

# SISTER'S KEEPER

## Chapter One

I've worn a floor length dress exactly three times in my life. Once to my high school prom (a black granny dress with combat boots - it was a political statement), once to my sister Nora's wedding (a tangerine and white empire cut with puffy sleeves which made me look like a walking creamsicle) and once on the night Zoe Freeman died.

It was the dead of summer which meant that New York felt like a sauna and smelled like a urinal. The last thing I would normally agree to do in August in New York, is wear heels and a formal, but this was a special occasion. Nora had even flown in from Baltimore where she lives with her husband Byron and their daughter Vickie. You have to understand, my sister, who likes the comforts and luxuries of any well-heeled hedonist, could only be lured to New York in August for a very good reason.

And she had one.

We had been given two tickets to an AIDS fund-raiser. For the last three years Life-Dreams, a non-profit organization, had been auctioning off fantasies, such as breakfast at Tiffanys with Audrey Hepburn, a bit part in a Spielberg movie, and ringside seats with Sugar Ray. This year there were twenty-two different items up for auction ranging from haute couture to horse racing. The gossip columnists were touting it as the event of the year. Tickets cost three hundred dollars each and there wasn't a one to be had in the whole of the city.

Zoe Freeman, our childhood friend, was catering the event and had insisted that Nora and I come as her guests.

Nora had helped me find an evening gown for the party. It was low cut, red and clung to me like a second skin. I hid my lack of cleavage under a hand painted silk shawl my father had bought my mother during their second honeymoon to Hong Kong in the late 60s. Nora's gown exposed her ample bosom to its full advantage and the black material against her milky white skin created a head turning affect.

"How do I look?" I asked somewhat sheepishly as I joined Nora. I had found her in the livingroom with a glass of wine in one hand and a picture frame in the other.

She studied me from head to toe and back again. "You could use a little more blush. And try the earrings Mommie left you, they'd be perfect with that dress."

"I already feel like a clown," I mumbled as I turned and walked back down the long corridor that leads to my bedroom at the front of the apartment. Having been the last sibling left in New York, when my father died I decided to move back in and re-do the place. A rent controlled sunny three bedroom apartment on West End Avenue can make living in New York a veritable piece of cake.

I stared at myself in the mirror and decided that if I added any more blush, I'd look like the old lady who frequents OTB. Instead, I reached for the bottle of Di Borghese perfume. When I opened it, it spilled over my hand and onto my shoes.

Nora had been here three days and already I could feel strain. I suppose part of me had thought that renovating the apartment would change the family dynamics somehow, but family has a way of pressing buttons that bring old patterns of behavior out of the moth balls.

"How did you get this picture?" Nora asked from the bathroom doorway. She held up the photograph she had been looking at in the livingroom. It was from Christmas past. Long past. I was eight, our brother David was eleven and Nora and her inseparable friend, Zoe, were fourteen. Mom and Dad were sitting together in the middle of a plastic covered sofa, David was next to Mom, I was sitting in Dad's lap, and Zoe and Nora were sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of everyone.

All dressed up for the holidays; David wore a red and green tie, Nora's party dress was covered with an apron, Zoe wore black pants and a brown turtle neck and I wore a tartan plaid jumper with a set of Anne Oakley guns hanging from my waist. Everyone was smiling up at the camera. Everyone, that is, except Zoe. But Zoe hardly ever smiled, even back then.

"I've had it for years." The perfume was defying soap and water. Now I smelled like my mother's sister, Sophie, who used to tip the perfume bottle just under her ear and half of the contents would splash down her neck and puddle in her cleavage.

Nora studied my reflection in the mirror and smiled. "That's much better. See what a little blush can do?"

"Oh yes, much better." I took a deep breath and nearly choked from the fumes. "Are you ready to go?" I asked .

"Yes. I've only been waiting for you for an hour."

"Well excuse me, it takes me longer to dress up like a Barbie doll."

"You look lovely." She said, following me into the bedroom.

"I do?" I hadn't meant to sound so surprised.

"You do."

"So do you." I paused. "But just remember, if there's dancing at this here shindig. . . I get to lead."

