



## *Fatal Deduction*

By Gayle Roper

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### **Prologue**

I opened the front door to the pre-dawn dimness of five A.M. on a July Thursday and stepped into murder.

Not that I recognized it as such right off.

And actually I tripped into murder, catching my foot on the unexpected body lying on the front stoop of my late Great-Aunt Stella's colonial era row house in Philadelphia. I went flying, all grace and beauty, landing on my hands and knees in the narrow lane, mentally telling off Aunt Stella for making me live where drunks slept off their hangovers on innocent people's doorsteps.

I pushed myself to my feet and checked to see the extent of the damage to my knees and palms in the light of the lamp beside the front door. There were slight brush burns on the pads of my palms, the kind that sting like crazy but don't actually bleed, and a tiny trickle of blood rolled slowly down my left leg.

I was going to have to go back inside and wash up, apply Bactine—did Aunt Stella have any? I didn't think I'd brought any with me in spite of dragging along everything but the kitchen sink—and put a Bandaid on my leg. Then I needed a pitcher of cold water to throw on the man to waken him and get him to move. The last thing I wanted was for Chloe to come out and find him. She'd have a thirteen-year-old hissy fit. Then again, she might find him fascinating, local color and all. I could never predict my daughter anymore, and I found it very disconcerting.

I raised a foot to step over the drunk when I noticed three things. No smell of booze and body odor wafted off the man like you'd expect with a street person in July. There was a note with TORI written on it, a white rectangle lying on the dark of his shirt. And there was a considerable pool of something red spreading beneath him.

## Chapter 1

### One Day Prior

I turned into the alley and slammed on the brakes. My van quivered to a stop with the front bumper nose to nose with a row of concrete stanchions. Vaguely I heard Princess tumble off the back seat and hit the floor with an indignant doggie *umph!*

I stared in amazement at the narrow lane ahead of me. The alley had proved to be about two car lengths before it narrowed dramatically into the passage ahead, too constricted for a small car, let alone my van.

“Wow, Mom,” Chloe said with a definite lack of approval. “Those houses are little!”

I stared at the eight attached row homes lining each side of the cobbled lane. They were little as in narrow. Olde as in authentic Colonial era. And they were probably dark and depressing inside, I thought, a far cry from our suburban New Jersey bungalow on its, by comparison, huge third-acre lot. And we had to live in the fifth house on the left for the next six months.

With Tori.

*Aunt Stella, what were you thinking?*

Chloe opened the passenger door and stepped into the alley. She stared at the four cement posts just beyond the nose of the van. They had obviously been placed to prevent anyone from trying to drive where no car would fit. “How do we get our stuff to the house, Mom?”

“We carry it, sweetheart.” For a smart kid, the girl could ask the dumbest questions.

“I told you we should have gotten movers,” she grumbled as she slid open the side door and pulled out her duffle and backpack.

*Yeah, yeah. And who would have paid the bill?* But I wasn’t having that discussion again so all I said was, “Shut your door, Chlo, before Princess escapes.”

With a put-upon sigh, she slammed the slider hard enough to make the van quiver.

I turned off the ignition, pulled the keys free, and clutched them in my hand as I climbed out into the heavy humid air of July first.

I slid the keys into my shorts pocket, feeling like I should glance around to see if anyone had seen where I’d stashed them. Foolish. No one was going to rush me, grab the keys, and make off with the van. It wasn’t a matter of crime not happening in broad daylight. It was more that no self-respecting car thief would be caught dead taking our dinged and scabrous van. The only

positive thing that could be said for the vehicle was that it ran, most of the time. And it was big enough to lug all my flea market, estate sale, and auction acquisitions.

“I am so not a city person,” I muttered as I walked to the rear of the van and lifted the hatch. “The size alone scares me.”

“I’m not scared,” Chloe announced. “I think coming to Philadelphia is cool.”

“Yeah, cool.” I stared at my daughter, the joy of my life. Thirteen was so scary. And so were the bad guys lurking around every city corner ready to prey on the girl’s innocence.

