

MOTHER MAY I

Chapter One

As a card-carrying member of middle age, I have learned that if you're lucky enough to enjoy a lengthy life, it doesn't matter what you do; time *and* gravity will ultimately get the better of you.

My last client, ninety-two year old Selma Onderdonk, proved to me, however, that a person can get through two world wars, several personal tragedies and still maintain their own teeth. This is, for me, a comforting thought, to be sure.

I met Selma through her brother, Enoch Zarin. Enoch is a strikingly handsome eighty-five-year-old retired investment banker who is also my eighty-one-year-old Aunt Minnie's *main squeeze*, as she likes to say. In October he hired me and my business partner, Max Cabe, on behalf of his sister, Selma.

Max and I are private investigators. We've had had our business, CSI, for over twelve years now, and though we've helped friends in the past, this was unusual all the way around. To start with, I'd never had a ninety-two-year-old client before, which shouldn't make a difference, but for me it did. Maybe her age made her endearing or vulnerable in my eyes when we first met, but there was something deeply compelling for me about Selma Onderdonk. Perhaps she reminded me of my mother; I know I thought about mom whenever I saw Selma, but the two were really not alike at all. My mother was tall, Selma's petite; mom was swarthy and fiery, whereas Selma is fair and contemplative. Who knows what the connection was? Sometimes you just connect, even if you don't understand the connection until much later. As far as the outcome, well, I normally feel good about *something* when we close a case, but it's almost two weeks after the fact, and I'm still confused about what, exactly, it is that I feel.

It all started on a fine autumn morning. I was awakened too early by a lustful pigeon who was cooing loudly under my bedroom window. By the time I threw a balled-up pair of socks at the licentious old coo-t, I was wide awake and annoying

my partner, Leslie, who for some reason wasn't bothered by the impassioned pleas of the lecherous bird. I don't like pigeons, I never have, and when they mate they are particularly irritating. Not wanting to start the day in an advanced state of vexation, I glanced at the clock and knew I was sure to get a solo lane in the pool at the local health club, which I did. As a matter of fact, until the very end of my workout I had the whole pool to myself, which in this overcrowded city, is bliss. After four thousand yards, I showered and arrived at my office earlier than usual where I found my Aunt Minnie's long-term boyfriend waiting for me.

"Enoch? What are you doing here?" I asked, genuinely surprised when I found him sitting on the stairs in front of our third-floor office bent over the *Wall Street Journal*.

He jumped at the sound of my voice. "Sydney, my dear . . ." He held out his hand and warmly clasped mine. "You startled me."

"Sorry about that." I helped him up.

"Thank you." He was over six feet tall and handled his height with elegance and grace.

"Were you coming to see me?" I asked nodding to the door behind him stenciled Cobe-Sloane Investigations.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" He pushed a strand of white hair out of his eyes. When he smiled, his eyes positively sparkled.

"Hey, they don't call me a hot shot detective for nothing. Come on in. I'll buy you a cup of coffee." As I routed around in my bag looking for my keys, I wondered what had brought Enoch to my office. Not only had he never been there before, but at eight-thirty in the morning, it wasn't even office hours for most businesses. The only thing I could think of was that he wanted to ask for Minnie's hand in marriage. They had been a couple for close to two years now and it was no secret that he was crazy about her. Aunt Minnie married; just the thought of it made me smile.

"Beautiful day, huh?" I said to fill the gap.

"Yes, truly, there is nothing quite so splendid as the month of October. Especially in New York City."

I unlocked the main office door and led Enoch through the door on the right which is my office. "Coffee?" I asked as we entered the sun-filled room.

"No thank you. I've had my morning fix, but please feel free to have some if you like." Mine is the corner office and Enoch walked to the windows which face east and look out onto Broadway. "Quite a view you have here. You must spend hours watching life filter past your window."

"Well, on the rare occasion when I do have time to watch life filter by, I only get anxious because it means I'm not working."

"The work will always be there, my dear. You mustn't ever castigate yourself for taking a moment to breathe. Breathing is good."