The party was being held at Weshim's Auction House in SoHo. Though I had been to Weshim's several times, I had never seen it looking so festive and colorful. The partitions which create display walls on the first floor had all been removed and the place was enormous. The building had been a deserted button factory when Harris Weshim bought the place in the early 70s. He had spent the first year restoring the place and it was now, both inside and out, one of the most impressive buildings in SoHo. The floors were wooden, the walls brick, the ceilings tin and twelve columns lined two sides of the room.

There were tuxedo clad hawkers selling balloons and t-shirts. The balloons were going for \$250 a piece because inside each balloon were gift certificates for the most trendy stores in town. The bars were draped with white and teal cloths. Artwork from the current Impressionist and Modern Painting collection up for

auction later in the week was prominently displayed on the surrounding walls. Splashes of colors from original canvases by Bonnard, Miro, Cezanne, and Sisley added to the festive air. Neon colored balloons bobbed from the ceiling and four huge arrangements of daylilies, foxglove, irises and gay feathers on pedestals were spotlighted strategically throughout the room.

Nora asked a security guard to point us in the direction of the kitchen and Zoe Freeman. En route we stopped at one of the bars and each got a glass of champagne.

As we wove through the maze of desperately *beautiful* people I sighted a handful of stars who were trying hard to look casual. A trio of party-goers were using a sculpture of a coffin by Magritte as a coffee table. We moved on, catching bits and pieces of conversation.

"Now *this*," said a woman holding up an asparagus spear for her friends to see, "is a *fascinating* vegetable. Absolutely fascinating."

"If the only way we're going to get a raise is to fire some do-nothing on a lower level, then I say, fine, fire 'em. Hey man, the cost of living's going through the ceiling." The speaker had a rich, deep baritone and a cheap toupee.

"As memorial services go, I would have given it a four. Bad turnout."

"If I wanted him to have the key, Freeman, I would have given it to him and not you. You're getting sloppy and believe me, that's certain death around here. Do you understand me?" The voice was so menacing that I had to see where it was coming from. I turned and saw Zoe Freeman listening impassively to a tall man in a long black morning coat with a floppy purple bow tie that hung loosely over his chest. He was so fair that at a first glance he looked as if he had no eyebrows at all.

Nora caught sight of them at the same time and her voice pierced through the din. "Zoe! We were just on our way back to see you." Nora thrust herself at Zoe and kissed the air on either side of her cheeks.

Zoe gave Nora a bear hug. "Nora," she said warmly, "I'm so glad you're here. You look wonderful."

"We wouldn't have missed this for the world. This is so exciting. And to think, you put it all together! And look, look who's here. How long has it been since you've seen Sydney?" Nora's words came out in a rush.

"Oh God, at least ten years." She held her arms out and pulled me into a tight embrace. "Can you believe I can still remember helping Eleanor diaper you?"

This was not the Zoe Freeman I remembered. The woman who could have been the prototype for Masha in *The Seagull* had gone through a dramatic metamorphosis since I had last seen her. At forty four, Zoe had dark brown hair which she wore very short at the sides and longer on top. A patch of bangs fell carelessly onto the right side of her forehead and her full lips were painted a deep shade of burgundy. She was wearing a white and turquoise summer suit with matching heels. "This is Harris Weshim." She introduced the infamous auctioneer.

Reputed to be a fashion maven, Harris Weshim's outfit looked to me as if he was trying too hard to dress like Vincent Van Gogh. When he forced a smile, his lips all but disappeared. "How do you do?" He dropped the smile when he turned back to Zoe. "I'll start the auction as soon as possible. Take care of that key. I'd hate to have to call The Gables next time." Either having forgotten his manners, or our presence, Harris Weshim elbowed his way into the crowd without so much as a glance back at Nora or me.

"What a charmer." Nora took a glass of champagne off a silver tray being offered by a waiter and replaced it with her empty glass. "Sort of reminds me of Leonard."

"My ex?" Zoe shook her head as if she'd eaten something sour, "Believe me, Harris is a prince by comparison." Zoe laughed easily. "One of the things I've discovered in my business is that unless their money's as old as the hills, rich folk don't know how to treat people." Her eyes scanned the room. "We're still on for tonight, right?" Zoe's question sounded more like a statement. "You're coming too, aren't you Sydney?"

