staring openmouthed and wide-eyed.

Before Ellie could speak, Sam took a swatch of cloth from his jacket pocket, used it to remove the scissors from Rob’s hand, and wrapped the cloth around the weapon. After setting it on a counter, he grasped Rob’s elbow and pulled him to his feet. Then he flipped open his phone and made a call.

Rob shivered and glanced at the doorway. When their gazes locked, Ellie sent him a smile of encouragement, then stepped back into the hall and rested her backside against the wall. Tears sprang to her eyes while she struggled to process the terrible scene. Rob couldn’t have done whatever it was she’d just seen. He was a sweet guy she’d grown close to over the past few months. Now he was a friend.

A siren wailed in the distance, its piercing sound growing louder, and she knew it was Sam’s backup. She ordered herself to take slow, deep breaths, hoping it would calm her pounding heart. The lights overhead flickered to life. A man wielding a clipboard walked into the room and quickly returned to the hall, his face a pasty white.

Officers marched in from what she assumed was the rear entrance of the building and began clearing people out and into another dressing area. Ellie closed her eyes and pressed herself against the wall, hoping to remain invisible, but when she raised her lids, she saw Vince Fugazzo, Sam’s partner, eyeing her intently.

“Ellie?” He wore an expression of both confusion and surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m—I was watching the show.”

“And Sam was with you?”

She jerked her head to the left. “He’s in there—with the victim.”

An officer she thought looked vaguely familiar grasped her elbow and Vince gave the guy a look. “She can stay, Murphy. Just secure the area.” Heaving a breath, he stared at her in full police mode. “Stay here, and do not move until either Sam or I come out to get you. Understand?”

Nodding, she slumped forward, still taking deep breaths. Who was on the floor lying in that pool of blood? Why was Rob holding what could only be the murder weapon? What the heck had happened?

EMTs and a cadre of crime scene investigators charged in from the rear entrance, probably because everyone in the audience was being cleared out through the front. Moments later, more men entered and she recognized them as the forensic team. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Dr. Emily Bridges quickstepped past her along with a slim young woman with almond-shaped eyes and short dark hair.

As the medical examiner charged by, she did a double take and stepped backward. “Ellie?”

Ellie heaved a sigh. This was the fifth time she’d met Emily Bridges. Four of the meetings, if she counted this one, were at crime scenes where Dr. Bridges had been the medical examiner of record. The fifth was at a Christmas party Sam had taken her to given by Captain Carmody. The woman probably thought she was some kind of jinx. At the very least, she would agree that Ellie was living up to her reputation as Sam Ryder’s bad penny.

“Dr. Bridges. I—uh—hello.”

“Is Sam with you?”

Sure. She followed him around like a gore-hungry groupie, always hoping to be involved in his latest murder investigation. She nodded toward the dressing room doorway. “He’s inside with the victim. We were here watching the show when it happened.”

The ME gave a faint smile. “I’d like to say it’s nice to see you again, but it seems that every time we meet there’s a dead body lying around.”

“I didn’t have a thing to do with this,” she said, feeling the heat rise from her collarbone. “Honest.”

“Oh, I believe you.” Dr. Bridges nodded at the young woman on her left. “This is Dr. Jordan Kingsgate. She’ll be training beside me for a while. Jordan, this is Ellie Engleman. You might run into her from time to time in the course of learning the ropes. It seems that being in the wrong place at the wrong time is a hobby of hers.”

*Great*, thought Ellie. Thanks to the episodes she’d been involved in over the past year, she now had a reputation as a permanent fixture with the crime scene teams working Manhattan. “I don’t look for trouble. It just seems to find me,” she said, shaking Dr. Kingsgate’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, and call me Jordan.”

“You ready?” Dr. Bridges asked her. “It’s time to go in.”

The two women disappeared through the door, and Ellie drew in a breath. Then she pulled out her cell and called Vivian. “It’s me.”

“Ellie? Where are you? And what’s going on?”

“There’s been an accident. Someone was stabbed.”

“Stabbed. Like in murdered?”

“I’m not sure,” she whispered. “I’m backstage, waiting to talk to Sam. According to Vince, I’m supposed to stand here and not move.”

“Sam’s partner is there, too?”

“Yep. I can only assume they’ll be working together on this little . . . er . . . problem. Where are you and Dr. Dave?”

“On the sidewalk out front. Dave’s trying to catch a cab, but with this crowd it might take a while. When the cops announced everyone had to leave, I was hoping you’d come home with us.”

“I’m fairly certain I’ll be staying for a bit.”

“So give me the scoop. Who got stabbed? And why?”

“I think it was Rob.”

“Your friend got stabbed?”

“No. But Sam found him with the body.” She swallowed. “It doesn’t look good.”

“He thinks your client is the killer? Are you sure?”

Ellie ran a hand across her forehead, shoving her damp curls into further disarray. “No, I’m not sure, but when I peeked into the dressing room I saw Rob kneeling over the body and—”

“The dead body?” Vivian asked, as if Ellie had just told her there was a live cow backstage.

“I think so.” Was the person really dead? Maybe not, though there was an awful lot of blood. “Probably.”

“And you’re going to wait for Sam?”

Not just Sam, but Rob, too. He was her friend and could probably use some support right now. At least, this time she wouldn’t have to be taken

in for questioning. "Those are my orders, and when the officers in charge are in official detective mode, there's no point in arguing."

"Then you won't be upset if Dave and I go to my place?"

"Of course not. Just do me a favor and walk Rudy. He'll worry if I'm not home soon, and he needs to go out before bed."

"Okay, sure. Dave and I will take him when we do Mr. T. We can talk tomorrow."

Ellie closed her phone, stuck it in her bag, and slouched against the wall. She still heard low voices muttering and saw flashes of light shooting from the crime scene doorway, which told her the investigators hadn't finished their job. She spotted a metal folding chair a little way down the hall, retrieved it, and took a seat. If this was going to take a while, at least she could be comfortable.

She closed her eyes and time seemed to stop. Next thing she knew, she was glancing at her watch and realized that close to two hours had passed. The EMTs took that moment to exit the room pushing a gurney with a zipped body bag resting on top, which gave Ellie the answer to Vivian's question. Dr. Bridges and Dr. Kingsgate filed out, and finally Vince, Sam, and Rob entered the hall along with two patrol officers.

Rob appeared nothing like the confident performer he'd been just a few hours ago. His dress was covered in blood, his wig was gone, his makeup was a runny mess, and his hands were cuffed behind his back. When their gazes collided, he tried to approach her, but Sam held him back.

"Ellie, thank God you're here. You have to help me. It's Bitsy. She's—"

"Take it easy, Mr. Chesney. Ms. Engleman can't help you. We're taking a trip downtown."