"So I hear." I hung my jacket on the coat rack and told Enoch over my shoulder, "I tell you, though, I'm more drawn to the way the sunlight plays in here."

Enoch turned and studied the spacious room. "Yes, I see what you mean." He rested his hands on his hips as he took in my home away from home. Aunt Minnie calls Enoch, *Easy*, (which are actually his initials, EZ), but she says that it suits him, and, of course, she's right. Watching him standing there I could actually envision him as a young man, deliberate and decidedly comfortable with himself. Finally he declared, "I like your office, my dear. It truly seems to reflect you in that it's easy on the eye, comfortable, and yet not so relaxed as to be unprofessional."

I grinned at the handsome gentleman standing in the sunlight. "Now I know what Minnie sees in you, Enoch."

"Oh yes? What's that?" He straightened his tie and craned his neck.

"You're a good bullshitter."

"Nonsense, everything I've told you is sincere, heartfelt you could say." His smile revealed a set of extraordinarily white teeth, which I assumed - at this point in life - were a damned fine investment.

"Mmhm. So, what brings you here? I don't think you've ever been to my office before."

"No, I haven't. And I wish I could say I was here for pleasure, but the fact is, I want to hire you." With his back to the sun, Enoch's face was in the shadows, so I couldn't tell if he was serious or pulling my leg.

"To . . .?" I asked cautiously.

"To investigate a murder." He could have bowled me over with a feather.

Murder? Enoch? The two didn't seem to fit. I talk to my Aunt Minnie every day, and she never mentioned a word of this.

"Why don't we sit down?" I suggested as I sank into my desk chair.

"Fine." Enoch walked the length of the room and sat on a peach-colored director's chair facing my desk. He crossed one long leg over the other and rubbed his forehead with his hand.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm just tired. It's been a difficult week. Do you know my sister, Sydney?" He squinted.

"I know you have one, but we've never met." The week before, Minnie had told me that Enoch's grandniece, Jessica, had recently committed suicide. Leslie, the woman I love and live with, had sent Enoch a condolence card on our behalf. "Is this about Jessica?"

Enoch took a deep breath and glanced at his watch. "Do you have time for this?"

"I always have time for you, Enoch."

He splayed open his hands in a helpless gesture and looked almost pained. "As silly as it might sound coming from an old man like me, Selma's my big sister, Sydney. She's also my last sibling - my last immediate family member, for that matter - and my best friend as far back as I can remember. She called me late last night, very upset. The stress from having lost Jessica has been overwhelming for her, and, naturally, at her age, this has concerned me." Enoch proceeded to give me Selma's entire family history, including details of her happy marriage to Günter Onderdonk and the tragic death of their only daughter, Margot. After Margot died in a car accident in 1954, Selma took in her one-year-old granddaughter, Jessica, whom she raised to adulthood.

A week earlier, Jessica had been found in the garage of her home with the car running, an apparent suicide.

"It turns out that it wasn't." Enoch cleared his throat.

"Wasn't a suicide?" I asked.

"That's right. Jessica didn't kill herself. She was murdered." Enoch wrapped his tapering fingers around the arms of the chair and kneaded the wood.

"How do you know?"

"Well, apparently the police were suspicious right from the start. There was no suicide note, and her husband - who's a physician, and a diabetic - refused to account for his whereabouts for several hours on the day of her death. When an autopsy was performed, they discovered that she had been injected with insulin."

"And so, naturally, hubby automatically becomes suspect number one." I finished the scenario for him.

"That's correct. However, Selma's convinced Michael didn't do it. That's why she was calling. She wants *me* to do something to help him."

"Do you know Michael?"

"Sure I do. He's a nice boy."

"A nice boy capable of murder?" I asked.

He pursed his lips together.

"What?" I questioned his body language.