"I didn't tell her. I wanted it to be a surprise." Nora slid an hors d'oeuvre of scallion pancake with sour cream and caviar off a tray being passed. She avoided my stare.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The Rainbow Room." Nora said before popping the pancake into her mouth.

"We're going there to celebrate." Zoe glowed.

"What are we celebrating?"

"Success. Life. But most of all, freedom." Zoe's eyes sparkled. "But I'll have to meet you there. Now," she straightened her back, "I have to get back to work." She motioned to a thin man in a tuxedo and called out, "Kenneth."

He snapped to attention and joined us, a dim smile plastered on his handsome face. "Zoe?"

"Kenneth Phillips, this is Nora Bradshaw and Sydney Sloane." We went through the introductions. Kenneth was the party manager and told to keep our glasses full. "Now go enjoy yourselves and I'll see you after the auction, okay?" That said, she and Kenneth headed towards the spiral staircase at the front of the building.

The food and champagne flowed freely, but what impressed Nora and me the most was that no matter where we looked there was a familiar face from either the entertainment industry, politics or the social register.

"Quite a party, eh?" I looked up and saw the most drop dead good looking man I've ever seen in my life clutching a glass in one hand and the auction program in the other. He stuffed the paper into his tuxedo jacket and offered me his hand. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Andre Masire, I'm a friend of Zoe's." His accent was English, but the studied Oxford inflection made it clear that England wasn't home.

"I'm Sydney Sloane and this is my sister, Nora Bradshaw." My hand felt tiny in his.

"I couldn't help but notice that the two most attractive women in the room were talking with Zoe earlier." His skin was the color of cinnamon and from the touch of his hand, as soft as velvet.

"Zoe and I are old friends." Nora selected a shrimp off a tray being passed by a waitress and dipped it in a bowl of cocktail sauce.

"How do you know Zoe?" I asked him as he reached for a shrimp.

"You can put your tail here." The waitress said to Nora.

"I beg your pardon?" My big sister's brown eyes grew wide.

"The shrimp tail." She pointed to a second bowl on the tray and explained, "It's a tail return so you don't have to hold it."

"Well isn't that thoughtful?" Nora dropped the tail of the shrimp into the bowl and smiled at the waitress.

"So, how do you know Zoe?" I asked Andre Masire again.

"Initially through Zoe's best friend, Judith. Do you know Judith Housmann?"

I didn't.

"Well, Judith and I work together at the Mission. Years ago she introduced us and now Zoe and I do business together." He took a sip of his drink.

"Zoe's told me *all* about you." Nora wiped the tips of her fingers on a cocktail napkin.

"Has she?" He leveled his gaze at Nora. "Should I be nervous or flattered?" It was impossible to read his dark eyes.

Nora smiled as she reached for a wild mushroom croustade.

A Chinese gong chimed, signaling the guests that the auction was about to begin.

All of the seats were taken by the moneyed bidders. In a horseshoe around them stood the masses, straining to see and hear everything. Nora and I were positioned towards the front of the horseshoe where we had an unobstructed view. Less than fifteen minutes into the auction, Andre excused himself and disappeared into the crowd.

An hour later the twenty two items had been auctioned off. Judging from the response of the Life-Dream staff, it had been a successful evening.

It was only ten thirty as people headed en masse for the door. Zoe was nowhere in sight but as we stepped out onto the sidewalk, Andre Masire appeared, took hold of Nora's left elbow and my right, and steered us towards a double-parked limousine.

"Taxi, ladies?" He smelled like musk and his teeth were as white as his shirt.

I pulled my elbow away from his grasp. I don't know if it's because I'm a feminist or my years as a police officer that makes that touch so unappealing to me. You can hold my hand, link your arm through mine, drape your arm over my shoulders, but the touch of a hand on my elbow unnerves me.

Andre didn't seem to notice.

"Zoe has asked me to take good care of you until she can meet us later." The lilt of his words was like music.

"I thought it was going to be a girls night out." Nora turned gracefully towards him.