Ellie stood, remembering to act professional and calm so she didn't agitate Sam. "Detective Ryder. If you could give us a minute?"

Sam traded frowns with Vince, who said, "I don't see the harm. We've done all we need to for tonight." He glanced at the floor. "Hell, we couldn't even get a decent footprint what with all the idiots tramping up and down the hall."

Ellie gave Sam a pleading look.

"All right, but just one minute. Mr. Chesney still has to be booked," he told her.

She smiled at Rob. "You don't need to worry about Bitsy. I have keys. I'll pick her up from your apartment on the way home and keep her at my place."

"But she isn't at the apartment. She's—she's here," he said, his voice breaking.

"Hang on. Your dog is in the dressing room?" asked Sam.

Rob kept his eyes on Ellie as he spoke. "She's supposed to be under my makeup table, unless whoever did this stole her—or something worse."

"I'll take a look," said Vince, raising his still-latexgloved hands in front of him. He went back into the room and returned toting a small pink dog carrier. "Is this what you're talking about?"

"Where did you find that?" asked Sam.

"Right where he said, but pushed all the way to the wall. The room was so damn tight. My guess is no one noticed it." Vince narrowed his gaze and inspected the carrier. "It looks clean, but you never know. What do you want to do with it?"

"It's part of the crime scene," Sam answered. "It has to be dusted for prints, photographed, treated as evi—"

"But Bitsy can't stay in that room overnight. She needs to go out, to be taken care of, f-fed—" Rob stuttered.

Sam gazed at the ceiling, as if he hadn't a clue.

"How about we give Ellie the dog, like he asks, and I put the carrier back exactly where I found it?" Vince suggested. "The dog's not going to tell us what happened, so we don't need it for evidence, but there could be something on the case."

Ellie peered into the mesh opening on the side of the carrier and saw Bitsy, her eyes closed, shuddering. "What would you normally do with a dog found at a crime scene?"

Sam shrugged. "It rarely happens, but we're supposed to bring them to the city shelter. I don't know if—"

"The city shelter? God, no!" Rob cried. "She's my baby, the only thing I have in the world I can count on. Please, Detective, let Ellie take her for tonight, and ask someone for permission tomorrow."

Sam and Vince exchanged looks of impatience.

"I'll sign papers—do whatever I have to do so she can stay in Ellie's custody," Rob continued.

Vince opened the top of the carrier and held it out to Ellie. "Don't touch anything. Just remove the dog."

She slipped her hands inside, cupped the tiny pooch, and lifted Bitsy to her chest. The adorable dog weighed all of four pounds and was trembling like a scoop of Jell-O on a plate. "You okay, little girl?"

Bitsy snuggled into her arms.

"We're taking Mr. Chesney to Green Street," said Sam. "Where he'll be processed for arraignment. I'll phone you about the dog tomorrow."

## Chapter 2



Ellie arrived home from the club, paid the cabdriver, and pulled the extra leash she carried for emergencies from her bag. After snapping it to Bitsy's rhinestone collar, she walked the pup to the corner. Bitsy squatted, did her business, and huddled at Ellie's ankles until she was picked up and carried to the apartment building.

She'd made a few tries at getting the poohuahua to talk on the taxi ride, but so far Bitsy hadn't said a word. Ellie imagined the pup was probably still in shock from all the terrible things that had gone down in Rob's dressing room. Between the screaming, the police, the EMTs, the swarming investigators, and seeing her owner covered in blood, she'd had a night filled with chaos and upheaval.

At the top of the porch steps, she held the still-shaking pooch in one hand, dug for her keys with the other, and unlocked the door. She juggled the tiny dog until she got inside, then held Bitsy close to her chest and climbed the two flights to her condo.

Ellie thought about knocking on Vivian's door on the way up, but it was after one, too late to disturb her friend when there was next to nothing she could say. Hoping to calm Bitsy and get her settled, she continued the climb while she whispered soothing words. "It's okay. You're safe now. Nothing's going to happen while you're in my care."

No comment from Bitsy.

"I know you're upset. I would be, too, if I saw what you saw. But Rob will be fine, and you'll be back together soon."

She sighed. The poohuahua didn't make a sound, just continued to tremble, ratcheting Ellie's worry quotient to the breaking point. On their twice-daily walks, Bitsy had no problem speaking her mind, but when Rudy was with them she was a regular chatterbox. The dog's absolute silence now was a concern. Maybe if she got Bitsy together with her yorkiepoo, she'd be more willing to speak.

After doing another juggling act to open her apartment, she went into the kitchen, set her tote and Bitsy on the table, and removed her coat. "Do you want to walk or should I carry you to the bedroom?"

Not a sound, not even a plaintive whimper, escaped Bitsy's doggie lips.

Ellie scooped her up and held her near. "I feel your pain, sweetie, but you'll sleep next to Rudy tonight. I'm sure that will make you feel better."

They entered the bedroom and she smiled at her boy, curled on the pillow next to her own. "Now that's what I call being a good watchdog," she teased, setting Bitsy on the foot of the bed. "Did you help the robbers clean out the apartment?"

"*I knew it was you the second the door opened,*" Rudy answered after yawning. Then he stretched and gave a sneeze. "*Why'd you bring Bitsy to our house? Was Bobbi-Rob's act so bad she decided to leave home?*"

Tsking, Ellie started to undress. Rudy had known about Rob Chesney's cross-dressing from the moment they met. The stinker thought it amusing that she was in the dark right up until Rob came to that party in regular male clothing. Calling him Bobbi-Rob was her dog's way of continuing the joke.

"Don't be silly. Rob was great, very talented. The whole show was amazing . . . until the murder."

Rudy gave a full-body shake. "*Not funny, Triple E. You promised there'd be none of that talk ever again, remember?*"

"Oh, I remember," she said, pulling her sweater off over her head. Walking to the closet, she folded the garment and put it on a shelf, then slipped out of her gray wool slacks and hung them up. "But it couldn't be helped. There was a"—she glanced at Bitsy, who was huddled into a tight ball, and held a finger to her lips—"problem at the club tonight. Someone got killed and they arrested Rob."

"*What? Bobbi-Rob? Our Bobbi-Rob?*"

"Yep." Ellie donned a sleep shirt, gave Bitsy a pat, and headed for the bathroom. After performing her nightly ritual, she returned to the bedroom and found Rudy lying next to their houseguest, his pose protective.

"Has she said anything?"