"This is breaking Selma's heart. You have to understand that she loves that boy as if he were her own. I don't know what he is or isn't capable of, but Selma's convinced he didn't do it. Personally, it disturbs me that he won't tell anyone where he was when Jessica died, or that he refused legal counsel at first. But it doesn't matter what I think, I told Sel I'd help her. She just lost her granddaughter. She doesn't want to lose a boy who is like her own flesh and blood." He put his hand into his jacket pocket and withdrew a checkbook. "Ergo, I want to hire you and Max to find out what happened to my grandniece."

I held up my hand and waved him away. "Put your checkbook back in your pocket." I scolded him.

"Oh no, my dear, this is business. Friendship is one thing, and business another. I came to you for your professional help, not for a favor from a friend. Am I making myself clear?"

"But this is precisely what friends are for, Enoch."

"Sydney, I suggest you don't waste our time haggling over money. I will pay the going rate, simple and clear." He opened the checkbook and pulled a pen from his breast pocket. "To whom do I make it out and for what amount?"

I took a deep breath and exhaled. I knew there was no use in even trying to talk sense into the man. "Cabe-Sloane Investigations." I told him as I opened the top left drawer and pulled out a standard contract. I explained the terms of the contract as he filled out the check. Enoch grunted and nodded at the appropriate places, but I knew he didn't hear a word I said. Having made a fortune as an investment banker, it surprised me that Enoch didn't pay more attention to money. Despite the fact that my parents' estates left me comfortable enough to never have to work another day if I don't want to, I can't fathom not looking at a price tag or the right side of the menu, but that's me.

We both signed on the dotted line and Enoch gave me all the information I needed to start the investigation, including Selma's address and the name of the officer in Brooklyn Heights who was handling the case. As I was walking him to the door, my partner, Max came racing into the outer office like the Mad Hatter in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. He stopped short when he saw Enoch.

"Enoch!" Max, who is a ruggedly handsome man, (also middle aged, only more so), hugged Enoch warmly. "Good to see you. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Mr. Zarlin is a new client." I perched myself on our secretary's desk and idly pondered where she might be. It was now almost ten, which made her nearly an hour late for work.

"Really?" Max stepped back a foot. "For what? Why?"

Enoch glanced at his wristwatch and apologized. "I'm afraid Sydney will have to fill you in, Max. I'm already late for my writing class."

"Writing class?" We asked in unison. "I thought you were taking Yoga classes." I added.

"I am. However, I made the mistake once of telling your aunt that I'd always wanted to write fiction. Next thing I knew I was signed up for a class." He chuckled like a schoolboy, which, technically, he was. "Between you and me, I've fallen head over heels in love with my teacher, but I think her nose-ring could present a problem, if not physically, symbolically. I shudder to think of what it might mean. Anyway, I'm off. Let me know what you find, Sydney."

When he was gone, Max started a pot of coffee, and I gave him an overview of Enoch's case. "You want to go with me to meet Selma?" I asked as we carried our coffee into his office.

"Can't." He shook his head with disgust. "You wouldn't believe what Louie did." Louie Perez was our top undercover operative who was working on a sweet hotel deal we had contracted for the last three months.

"Do I want to know?" I sank onto the loveseat in his office and glanced at his dart board. A dart-riddled photograph was pinned to it. "What's Mel Gibson doing on your dart board?" I interrupted before he got started.

"I saw him interviewed on TV the other day and decided to add him to the Hall of Infamy." Max sat on the armchair facing away from the dart board and looked boyish as he explained. "Honestly, I like his acting, but I don't know, he's kind of scary. Have you ever seen him interviewed?" When he squinted his eyes it looked like two black marbles were hiding behind the lids. When I shook my head he said, "I used to like the guy, but this interview was very controlled, *very sincere* and very obvious that he is so far to the right he's limping."

"That sounds like about eighteen dozen people I know." I offered a casual observation.

"Yeah, well, maybe you know `em, but you don't call `em friend. I'm telling you, I got the distinct impression that if he could, he'd vote for Newt." We both studied the picture in silence.

"He's gorgeous." I said.

"He's a homophobic jerk." Max countered triumphantly, unaware of the physical similarities between him and his Hall of Infamy guest.

