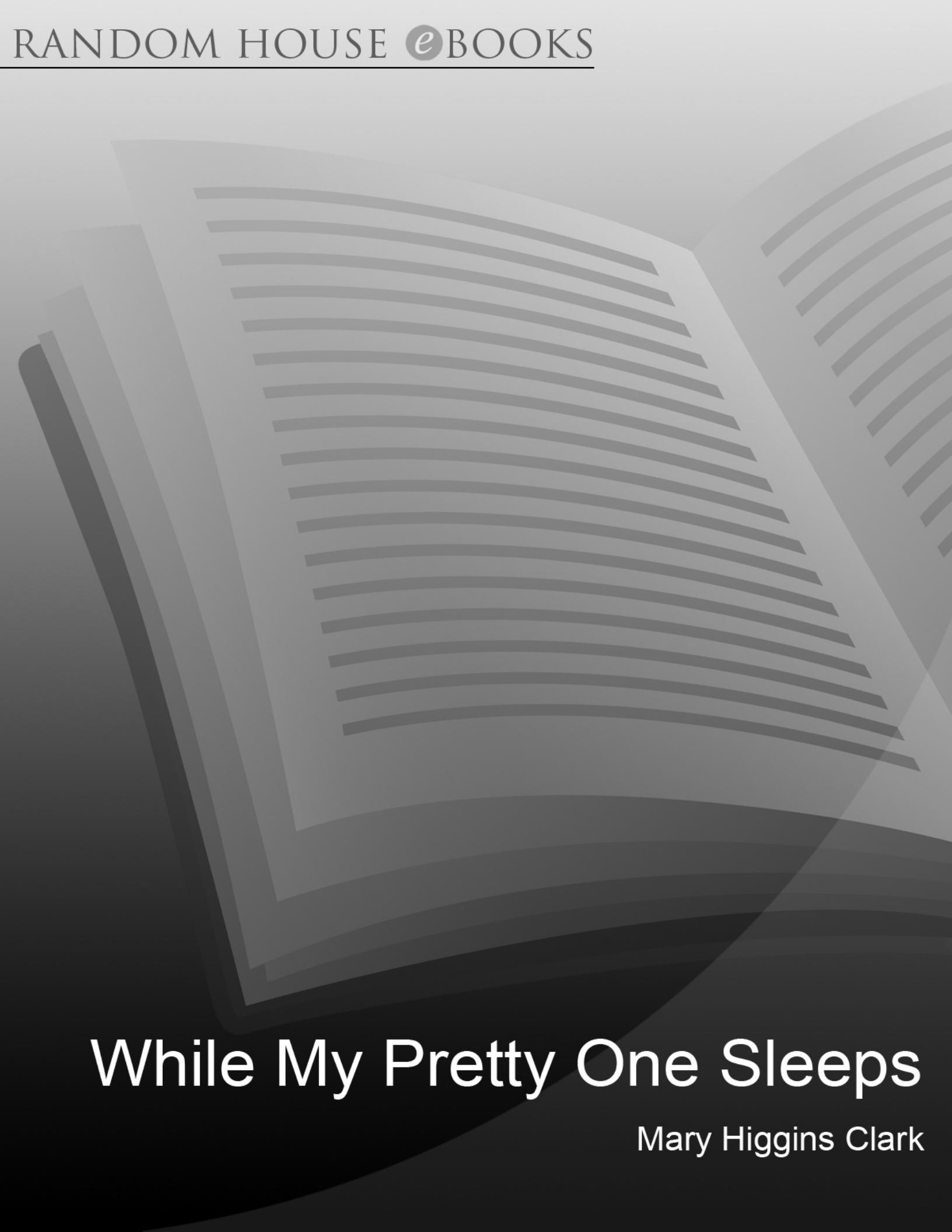


RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



While My Pretty One Sleeps

Mary Higgins Clark

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About the Book

Gossip columnist Ethel Lambston knew everything about everybody who was somebody, and her forthcoming book is about to expose the leading figures in the fashion world. So there are more than enough suspects when she is found murdered, her throat slashed.