"*Nope. But she stopped shiverin' when I got close to her, so I'm stayin' down here for a while. Is that okay with you?*"

"I was hoping you'd do that. Bitsy is always talkative when you're around, but she hasn't said word one to me." She doused the light and snuggled under the covers. A few minutes later Rudy gave her cheek a sloppy lick. "I thought you were sleeping next to Bitsy."

"*I will, but she's out like a light, so I have to ask, was there really a murder?*"

Ellie ruffled his ears. "Yes. One minute the performers were headed into the finale; the next someone offstage was screaming like a freight train. Sam left to—"

"*Detective Doofus? It figures he'd stick his nose in it.*"

"He was simply doing his job as an officer of the law."

"*So how did you get involved?*"

"I followed him, of course. I didn't want him to get hurt."

"*As if you could stop a bullet.*"

"I didn't hear any shots, so I thought it might be a fight. When I got to the backstage area, I took a look in the room with a crowd at the door and . . ."

"*And . . .*"

"There was blood. Lots and lots of blood," she said in a hushed tone. "And Rob was kneeling over the body with a pair of scissors in his hand."

"*Somethin' must have happened, because the Bobbi-Rob I know would never kill anyone.*"

"Exactly what I thought, but nobody asked for my opinion."

"*Then the cops arrived?*"

"Not just the cops. Vince, the medical examiner, her new assistant, the EMTs, the whole investigative team. Before I could find out more, the place was crawling with officials."

"*Where was Bitsy when it happened?*"

"Under Rob's makeup table. She would have been left there overnight or, worse, taken to the city pound if he hadn't asked me to look after her."

*"Typical cop reaction,"* the yorkiepoop pronounced. *"Forget the canines. They're not worth a second thought."*

"You're being too harsh. Vince and Sam could have insisted they take Bitsy to canine prison, but they agreed to let her stay with us. They did the best they could." She rolled to her side and gave him a shove. "Now get down there and stay close in case she has a nightmare or something. If she wakes up, try and get her to talk. I'll find out what else we can do in the morning."

"Bitsy is totally traumatized," Ellie said as she and Rudy accompanied Vivian to her subway stop. "On this morning's walk, she did her business, then sat in a trance until I picked her up and carted her the rest of the way home. If she doesn't act normal by the end of the day, I'm taking her to Dr. Dave for a checkup."

"Where is she now?" Vivian asked as they headed up Lexington.

"Asleep on my bed, I hope. She didn't spend a very restful night." Rudy had complained that Bitsy had awakened him several times with pathetic-sounding whimpers. Ellie hadn't heard the noise because she'd been too enmeshed in her own nightmare involving bloody scissors and blue-dressed harbingers of death. "I can only imagine the horrific scenes playing over in her mind."

Viv hoisted her Valentino rosette bag onto her shoulder and smoothed the lapels of her full-length black leather trench coat. "She's a dog. Do you really think something like that would bother her?"

"I can't believe you just asked me that," Ellie said, frowning. Viv knew how in tune she was with her charges and she usually put up with Ellie's views, especially when they were relaxed and having fun. But today was a workday, and Vivian was more professional . . . in every way.

"Sorry. I'm aware you're wrapped up in your dogs and their lives, but I'm not. I didn't mean to sound snotty."

"No snot taken," Ellie said with a smile.

She could only imagine the contrast they made standing side by side. Vivian was almost six feet tall and model slim. Though also considered tall, Ellie stood about four inches shorter, and even when she had been married and starving herself to stay in a single-digit dress size, she hadn't been model thin since she was a ten-year-old.

Today's temperature was warm, the sky sunny, the morning breeze balmy, and Viv looked as if she was on her way to a *Vogue* photo shoot. Ellie, of course, wore her usual yellow rain slicker over a nubby yellow and navy sweater, worn jeans, and her most practical hiking boots. If the temperature climbed, she could fold up the slicker and hide it in her Fendi peek-a-boo tote, a Christmas gift from her mother and one of the few designer pieces she owned.

Standing at the subway entrance, Viv said, "So what's your plan for the day?"

"First thing I'll do after morning walks is find out where Rob is and try to get a visitor's pass to see him. Then I'll go home for lunch and take Bitsy out." *And let her know how Rob is doing.* "After that, it's second rounds. If Rob is still in custody, I'll stop at his apartment and pick up whatever will make her comfortable at our place."

"And you're going to call Dave?"

"If she's still acting weird, yes. Why? Were you planning on seeing him tonight?"

"Not really, but phone me if he agrees to come over and I'll call in a dinner order for the three of us." Viv headed down the stairs to her subway. "You can bring the dogs to my place, and Bitsy can have her exam there."

"Sounds like a plan," Ellie said, giving her a wave. "I'll let you know."

Ellie and Rudy started their morning rounds at the Cranston Arms, and were on the way to collecting their first customer: a rather plump Pug named Sampson, who belonged to Mariette Lowenstein. Ellie had given several potential helpers a tryout at walking the six dogs in this building, but unfortunately, none of them had worked out. She was disappointed that her last assistant, Joy, had quit with no warning, even though she'd been paid a good salary, with bonuses for any extra time she spent lending a hand.

*"Why don't you call her?"* Rudy asked, as he often did when he was in mind-reading mode.

She and the yorkiepoop were fast approaching their one-year anniversary, so she was getting used to his uncanny ability to sneak into her brain. It happened most often when she was preoccupied or worried.

"I've tried Joy a few times, but she never answers, and she doesn't call back when I leave a message. I wish I knew what kind of problem she had that forced her to stop working for us."

*"Keep tryin'. Maybe now that the weather's gettin' nicer, she'd be willing to come back."*

"I guess I'd better hang another round of flyers in the local college bookstores. Those sites brought me the most applicants, even if Joy was the only one who worked out."

They arrived at Mariette's apartment and knocked, though neither of the Lowensteins was usually home at this hour. Ellie used her key to enter, but before she could open the door it swung inward. She gaped at a puffy-faced Mariette, her eyes swollen, her expression sour.

"Mrs. Lowenstein, is everything all right?"

The usually attractive and personable middle-aged woman nodded and stepped back to let them in. "I had a bad night. Couldn't fall asleep, even after I took a pill."

"Can I do anything for you? Call the doctor, maybe? Or your husband?"

Mariette jumped at the suggestion. "Heavens, no. Norm has a full calendar today, as usual. He never has time for—I mean, he doesn't have time for my problems."

Ellie had met Mariette Lowenstein and her husband through Ellie's stepfather, Judge Stanley Frye. Norman Lowenstein was a judge for the U.S. district court, where, according to Stanley, the cases he tried involved everything from organized crime to people suing the government.

"Judge Frye told me how hard he works. Isn't he up for some big-time federal appointment?"