"It's a shame. He's a good actor."

"Ho-mo-pho-bic." Max repeated, stressing each syllable.

I looked at him with doubt written all over my face.

"Trust me. But today, I put up a picture of Louie, dear Louie who has no doubt blown our deal with the Madeline Hotel."

"How?" That our best operative could have done something so heinous was unfathomable.

"Jules Hopper was a guest there a few days ago. Apparently Louie slipped a note under his door."

"Jules Hopper the film director?"

"The one and only."

I stared mutely at Max.

For six months Max and I had been trying to get the hotel account. The management suspected that one or more of the porters were stealing. In late July we placed a new operative, a student at John Jay College, into the hotel maintenance staff. Within a week and a half, we had enough evidence to convince the owners of The Madeline that Cabe-Sloane Investigations was the company for them. We kept the guy in maintenance and put another in housekeeping. Pretty soon we had another in the kitchen. Three operatives working full-time was bringing in a nice chunk of change for CSI. Then the owners said they wanted someone in security. Louie had been with us for years, so it made sense that we would choose him for the more delicate job.

Normally any contact between hotel security and guests is strictly frowned upon. If an *operative* crosses that line, it is way out of bounds.

"What kind of note did Louie slip under his door?" I asked, skeptical that Louie would have done something so unprofessional.

"His girlfriend is in film school. When Louie told her that Hopper was one of the hotel guests, she begged him to slip a note under the director's door telling him all about her."

"He knows better than that. How could he do that?"

As if on cue, the phone rang. Max picked up on the second ring and was soon involved in a lengthy discussion with a lawyer named Dunn. Max scribbled a note telling me that this about The Madeline, would take a while and I should be patient. I scribbled a note back to him saying that I would visit Selma at the Treelane Nursing Home and be back in a flash.

En route to the subway, I passed our secretary, Kerry Norman, who was wearing a paisley cowboy hat, a lime green leather motorcycle jacket with fringe, and shoes that resembled fat, black, pontoons. She was also hanging on the arm of a man who could melt dry ice with his eyes. Patrick was Kerry's latest boyfriend, and a man prone to unforgivable taste in clothing. Before the two of them met, Kerry dressed like any other aspiring actress in New York City, alternating between basic

black from head to toe or the layered look. However, when she met Patrick, a self-proclaimed Soho artist, her style changed drastically. Whereas her clothing statement before had been *Artisan*, she now read *Nightmare of Color on Floatation Devices*.

Kerry shrieked when she saw me. "Sydney! You must hate me I'm so late for work!"

"Kerry, how could I hate you? You wear such entertaining clothes." I gave Patrick a kiss and chided him. "It's all your fault, you know."

"I brought a note for her tardiness." He flirted shamelessly, never once letting go of Kerry.

"Not her lateness, Pat, her fashion sense. She used to have some, now it's gone, and I hold you entirely responsible."

"Cool." He said, the way only a groovy, laid back, now-and-happening artist could.

The sun reflected off Kerry's jacket, temporarily blinding me, but, bringing me back to the moment. "You planning to visit the office today?" I asked in passing.

"Do I have a choice?" She squeezed Patrick's right arm.

"Sure you do." I smiled and sidestepped them. "You could quit in which case we could replace you with someone who actually wants to be a secretary. Wow, imagine that."

"Hardy-har-har." Kerry pulled Patrick in the direction of CSI.

I proceeded to the subway and considered how I had initially thought that Enoch wanted Minnie's hand in marriage, which made me think of the time, not long ago, when she had told me that despite what people like to think, there were some old folks who enjoyed intimacy, even at their advanced age. The image of Minnie and Enoch making love wasn't one I particularly wanted to stay with, so I brought myself back to the task at hand. It wasn't marriage, but a murder investigation. I would have preferred the marriage concept. But that's life, isn't it, just a big old roller coaster ride. Roller coasters . . . I could feel the subway train pulling into the station under my feet. I bolted down the steps two at a time and made it into a subway car just as the doors were beginning to close.