For Neeve Kearny, the owner of an exclusive New York boutique, the killing of one of her best customers has eerie echoes of another death that occurred many years earlier – the murder of her own mother. Are the two deaths linked? Suddenly Neeve is plunged into the mystery of Ethel's murder, following a trail that leads from the glittering pleasure palaces of New York's rich and beautiful to the Mafia underworld. And who is the killer who reckons that anyone as inquisitive as Neeve deserves to die?

About the Author

Mary Higgins Clark's first novel *Where are the Children?* was an instant bestseller. She lives in the United States and has five children and a host of grand-children.

Also available in Arrow Books by Mary Higgins Clark

The Anastasia Syndrome and Other Stories
Loves Music, Loves to Dance
All Around the Town
Death on the Cape and Other Stories
I'll Be Seeing You

While My Pretty One Sleeps

Mary Higgins Clark



arrow books

FOR MY NEWEST GRANDCHILDREN,
COURTNEY MARILYN CLARK
AND
DAVID FREDERICK CLARK,
WITH CONTINUING LOVE, AMUSEMENT AND DELIGHT.

1

HE DROVE CAUTIOUSLY up the Thruway toward Morrison State Park. The thirty-five-mile trip from Manhattan to Rockland County had been a nightmare. Even though it was six o'clock, there was no sense of approaching dawn. The snow that had begun during the night had steadily increased until now it was beating relentlessly against the windshield. The overhead clouds, heavy and gray, were like enormous balloons pumped to the breaking point. The forecast had been for two inches, with 'precipitation tapering off after midnight'. As usual the weatherman had been wrong.

But he was near the entrance to the park and, with the storm, there probably wouldn't be anyone hiking or jogging. He'd passed a State Trooper ten miles back, but the car had rushed past him, lights flashing, probably on the way to an accident somewhere. Certainly the cops had no reason to even think about the contents of his trunk, no reason to suspect that under a pile of luggage a plastic bag containing the body of a prominent sixty-one-year-old writer, Ethel Lambston, was wedged in a space-defying squeeze against the spare tire.

He turned off the Thruway and drove the short distance to the parking lot. As he had hoped, it was nearly empty. Only a few cars were scattered around and they were coated with snow. Some damn fools camping out, he supposed. The trick was not to bump into them.

He glanced around carefully as he left the car. No one. The snow was piling in drifts. It would cover the tracks when he left, cover any signs of where he was going to put her. With

any luck, by the time she was discovered there wouldn't be much left to find.

First he made his way to the spot alone. His hearing was keen. Now he tried to maximize it, to force it to filter past the sighing of the wind and the creaking of the already heavy branches. Down this way there was a steep path. Past it and on a sharp incline was a pile of rocks layered by heavy loose stones. Very few people bothered to climb there. It was off-limits for riders - the stable didn't want the suburban housewives who were its main customers breaking their necks.

A year ago he had happened to be curious enough to make that climb, and had rested on a boulder-sized rock. His hand had slid across the rock and he'd felt the opening behind it. Not a cave entrance, but a natural formation like the mouth of a cave. Even then, the thought had passed his mind that it would be a great place to hide something.

It was exhausting to reach with the snow turning icy, but, slipping and sliding, he made the climb. The space was still there, a little smaller than he remembered, but he could force the body in. The next step was the worst. Going back to the car, he would have to take infinite caution to avoid any chance of being observed. He'd parked at an angle so that no one who happened to drive in would have a direct view of what he was removing from the trunk, and anyhow a black plastic bag in itself wasn't suspicious.

In life Ethel had been deceptively slim. But as he picked up the plastic-shrouded body he reflected that those expensive outfits had concealed a heavy-boned frame. He tried to heave the bag over his shoulder, but, perverse in death as she had been in life, Ethel must have begun the process of rigor mortis. Her body refused to slide into manageable lines. In the end, he half carried, half dragged the bag as far as the incline, then sheer adrenaline gave him the strength to haul her up the sloping, slippery rocks to the spot.