"I can't think of anything I'd enjoy more than that." Andre laughed flirtatiously, then added, "Seriously, would you prefer I not join you?" He opened the back door of the car and cool air beckoned us to abandon the sweltering heat of the street and enter comfort and luxury. "It was Zoe's invitation, but I would be happy to escort you to The Rainbow Room and then be off."

Nora studied him for a minute. "Zoe's right, she said you have great eyes."

"You had better stop before you make me blush." He gestured to the opened door. "Does that mean I may accompany you?"

"Mr. Masire, the way you look in that tuxedo, you could accompany me anywhere." Nora slid into the backseat like a queen, as if she had a fleet of limos at her beck and call on a daily basis.

"How very gracious." Andre's smile was beguiling.

For all they seemed to care, I could have been invisible. By that point, I wouldn't have been surprised if they took off without me, but they didn't. Andre took the seat opposite us and, as the car pulled away from the curb, he opened a bottle of champagne.

By twelve forty-five Zoe had still not arrived at The Rainbow Room and I was fading fast. Andre had called Zoe's shop, Feastings, as well as her home and had gotten the answering machine at both places.

I decided to leave Nora and Andre and head home. Nora was already on to her second after-dinner drink and, I predicted, one hell of a hangover.

I find comfort in the fact that the streets of New York are never truly empty. However, I didn't expect the intense traffic jam I saw when I reached the street.

I realized that half a block down the police had cordoned off the area. Being a card-carrying snoop, I headed towards the sight. A uniformed police officer was keeping curiosity seekers and passers-by at a healthy distance, muttering that there had been an accident and there wasn't anything there to see. He was right. As is the case with car accidents, you can't see a thing because the police block the view with their cars, the ambulance and simply by putting themselves between the injured and the passers-by.



I was about to leave when I saw Brian Skeets standing by an unmarked car. He was having an animated conversation with a uniformed officer. Brian and I had been cadets together at the Police Academy in the early seventies.

New streaks of gray in his short sideburns made him look more distinguished. I inched my way to the front of the barricade and asked an auxiliary cop if I could see Brian. She asked my name and I told her I was Mimi Butler - a fellow classmate from the Academy. Eighty per cent of our class, including Brian, had tried to win Mimi's affection to no avail. I watched the wannabe cop walk crisply around the circumference of the accident and finally tap Brian on the shoulder. He seemed to get a fresh surge of energy when she told him who wanted to talk to him. He straightened his tie with one hand and slicked back his hair with the other. As he started towards us, he surveyed the crowd for a brunette with legs up to her ears. I wiggled my fingers in a wave as his eyes finally came to rest on me.

"Sloane?" His body seemed to sag for an instant, but he recovered quickly. He smiled unevenly and shook his head, "Figures you'd say it was Butler. Have you heard from her?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. About three years after we hit the streets, she called. She'd given up police work and decided to join a convent in New Mexico."

"Figures."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

Just over six feet tall, Brian has the gait and carriage of a professional basketball player, but I've watched him play and he's not very good. He ambled towards me. I opened my arms.

"So, stranger, this is a surprise, isn't it?" We hugged and then he held me out at arms length. He looked dapper in his black pants, charcoal jacket and baby blue shirt.

"In a word, yeah. Christ, how long has it been, eight years?"

"Well now, how long have you been married?" I laughed at his pained reaction.

"Ouch."

"Yeah, ouch is right." The last time I had seen Brian was the night before his wedding. I was pleased to see he remembered enough of that night to blush.

"You're looking good. Great, as a matter of fact." He still had the self-conscious grin of a teenager.

"You too."

His eyes came to rest on my neckline. I had forgotten that I was in a strapless skin-tight, red, floor-length gown. I pulled the shawl up on my shoulders and cleared my throat.

"What happened here?" I asked.

"An accident." He sighed, bored. "I was passing by. Thought I'd take a look see."

"I thought you were with the 19th." We were on the west side and the 19th precinct covers the east side from 59th street to 96th.