Mariette heaved a sigh. "Second Circuit Court of Appeals. It's something I thought we both wanted, but I'm beginning to think—" She put a hand over her mouth. "Lord, just listen to me, going off on a tangent when you have work to do."

"I'm always willing to lend an ear to my clients, both human and canine," Ellie assured Mariette, following her into the kitchen. "So, how have things been going with Sampson and his diet?"

Shrugging, Mariette ran a shaky hand through her straight brown hair. "You tell me. You're the one who cleans up after him."

Rudy snorted. *"Yeah, and it's always a treat."*

Ellie jerked his leash. "There hasn't been another incident like the one I had in November—"

*"That blue poo was gross."*

She tapped her boy in the rear with the toe of her boot. "But Sampson still processes a large amount of waste, and it doesn't look like he's lost any weight, which is my main concern."

"I've managed to keep him out of the wastebaskets, even the one in Norm's office, which is where he got hold of that transfer paper. But he still

food at the dinner table, and if I don't keep the trash up"—she nodded at the metal container on top of the counter—"he's in it all the time, even though I've warned the housekeeper to stow it out of reach. It's just that . . . well . . . I hate saying no to him."

Ellie hated saying no to Rudy, too, as did most owners who cared about their dogs. But pet lovers had to stand firm, exercise their pooches, give treats in moderation, and serve their animals healthy food with no chemicals or additives if they wanted their four-footed friends to enjoy a long and healthy life.

*"Sounds like she's a pushover, Triple E. You could take a lesson from her every once in a while."*

Ellie made a note to list the treats she gave her boy, including the number of times each day she fed him a bite from her own fork or spoon, and read it to him the next time he complained. She knew darn well she shouldn't be giving him anything extra, but a forkful every once in a while wasn't that bad. It was the owners who made a habit of indulging their dogs' every whim who weren't being fair to their pets.

She gave Mariette a smile of encouragement. "I know what you mean, but you still have to stick to the rules."

Sampson ambled in from the hall and plopped his extra-wide bottom on the tile floor. After emitting a large burp, he yawned. *"Morning, all. Here for a breakfast nibble?"*

Ellie reached down and gave his wrinkled face a scratch. "Has he had breakfast yet?"

"He hasn't even been out," Mariette answered. "I got in late and—Well, I got in late and took him out to calm myself down. He lost sleep and so did I."

"Then you can feed him after we return from his morning walk. We'll be back in about thirty minutes."

*"But I'm hungry now,"* the Pug said with a moan.

Ellie raised an eyebrow in his direction. "And make sure it's a half portion. Not one kibble more."

*"Aw, Ellie,"* Sampson said as they ambled into the outer hall. *"You take all the fun out of my life."*

They stepped into the elevator, rode to a different floor, and set out for their next stop while Ellie lectured the overweight Pug. "Fun is one thing. Eating food that's bad for you is something else entirely."

*"How'm I supposed to know what's not good? Everything is tasty when my tummy is empty,"* he grouched. *"Besides, I got a supercharged metabolism. I need more food than other dogs."*

*"Hah!"* Rudy said, his voice snarky. *"What you got is too much nap time."*

Ignoring their chatter, Ellie knocked on Freud's door, then used her key. Most mornings, Esther Gordon left early for her sculpting studio and her psychologist husband had appointments. "Hey, Freud," she told the cocky French Bulldog. "How are things going today?"

"Great." He gave Rudy and Sampson the usual buttsniff welcome. *"Whoa, smells like the big guy's gonna need some extra outside time today."*

*"Oh, goody,"* commented Rudy.

"I'll take care of it, but we still have to get Roscoe, Arlo, Lily, and Rocco."

She led them to the elevator for another climb. Twenty minutes later she and the canines were outside and across the street in front of the park. The sun felt warm, even at this early hour, so after the pack's normal route she took a seat on a bench. When Sampson sat at her feet, she thought he wanted to continue the discussion on his dietary needs.

"I'm not going to tell your mom to ease up on the food restrictions, so there's no point in asking."

*"Big Momma will do whatever you say, Ellie. She thinks you're the man—er—woman,"* the Pug pronounced. *"After she got in last night, she kept tellin' me over and over how much she loved me, and how we'd never be apart."*

Generously proportioned, Mariette stood about fiveten, which made her a very formidable woman. So formidable that the Pug's pet name for his mistress made perfect sense. But to Ellie, the conversation sounded much too dramatic for Mariette. "That's surprising. I always thought your Big—er—Mariette was a bit more practical."

*"She was sad, even a little upset, kinda like she is when she and the judge argue."*

"Have they argued a lot lately?"

*"Yeah."* Sampson rested a paw on her knee. *"But Norm wasn't there when she got home. He walked out when the news finished and stayed away most of the night. Then, a little while ago, her and the judge were in the back room, arguing about more stuff."* Sampson sneezed, blowing dog spit over her legs. *"He left right before you got here."*

Ellie took the spittle as part of the job. She listened to her dogs when they confided in her about their home lives, even if in jest, but this sounded more serious than usual. The Pug had complained a couple of times about the way his mom and dad did verbal battle, but she assumed it had to do with the pressure Judge Lowenstein was under regarding the position he hoped to be appointed to on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals.

"Parents argue. It's the way humans work out their differences. I'm sure Judge Lowenstein is worried about his future on the bench."

*"I don't think his job was the problem. Big Momma's always sayin' he does bad things."*

"Well, she's home now, and the judge is gone, so I'm sure she'll calm down. Her and Norm will work things out." Standing, Ellie headed the pack across Fifth Avenue. "Time to go inside. Rudy and I have three more buildings to take care of."

They dropped off their charges, finished the walks for building two, and were at the Davenport in record time. Randall, the daytime doorman and Ellie's good friend, shot to attention when they entered the foyer. "Did you make Mr. Chesney's opening-night gala? Did you see him afterward, when the trouble began?" he asked, rounding the counter with a newspaper in hand.

"We were there for the whole magilla. Had a great time, or rather Viv, Dr. Dave, and I did. Sam, on the other hand—"

Randall cleared his throat. "I can well imagine what Detective Ryder thought about attending a drag show. He appears to be a very—I believe the term is 'macho'—type of man."

"He's macho, all right, sometimes a little too mucho macho for me, but I've learned to take the good with the not-so-good."

"So he enjoyed the show?"

"I think so, at least until the moment the screaming started."

"Ah, yes. The entire evening was reported in this morning's paper. I assumed that Detective Ryder would be in the thick of it if he was there."

"It made the papers?" Since the murder had occurred around eleven p.m., she thought it would be on the local news, but not in print.

The doorman held the newspaper in front of her face and Ellie read the headline: MURDER AT GUESS WHO. DRAG QUEEN'S DEATH STEALS THE SHOW. "The entire story is covered here."