Maybe if I hadn’t dealt with so many bad guys myself, I wouldn’t worry as much. But I had, way more than my share, and I didn’t want Chloe to face the same horrors.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Trust in the Lord with all your heart.” The muttered Scripture eased my tension somewhat as I reached for Princess who sat on the cooler and stared at me doing her miniature poodle version of Snoopy’s vulture. Poor Princess. It was hard to look threatening or reproachful when your topknot had a pink bow in it, courtesy of Chloe.

I snapped on the dog’s lead and determined not to think about all the daunting possibilities lying in wait for Chloe and me. There was no sense in looking for trouble before it came. And it would come. I knew it as certainly as I knew Princess’s shrill bark would alienate all the neighbors.

If Tori didn’t accomplish that feat first.

“Come on, baby.” I set Princess on the ground and eyed the cluster of row homes set so close together that one’s right wall was the next’s left wall. I desperately missed my yard and my flower garden, and I’d only left home an hour ago. Growing up I’d always compared our suburban homes on their little plots with Philadelphia’s row houses and felt blessed to have a yard and space between houses. Now I didn’t even have a driveway. Or fresh air. Would six months smelling the city’s fumes shorten our lives appreciably?

Not that I had a choice. Aunt Stella had made sure of that.

She wasn’t really my aunt but my great-aunt, Pop Keating’s sister. She was the one who moved away and sought her fortune by becoming head buyer for Wanamaker’s, retiring just before the giant department store closed its doors. She was also the only one who actually had an estate to leave but sadly no one to leave it to as she’d never married. So she’d reached into the bottom of the familial barrel and picked Tori and me.

It was sad, really. We saw her about once a year, and those visits were always laden with tension because Mom and Nan resented her so much, especially in the last fifteen years since Dad and Pop had been in jail. She had money and an ordered life, and they didn’t. Before Dad and Pop

got into trouble, both men treated Aunt Stella like the Queen of the World whenever she showed up, which only fueled Mom's and Nan's antipathy. Since they were always and already mad at the men in the family, adding Aunt Stella to their hate list didn't take any effort at all.

I shook off the malaise that thoughts of family frequently brought and turned my attention to Chloe who I was determined wouldn't suffer as I had.

With a sigh at the imposition of carrying her own luggage, she started down the narrow lane, dragging her duffle. Princess pulled on her lead, choking herself in her desire to follow Chloe. I made sure the van was locked, then grabbed the suitcases I'd dragged out, pulled up their handles, and followed, trying not to step on Princess who zigzagged in front of me like a drunk driver on New Year's Eve.

I studied the block of Olde Philadelphia as I walked toward Aunt Stella's house, the bags bumping and complaining their way over the uneven surface behind me. I should be happy to be living here, being in the antiques and collectibles business as I was, but I guess no one likes having her life rearranged without her permission.

This little block of Colonial era homes was removed from the tourist area, a mere five blocks from Broad Street—or the Avenue of the Arts as they were calling this section of it now. How had it survived when so many of the old places were gone? And how had Aunt Stella ended up living in what had to be a very expensive home? Being head buyer had to pay a nice wage, and she'd had only herself to support, but still....

All the brick fronted homes were impeccably kept, their brass door handles, knockers, lamps and locks shining in the sun, the paint on the doors and matching shutters gleaming, the window boxes full and flourishing. I stopped at the fifth unit, the one with the glossy black door and shutters, the window boxes stuffed with deep red geraniums, white petunias, and brilliant blue lobelia with bright green and crimson sweet potato vines trailing to the ground.

Aunt Stella's home. Now Chloe's and my home for six months. And Tori's.

Taking a deep breath, I inserted the key in the front door.

“Are you Libby or Tori?”

Jumping slightly, I turned to find a woman with beautiful white hair and a warm smile standing in the lane in front of the house directly across from ours. Her midnight blue window box was crammed with bright pink geraniums, miniature snapdragons in light pink and white, and light blue lobelia. English ivy trailed over the edges.

“I'm Libby Keating.” I held out my hand. “And this is Chloe.”

“I'm Tinksie Mowrey.” She looked at Chloe curiously. “I didn't realize a child was coming. Stella never mentioned her.”

I bit back a smile at the expression on Chloe's face at being called a child. As far as Chloe was concerned, the only thing keeping her from leaving home to manage on her own was lack of a driver's license. And money. At least Aunt Stella hadn't made the mistake of providing that.