"I am. As a matter of fact I'm a detective now."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you, thank you. Actually, though, I was just on my way home and thought I'd check this out." He tucked his hands deep into his pockets and rocked back onto his heels. "No big deal. Old story; lady's not looking where she's walking, driver panics and hits the accelerator instead of the brakes." He nodded in the direction of the driver, a small, dark man who was leaning against a police car, sucking nervously on a cigarette pinched between his thumb and index finger. The driver's almond shaped eyes were darting from the motionless body, which had been covered, to the thinning crowd on the avenue. His car, a Buick, with red, white and blue plates, sat twenty feet away and was being examined by a forensic team.

In the middle of the street the victim's shoeless foot was poking out from under a blue and white paper blanket.

The flash of the police camera brought me back to Brian who was asking, "You still work with that pain in the ass?"

"Max?"

"Yeah, Max. Who else?"

The woman's nylons had a run from the arch of her foot past her heel, up her calf and finally disappearing under the cover.

Even after seven years on the force and ten years as a private investigator, I'm still not able to look at death without feeling a sense of personal loss. I got a lot of grief

for that when I was on the force, but the truth is I've never really learned how to deal with death. I always feel a little empty when I see a dead body.

"You okay?" He touched my arm.

"I'm fine." I took a deep breath. "Max? Of course Max and I are still partners. Who else would have him?"

He smiled, "Man's got one hell of a reputation. Are you two . . . you know, together?" He moved his upper body back and forth like a marionette.

I laughed. "What do you think?"

He shrugged and held his palms up, "Hey, you never know. I mean, stranger things have happened."

"Not in my life." I scanned the streets for the victim's shoes. I don't know why but whenever someone gets hit by a car, no matter if they're wearing boots, heels, sandals or sneakers, one foot always seems to end up bared. And shoes always tell so much about a person. Then I saw it.

"Oh my God," I whispered.

"What?" Brian followed my gaze.

"The shoe." I started walking quickly across the cordoned off area to a police officer who was holding a familiar turquoise shoe. Brian walked beside me, waving off any objections from rulebook officers.

"Was that her shoe?" I asked the acne scarred officer, pointing to the victim.

"This?" He held it up. "Yeah," he said to Brian.

"You have an ID on her?" I asked him.

He looked at Brian as if I wasn't there.

"Why? Do you know her?" Brian asked.

"Maybe."

He turned to the officer and asked, "What do you have on her?" Brian took the scuffed shoe from the officer.

"Well sir," he pulled a small leather bound notebook from his jacket pocket and flipped through a few pages. His hands were ugly appendages with stubs of nails at the tips of his sausage-like fingers. "There was a set of keys, close to four hundred dollars cash in her wallet, a drivers license and two credit cards, sir. We believe the name's Carson. Louise Carson."

I took the shoe from Brian. These had to be the same shoes Zoe was wearing at Weshims. How many pairs of turquoise shoes with white stripes on the heels and toes could there possibly be?

"You know her?" Brian's voice was gently and caring.

"The name's not right, but this shoe . . ." I looked back at the body. "May I?"

"Sure." Brian gave the shoe back to the officer whose silent objections rang loud and clear from the expression on his face. For whatever reason, it was obvious that the officer didn't want to relinquish control to a superior officer.

Brian put his arm around my shoulder and we walked over to the motionless heap. "You sure you want to do this?" He asked.

"Yes."

Brian squatted down and lifted the shroud off her face. My breath caught in my chest and I felt my whole back go numb. It was Zoe, all right. Aside from the fact that her head was facing in the wrong direction, she looked as if she were asleep. At my feet was proof that the human body is no match against a Buick La Sabre. She looked like a discarded rag doll. Her pretty summer suit of white and turquoise was stained with blood and dirt.

I stared at her, unable to turn away.

"Is this your friend?" Brian asked, glancing up at me.

"Yes." My voice barely made it past my lips. "Yes, it is." I repeated. "We were waiting for her to join us. She wanted to celebrate, but she didn't show up. It was getting late and I was tired so I left."

"I'm sorry." Brian carefully covered her face and offered me his handkerchief.

I couldn't speak.

"What was she celebrating? A birthday?"

"No. All she said was that she wanted to celebrate life. Freedom."

"Well she's free now. One hell of a way to celebrate."

St. Martin's Press  
isbn: 0-312-11336-6