"I sometimes wonder where the heck newspaper reporters get their info. I mean, I was there and I don't know the whole story. Sam finished the night as the detective in charge, and it was a zoo backstage—worse than when Arnie Harris died."

He cocked an eyebrow in disapproval. "And how did you get backstage?"

"No biggie. When the racket started, I followed Sam. I was worried he might get hurt."

"I'm sure the good detective loved that move."

"Not so much, but he'll get over it. So what else does the paper say? Anything about Rob?"

"It just says there was a stabbing, and the police—that would be Detective Ryder—caught Mr. Chesney with the supposed weapon in hand.

The paper is calling it a crime of passion."

"Really? That, I hadn't heard. Of course, it sounds lurid enough to be information dreamed up by some reporter hoping to make a name for himself."

"That's possible, but—" Randall's eyes lit up as if a lightbulb in his brain had suddenly switched on. "Are you telling me you once again stuck your nose in a crime scene?"

"I didn't 'stick my nose in,' as you so nicely put it," she said on a sigh. "When I went after Sam, I had no idea there'd been a murder."

"Ellie," he warned.

She rolled her eyes. "I know, I know. Stay out of trouble, mind my own business, blah, blah, blah. I was, I tell you. If I'd known what was going on, I'd have kept my bottom in my chair."

"I understand. Still—" The doorman tipped his cap to a tenant leaving the building. "Please don't get involved."

"I didn't do it on purpose. I had no idea that whatever was happening had to do with murder and would have to do with Rob."

Randall glanced at the paper again. "The scenario certainly seems to incriminate Mr. Chesney."

"Sam did find Rob with the weapon in his hand, but I think the rest is speculation on the reporter's part. I simply can't imagine Rob is capable of doing anything that horrible. And the 'crime of passion' thing doesn't ring true."

It hit her that except for Rob holding the scissors and Bitsy being under the dressing table during the murder, she knew virtually nothing about the crime scene. "Does the paper give the name of the victim?"

"I'm sure it does," the doorman said, scanning the columns. "Yes, here it is. The dead man was Arthur Pearson, also known as Carmella Sunday. It says he—er—she had been arrested on several occasions for lurid acts and prostitution, but in the last several years she'd done a turnaround and gone into the entertainment business."

"She had a part in the show. If I remember correctly, she was wearing a big dance-number costume when they found her, but she wasn't one of the three headliners."

"Mr. Chesney planned to take Bitsy to every performance. Do you know what happened to her?"

Ellie realized all this chitchat was making her late and headed toward the elevator. "Bitsy spent the night at our place. Rob asked me to keep her and I couldn't say no." She pressed the call button. "If he doesn't get out on bail, I'll stop in his apartment this afternoon and gather her things. Someone has to look after her. She's too tiny to go to a shelter." She wagged her fingers when the elevator door opened. "I'll be down in a minute."

On the ride up, she gazed at Rudy. "You're too quiet. What are you thinking?"

"*I got a lot on my brain. Who killed that Carmella person? Why was Bobbi-Rob holdin' the weapon? What will happen to Bitsy if he gets convicted?*" He sneezed. "*We have to help them.*"

"My thoughts exactly," she said as they stepped onto Buckley's floor.

"*But you shouldn't get involved in the actual find-the-murderer scenario. This one sounds like a bigger mess than any of the others.*"

She knocked, then used her key to get Buckley, a small black maltipoo with a cranky disposition. "Hey, Buck. How are things?" she asked when he trotted to the door from somewhere in the rear of the apartment.

"*Hazel's on a tear about my health again, just because I been chewin' my paws.*"

Ellie stooped to hook his leash to his collar. "So why are you chewing?"

"*Itchy is all. No big deal. But she took me to that dopey pet psychic for another reading.*"

The trio aimed for the elevator. Ellie had four more dogs to retrieve. "What was her name again?"

"*Madam Orzo. According to Hazel, the woman's a wonder, but she has yet to get me right.*"

No surprise there, thought Ellie. Buckley had a bad opinion of everyone and a complaint about everything. "Hmm, I can't imagine why," she said jokingly. "I haven't seen your mistress in a while. Still off the cigarettes?"

"*She's been good, but I bet that once the nice weather's here she'll start again. She always sits on the patio and takes a hit. Bet she thinks I'm too stupid to figure it out.*"

"She knows you're a smart little guy," Ellie said. They arrived on Sweetie Pie's floor, walked down the corridor, and opened the Westie's door. "Hey, Sweetie. You ready for us?"

The adorable West Highland White Terrier greeted Rudy and Buckley in typical doggie fashion, prompting her yorkiepoo to say, "*You smell like you've been through the wash cycle. Mom using a new shampoo?*"

"*Not Babs, but the groomer thought it was a nice change of pace. Personally, I hate it.*"

The details on the Westie's shampoo sent the dogs off on a tear about groomers that continued until the pack was outside and crossing Fifth Avenue. When they got nitpicky about telling one scent from another, Ellie's mind went into overdrive. Was it possible Bitsy had smelled something during the murder that would identify the killer?

She'd never find out until she got the poohuahua to talk, and that might take time. Meanwhile, she still needed to know if Rob had been released. Until then, there wasn't a thing she could do to help him or his dog.

## Chapter 3



Sam read the caller ID on his cell phone and leaned back in his chair. Paying attention to Ellie now would go a long way toward keeping the peace and deflecting invasive questions later. He had, in fact, expected her to call him before this, but then he remembered that she'd taken home a suspected killer's dog, which might have caused a problem.

"Ryder," he said, though Ellie had to know he'd be the only one on the other end of the line.

"Do you have time for a few questions?"

He smiled at the greeting, happy to know they'd grown so close over the past couple of months that Ellie didn't feel it necessary to announce herself. Positive he knew the topic she wanted to discuss, he heaved a sigh. There was no use trying to pretend he didn't have the answers, and after only four hours' sleep last night, he didn't have the energy to play the avoidance game or give her a lecture, something that never worked with his "bad penny" anyway.

"Can you keep it to five minutes? Because that's about all the time I have right now."

"I'm outside the station. Can I come in?"

Sam ran a hand through his hair. "Don't take this the wrong way, but no. Just ask what you have to and I'll do my best to tell you"—*get off my case*—"what you need to know."

"It's about Rob Chesney."

Well, duh. No surprise there. "I figured. Go ahead."

"Where is he right now?"

"Probably in a holding cell."

"Has he had a bail hearing?"

"And you need to know that because . . ."

Ellie blew out a breath. "Because I have his dog. I want to know if I should keep her with me or drop her at his apartment."