"Mrs. Mowrey," I said. "It's nice to meet you."

"Oh, no, dear. Tinksie."

*Oh, no, dear* was right. How could I ever call a woman older than my grandmother Tinksie?

"I know, dear," Tinksie said. "Terrible name for an old lady, isn't it? Why don't people think about the fact that you're not always going to be a three year old when they give you nicknames?"

"A very good question," I agreed.

"My husband's name is James." Tinksie smiled fondly. "Everyone calls him that. We both loved Stella." Tinksie blinked rapidly, and I realized that just mentioning Aunt Stella had made her teary.

"I'm happy to meet one of Aunt Stella's friends." I smiled warmly.

Tinksie nodded. "She was my dearest friend. We lived across from each other for, oh my, I don't know how many years. But James will know." She pulled a tissue from the pocket of her slim black slacks and brushed it across the end of her nose. "He knows everything."

"Are there any kids in this block?" Chloe asked, either missing or ignoring the tears for more pressing matters.

"Just one, dear. For a few months. Drew Canfield's girl."

"How old is she?"

"I don't know exactly, but she might be about your age." Tinksie tucked her tissue back in her pocket. "James will know."

I had to smile. James was going to be a very interesting person to meet.

"Well, I must go." Tinksie adjusted the pearls at her neck, the huge rock on her ring finger flashing in the sun. "Today is my day at the Kimmel Center. But welcome to the neighborhood." With a cheery wave she walked past the van and turned left.

"Well, she was nice," I said, thinking that there might be some positive things about this adventure after all and wondering what Tinksie did at the Kimmel Center, the city's replacement for the old Academy of Music.

“A child.” Chloe’s voice dripped with disgust. She said child in two syllables, chi-uld.

I bit back a smile. Tinksie was going to have to go a long way to recover from that inadvertent insult.

“Is she gone?” The whisper emanated from the miniscule crack in our now open front door. “She’s so cheery she drives me nuts.”

“Tori?” I peered into the shadowed interior.

“Yep, it’s me!” The door flew open, and I blinked at the vision before me. Tori’s blonde hair was pulled into a curly topknot with tendrils falling coquettishly against her nape and over her ears. Her eyes were a vivid blue, the color accented by artfully applied shadow, mascara, and liner. She wore a tight pink camisole with a built-in bra—at least I hoped there was a built-in bra—and a short denim skirt. Her long tanned legs were bare, as were her feet. She looked beautiful.

I thought of my own blonde hair scraped back in a haphazard ponytail, the strands breaking free not tendrils but springs of frizz. My cheap navy tee shirt had side seams so skewed that they ended up in the centers of my stomach and back, and my khaki shorts were more wrinkled than a dozen Tinksies.

I could feel myself begin to shrink. Thirty seconds with Tori and I was back in Wonderland. I didn’t need the contents of Alice’s little bottle with the Drink Me label to dwindle to nothing. I just needed my sister, my twin, my other half. My nemesis.

“Aunt Tori!” Chloe cried, throwing herself at Tori.

“Hey, kiddo!” Tori hugged her, then held her away, looking amazed. “Good grief! You’re as tall as I am.” She sighed. “Your mother simply has to bring you to visit me more often. I can’t take shocks like finding my niece a grown woman, you know.”

Chloe smiled happily. “That’s what I keep telling Mom.”

*Which?* I wondered. *That I need to take you to visit more often or that you’re a grown woman?* Neither option made me happy.

“And you, little lady.” Tori bent to pet Princess who was jumping against her shins, barking for attention. She scooped the little dog in her arms, unhooked her lead, and planted a kiss on her nose. Princess returned the favor with a lick and settled against Tori.

*Traitor*, I thought, retracting the leash and putting it and my purse on a living room chair, carefully tucking the door key in the purse’s inner pocket.

Tori, Chloe and Princess disappeared into the house, talking and laughing.

“Chloe, there’s more to carry in!”

But Chloe was struck with selective deafness, an affliction common to teens, its cure unknown to modern science.

I looked at Chloe’s duffle, abandoned on the stoop beside the suitcases, and sighed as I dragged the luggage inside.

It was going to be a long six months.

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