"I believe Mr. Chesney's attorney is in the process of amassing the funds needed to set him free."

"How much did the DA ask for?"

He drummed his fingers on the desk. "I fail to see what the amount of Mr. Chesney's bail has to do with his dog."

"Come on, Sam. Bend a little. Rob's a friend and I want to help him if I can."

"Why? Did he ask you for the money?" He'd heard Chesney was a trust fund baby and didn't need a cent from anyone.

She waited a beat before saying, "You're being difficult."

He shrugged. "Unless you're an attorney or an eyewitness to the murder, you don't need to know anything about his finances or the state of his stay here." Of course, he knew damn well that wouldn't stop her from prying. After a long silence, he said, "Bail was set at half a million. I believe he's made arrangements with a bondsman, but there's paperwork to finish. With luck, he could be home by the end of the afternoon."

"Okay, fine." She exhaled another breath. "Would it be possible for me to see him?"

Sam gazed at the ceiling. "You're kidding, right?"

"I would never kid about such a serious matter. I'd like to see him, and I know you can get me in."

Okay, he could, but that would be a bad move for a couple of reasons. First off, just about everyone in the station knew he and Ellie were dating, and they'd consider it extending special privileges if he did what she asked. Second, they also knew she continually horned in on police business, which didn't endear her to the cops. Third, she wasn't a relative of the perp and therefore had no credible reason for a visit, which would steer them back to reason two. Fourth—well, hell—the list went on and on.

"Can't it wait until he's home?"

"I guess." Another pause, then, "The papers are calling it a crime of passion. Any idea where they'd get that idea?"

That was his girl. If one direction took her nowhere, she'd head off in another. "Not from here. Must have been someone in the DA's office."

"And those scissors were the murder weapon?"

"We're waiting for confirmation from forensics and the ME, but I'm guessing so."

"Is there any other evidence?"

"Not much. The crowd that tromped in and out of the room obliterated any footprints, but forensics might come up with something."

"What about—"

"Sorry, Nancy Drew, but that's all I can say for now."

Ellie's *tsk* shot across the phone line. "But you have an opinion. I know you do."

"All I have right now are the facts. Until the entire story comes to light, and that's up to the evidence Vince and I gather, I don't know anything for sure."

"Okay. Be that way."

The huge sigh she dropped onto the end of the sentence made him want to bang his head against a wall. "Are you really going to make me recite the list of reasons why I can't discuss this with you?"

"You could discuss it if he was innocent."

"You know better than to say that, and as far as I'm concerned, he isn't." Neither he nor Vince had bought Chesney's story of walking into the dressing room, seeing the victim, and falling to his knees to offer assistance. Only an idiot would pull a weapon out of a body. "I have to go."

"Can you stop by my place tonight? I want to talk to you about Bitsy."

Sam closed his eyes. He recalled the fuss about the dog, but what the heck did it have to do with him? "Did something happen to the little mutt that I need to know about?"

"I think Dr. Dave has to make a house call."

When the word "mutt" didn't get a rise out of her, he said, "Why? Is it sick?"

"Not in the physical sense."

Was she saying the dog had a mental problem? Did he really want to know? "And you need me there . . . Why?"

"Just to talk over a few things. Come on, I promise I won't go overboard with the questions."

Impossible. "I'll drop by if I can, but I'm not making any promises. What time?"

"Anytime. In fact, if you're free around seven you can stop by Viv's place. She's ordering dinner for me and Dr. Dave, and there's always more food than we can eat."

"It all depends on how the investigation goes. Vince and I are still questioning people who were allowed backstage last night, even if they were performing at the time of the murder. Vince is lead on this one, so he's calling the shots."

"Why Vince? You were the first officer on the scene."

The answer to her question was the same as the list of reasons he had for not allowing her to visit Chesney in jail. They were personally involved; she'd been with him at the site; she knew the supposed killer. But if he told Ellie she was the reason he had to play second fiddle, she'd have a full-blown fit.

"It was Vince's turn," he stated simply. "He had no problem taking whatever I told him as fact and assuming command."

"Is that the truth?" she asked, her tone rife with suspicion.

He crossed mental fingers. "Yes. Now hang up. I'll call you later and let you know about dinner."

The connection dropped and he tossed his phone on the blotter. He'd been waiting for Ellie's call, knew what she would ask, was even prepared for her bossy attitude. So why did their dialogue bother him so much?

*Get real, Ryder, a voice in his brain growled. You care about the woman. You don't want to create hostility, especially since things have gone so well for the past four months.*

Ellie had let him back into her bed. They enjoyed being together, verbal sparring included. She always knew what to say to ease his anger and make him laugh. She was a good person, a saint really, when compared to most of the people he had to deal with, including those in his own family.

More important, she knew the rules. She usually backed away when he asked her to, and made him smile when she did it. She was the bright spot in his day, the reason he now saw the good in people he used to write off as crackpots or fools. She complemented his contrary and disbelieving nature, made sense of the things he sometimes found it impossible to understand. To put it plainly, Ellie was the very best of his better half.

Except when a friend or a client was in trouble. Then all bets were off, and she fought as dirty as any street fighter.

And Chesney was both.

Leaning back in his chair, Sam heaved another sigh. He could give orders, make demands, and set as many boundaries as he wanted, but it wouldn't do him a damn bit of good. Vince had already told him he was a goner when it came to Ellie Engleman and he didn't doubt it for a second.

Instead of saying good-bye to Sam, Ellie simply ended the call and headed for home. The man was so frustrating she wanted to scream. Then she remembered the hellacious wail that had erupted from backstage at Guess Who and thought better of it. She'd only hurt her voice if she raised it that many decibels, and the last thing she needed was laryngitis—not a good thing in her line of work.

*"Didn't sound like the deceptive dick was any help,"* Rudy offered, trotting beside her.

"He told me as much as he could, I guess. I'll just have to get the rest of the details from Rob."

They made it home in twenty minutes. After Ellie gave Bitsy a cuddle and a walk, they came back inside, and she was now studying Bitsy in silence. She planned to eat lunch and leave Rudy here babysitting while she completed her afternoon rounds. Right now, the poohuahua was huddled on a floor mat and trembling, exactly where she'd been when Ellie first came in the door. Best she could tell, the pup was still traumatized from the events of last night, but without verbal contact, she had no clue as to why.

*"You gonna give me orders or what?"*

She cocked an elbow and rested her cheek in her palm, still gazing at her houseguest. "Just take care of her. Stay close and give her a shoulder to cry on if she needs it. If she starts to talk, try to remember what she says so you can repeat it when I get home. Think you can follow instructions?"

*"That's as easy as polishing off a Dingo bone, Triple E. I can handle it."*

"Then I'm out of here. I probably won't be back until it's time to go to Viv's for dinner. I guess I'd better call Dr. Dave and ask him to meet us there so he can give Bitsy a once-over."

Rudy settled on the mat, curling his body around the tiny pooch. *"Got it. And don't worry about us. We'll be fine. Won't we, Bits?"*

Bitsy snuggled closer to him and closed her eyes, which again tore at Ellie's heart. As soon as she finished the afternoon runs, she'd visit Rob, get his version of what had happened in his dressing room, and see if there was anything she could do to help. She hated lying, but she had to tell Rob his dog needed a checkup, which meant she had to come up with a story that would convince him to leave Bitsy in her care for another night.

She left her apartment with Bitsy's predicament in the forefront of her mind. The idea of the tiny dog so in tune with her owner that she could do nothing but shake and whimper at his misfortune brought tears to Ellie's eyes. Anyone who believed that canines didn't experience emotion was an idiot. The dogs she walked felt sorrow, joy, pity, love, and every emotion in between, and they were proud of it.

Heading west on Sixty-eighth, she crossed Lexington and passed Hunter College. Great. She'd been so enmeshed in Rob's dilemma she'd forgotten all about dropping off Help Wanted flyers at the local colleges. *I'll do it first thing tomorrow,* she told herself, striding across Park Avenue. She figured she might as well talk as she walked, so she pulled out her cell and rang Dr. Dave.

"Hi, David. It's Ellie," she said when he answered.

"Hey, what's up?"

"This is a twofold call. First, you're invited to join me for dinner at Viv's place around seven tonight. Think you can make it?"

"Barring a four-legged emergency, sure. What else?"

"Bitsy needs a checkup."

"Bitsy? What's wrong with the little girl?"

"I assume Viv told you I brought her home with me last night."

"She did. But what happened that made you think she needs an exam?"

"The poor thing hasn't stopped trembling since they pulled her carrier out from underneath Rob's dressing table. And she hasn't so much as touched a single bite of kibble either. She's all of four pounds, and I'm pretty sure a dog that small can't go too long without eating, right?"

"You're absolutely correct. So, you'll bring her to Vivian's and I'll look at her there?"

"Yep, and thanks. I appreciate it."

Crossing Fifth, she dialed Viv's office line and left a message about dinner. Then she dropped the phone in her bag and aimed for the Beaumont, after which she planned to skip the Davenport, take care of her two northernmost buildings, and swing back around. Keeping things tight, she took care of her charges and was at the Davenport in under two hours. Now that she was here, she would walk the dogs, bring them home, then go to Rob's for a quick talk.

She entered the building to the sound of angry chatter and the booming voice of the evening doorman, Boris Kronkovitz.

"You must wait," he told the crowd gathered around the front desk. "I need identification before you go up."

*Huh?* Ellie glanced at her watch as she skulked past the unruly tenants, praying she wouldn't get caught. She didn't have time to wait for the people who were complaining to get through.

She'd made it to the elevator and pushed the call button when Kronk's voice, sounding much too close, chimed, "*Ell-ee*, my dar-*link* girl. Where are you go-*ink*?"

She turned to give the doorman a wave and bumped smack into him. Rubbing her nose, she took a step of retreat. "Stop sneaking up on me, Kronk. I have dogs to walk."

He shook his leonine head. "Sorry, but no. *Ees* impossible."

"What do you mean '*ees* impossible'? I have keys and you're holding permission slips from each of my clients." She peeked around the doorman's beefy chest and found a dozen people glowering at her. "Uh, hi. I don't suppose any of you need a dog walker?"

"If she's allowed up, we're all allowed up, Mr. Kronkovitz," said a woman wearing Prada and pearls. "This business of having to be cleared before we go to our apartments is ridiculous. The police can't keep us from our homes."

Shouts of "Yeah," "She's right," and "You tell him, Sharon," rang out when she finished.

"What the heck is going on, Kronk?" Ellie asked, hoping the tenants would view her as a friend if she was able to get the crazy Russian to change his tune.

The doorman stretched his six-foot-four frame to an even more imposing height and scanned the crowd. "*Ees* not my idea." Stepping into the elevator, he removed an enormous key ring from his pocket, chose a key, and fiddled with the control panel. Then he marched back to the desk, calling over his shoulder, "*Ell-ee-vay-tor* not work until I check you in."

The tenants continued to grumble. A gentleman rushed to the stairway entrance, grabbed the door handle leading to the steps, and gave a tug. When the door failed to open, he swung around. "How dare you disable the elevator and lock the door to the stairs. I'm reporting you for a fire code violation."

"*Ees* not me," Kronk explained. "*Ees* management."

"But we're not criminals," the woman named Sharon said.

"Management say police advise them to keep build-*ink* free of trespassers and news *pipple*. I only do-*ink* my job." With that, Kronk raised a clipboard and waited.

The residents continued to argue, but it appeared they'd gotten the message. Ellie watched while the burly doorman did his thing, matching each person's identification to a list of names on his clipboard. Finally, he walked to the elevator, again took out his key ring and fiddled with the control panel, and stepped into the foyer.

One by one, the tenants entered the waiting car, leaving her to get to the bottom of the story. "Okay, spill," Ellie ordered, following Kronk to the front counter. "What's this all about?"

"I am only obey-*ink* orders," he said, his expression soulful. "Authorities say no one goes up unless they prove they *leeve* in build-*ink* or someone already here gives okay."

"So the cops are trying to keep reporters and thrill seekers away from Rob Chesney? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, is what I'm say-*ink*." He gave her a grin. "But *ees* not for you. I am sure you are approved."

Ellie opened and closed her mouth. While she and Kronk had a decent relationship, she'd never found the man to be totally trustworthy, but every now and then he surprised her. "That's nice of you, Kronk."

"But I *haf* favor."

She rolled her eyes. She should have known it was too good to be true. "And that would be . . ."

"You are great crime solver, yes?"

Fairly sure she knew where this was leading, she raised an eyebrow. "I have had some success at scoping out murderers."

"And *eef* you find *geel-tee par-tee*, you go to police?"

"I definitely go to police—er—the police."

"So, before you do, you tell Kronk who *ees keel-air*. I call reporter and get paid for news. You get credit for solv-*ink* crime. *Ees* what you call a win-win deal, yes?"

"Ah, no," Ellie stated, heaving a sigh. She'd learned from past experience that the Russian was all about the cash, but this was too bold to be real. "And you should be ashamed for asking me."

Kronk's expression grew wounded. "*Ell-ee*, why you say such a *theenk*? I merely share in your wonderful luck."

Luck? Now that was a real insult. She'd been tied to a chair and left for dead, had her dog stolen, and just four months ago had been held at gunpoint and threatened with poison. Getting out of those situations had taken a heck of a lot more than luck.

"We split *mon-ee*? I give you ten—no—*twen-tee* percent," he continued.

She pivoted on her toes, walked to the elevator, and pushed the call button. The suggestion wasn't even worth a second "no." When the door opened, she stepped inside and punched the number for her first client's floor.

Finished walking the Davenport pack, she managed to slip past Kronk, who was busy checking in more grumbling tenants, and back into the elevator. She probably should have phoned Rob and asked if he wanted visitors, but she assumed he would expect her to bring Bitsy home without a call. Which she would have done, except for the fact that the poohuahua was too traumatized to leave her condo.

But how to explain this to Rob?

After returning the dogs to their homes, she knocked on his door and waited, positive that someone was watching her through the peephole. When no one answered, she knocked again and heard the dead bolts slide open. Then the door swung inward.

"Ellie. Thank God it's you." Rob stepped back and allowed her inside. Then he slumped against the hallway wall and ran shaking fingers through his hair. Throwing her a mournful smile, he said, "I guess I don't have to tell you about last night, do I? I mean, you were there and all, and —"

He headed down the hall, as if expecting her to follow, and she obliged.

"The first detective on the scene was your date, right? I figured that out when I met you outside the dressing room." Now in the living room, he dropped onto a butter yellow leather sofa and crossed his legs. Wearing faded Levi's and a claret red cashmere sweater, he looked sad yet determined. His disheveled hair only added to his pitiable expression. "So did Detective Ryder tell you anything? Is there any word on the real killer?"

She dropped into a matching wing chair across from him. "Yes, Sam was my date. We've gone out for a while now, but he won't—I mean, he rarely discusses his cases with me. In fact, I probably know less about what happened than was reported in the papers."

"But you've solved crimes, caught killers and all that. Doesn't he ask for your help?"

*My help?* She wanted to laugh, but knew it wouldn't be appreciated by a guy who'd just been charged with murder. "He hasn't approved of anything I've done to solve the murder—er—the cases I've been involved in. He thinks I'm inept and a danger to myself, so, no, he does not ask for my assistance."

"I'm sorry to hear that, because the way Randall talks you're a regular Sherlock Holmes." He leaned back on the couch. "I was hoping I could hire you to lend a hand in the investigation."

*Hire me?* "Rob, I'm not a PI or anything like one. To tell you the truth, I'm a nudge." Great. She'd just slotted herself in the same category as Sam put his mother. "I really don't know what I'm doing, but I push and push until I manage to stumble onto the facts."

"But you've caught the guilty party."

"Yes, but . . . How about I ask you some questions? Maybe if we talk it out, something will come to you that you haven't thought of before. Then you can tell the cops and they'll look into it."

"Sure, fine." He narrowed his eyes. "Hey, where's my baby? Why didn't you bring Bitsy home?"

Ellie swallowed hard, determined to tell a convincing story. "Bitsy is still at my place. I wasn't sure you'd be here, so I thought it best she stay with me until I knew for certain."

"I'm out on bail. It took the entire day to get that straightened out." He started jiggling his leg in a twitchy, nervous kind of manner. "Little did I know there are some restrictions on my trust fund that don't allow for a withdrawal of a large amount of cash unless I can prove to the attorney in charge that it's necessary."

"I heard bail was set at half a million. Isn't putting up ten percent the norm?"

"Yes, but everything I have is invested. I didn't trust myself to have that kind of money at my fingertips, so I put myself on a budget. My attorney pays the mortgage on this place, the tenant's fees, all of it, and deposits a monthly allowance in my checking account. He had to liquidate some bonds to—" He rubbed his hands over his eyes. "Listen to me, going on about money when I'm facing a murder charge. If my mother and father hadn't already disowned me, this would have sealed the deal."

Right around Christmas, Rob had told Ellie a sad tale about his dreadful family life, and since Sam was on duty and her mother and the judge were in Barbados, she'd invited him to spend the holiday with her and Flora Steinman. But it hadn't been necessary. Rob was still on good terms with his sister in Phoenix, and he and Bitsy had flown there for the week.

"Do you think they know you were arrested?" Ellie asked, uncomfortable with the personal questions.

"I haven't a clue, but I've talked to my sister. Kayla's agreed to stay with me until I'm cleared of the charges. And if I'm not, well . . ." He shook his head. "She'll take Bitsy home to live with her and Bradley."

Hoping to drop the dismal family business, Ellie decided it was time to get down to the nitty-gritty. "I don't mean to be intrusive, but can you explain what happened last night? I'll understand if you don't want to tell me anything, of course, but I ran into Kronk and a group of angry tenants downstairs, so I know about the restriction management has put on allowing reporters and thrill seekers into the building."

"Amazing, isn't it? No one gives a damn about me. All the tenants care about is their precious right to privacy, and the newspapers can't seem to talk about anything except the fact that I'm a drag queen and so was the victim. I have to be the killer. It's nothing less than what any pervert would do."

"So you've seen the papers?"

"I read them, and afterward I was ordered to clam up by Keller Williams, my attorney. He'd probably have a fit if he knew I was talking to you, but I really could use a friend right now, and the guys in the revue . . . Well, let's just say I wasn't close to any of them."

"Okay, fine. I'll be your sounding board until your sister shows up." Ellie rested her elbows on her knees. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

"Why not? It's all going to come out anyway. The victim was Art Pearson, stage name Carmella Sunday. We weren't lovers, as the papers suggest, and we certainly weren't friends. In fact, Carmella could barely tolerate me."

"So he—er—she was just someone working in your show?"

"She danced in the revue, but she wasn't just any performer. Carmella was my understudy. If I got ill or couldn't go on for any reason, she had my numbers down pat." Rob stood. "Hang on a second. Let me show you something."

He left the room and Ellie bit back a sigh. It sounded as if this Keller Williams guy had a pretty good idea of how to handle the press. She only hoped he was a decent trial attorney.

Rob returned and passed her an eight-by-ten glossy. "Take a look at this."

Ellie gazed at the photo, a picture of Rob in full drag, complete with the ice blue satin gown he wore during his second number. "Um, I don't understand. This is you the way you looked in your final song last night."

"But that isn't me," he said, his expression bleak.

She held the photo at arm's length and studied it. The person in the picture wore the same blond wig and elbow-length gloves, the identical headpiece. . . . If this guy wasn't Rob, it was someone who had him down cold. "It's not?"

"Nope. That's a picture of Carmella Sunday, vamping as my understudy."