His original plan had been to leave her in the bag. But at the last minute he changed his mind. Forensics units were getting too damn smart. They could find evidence on anything, fibers from clothes or carpets or human hair that no eye would notice.

Ignoring the cold as the gusting wind seared his forehead and the pellets of snow turned his cheeks and chin into a chunk of ice, he placed the bag in position over the cave and began to rip. It would not give. Two-ply, he thought grimly, remembering all the commercials. Savagely he tugged at it and then grimaced as the bag gave and Ethel's body came into view.

The white wool suit was stained with blood. The collar of her blouse was caught in the gaping hole in her throat. One eye was slightly open. In the gathering dawn it seemed less sightless than contemplative. The mouth that never knew repose in Ethel's life was pursed as though about to start another one of her interminable sentences. The last one she ever got to spit out had been her fatal mistake, he told himself with grim satisfaction.

Even with gloves on, he hated touching her. She'd been dead nearly fourteen hours. It seemed to him there was a faint, sweet odor coming from her body. With sudden disgust he shoved her corpse down and began wedging stones on top of it. The opening was deeper than he'd realized, and the stones dropped neatly in place over her. A casual climber wouldn't dislodge them.

The job was finished. The blowing snow had already covered up his footsteps. Ten minutes after he got out of here, all trace of him and the presence of the car would be obliterated.

He crushed the shredded plastic into a wadded ball and began hurrying toward the car. Now he was frantic to leave, to be far from this exposure to discovery. At the border of the parking lot, he waited. The same cars were there, still untouched. There were no fresh tracks in the lot.

Five minutes later, he was back on the Thruway, the bloodied, torn bag that had been Ethel's shroud jammed under the spare tire. Now there was plenty of room for her suitcases and carry-on and purse.

The roadway was icy now, the commuter traffic beginning, but in a few hours he'd be back in New York, back to sanity and reality. He made his final stop, a lake he remembered not far from the Thruway, that was too polluted now for fishing. It was a good place to dump Ethel's purse and luggage. All four pieces were heavy. The lake was deep, and he knew they'd sink and get caught in the mass of junk that rested on the bottom. People even dumped old cars here.

He tossed Ethel's belongings as far as he could heave them and watched as they disappeared under the dark-gray water. Now the only thing left to do was to get rid of the torn, bloodstained wad of plastic. He decided to stop at a garbage bin when he got off the West Side Highway. It would be lost in the mountain of trash carted off tomorrow morning.

It took three hours to get back into the city. The driving became more treacherous and he tried to keep his distance from other cars. He didn't need a fender bender. Months from now no one would have any reason to know that he'd been out of the city today.

It worked according to plan. He stopped for a split second on Ninth Avenue and got rid of the plastic bag.

At eight o'clock he was delivering the car back to the gas station on Tenth Avenue that rented old cars as a sideline. Cash only. He knew they didn't keep records.

At ten o'clock, freshly showered and changed, he was in his place, gulping straight bourbon and trying to shake the sudden chilling attack of nerves. His mind went over every instant of the time that had elapsed since he'd stood in Ethel's apartment yesterday and listened to her sarcasm, her ridicule, her threats.

Then she'd known. The antique dagger from her desk in his hand. Her face filled with fear and she'd started to back away.

The exhilaration of slashing that throat, of watching her stumble backward through the archway to the kitchen and collapse onto the ceramic-tile floor.

He still was amazed at how calm he'd been. He'd bolted the door so that by some crazy trick of fate the superintendent or a friend with a key couldn't walk in. Everyone knew how eccentric Ethel could be. If someone with a key found that the door was bolted, they'd assume she didn't want to be bothered answering.

Then he had stripped his clothes off down to his underwear and put on his gloves. Ethel had been planning to go away to write a book. If he could get her out of here, people would think she'd left on her own. She wouldn't be missed for weeks, even months.

Now, gulping a mouthful of bourbon, he thought about how he had selected clothes from her closet, changing her from the blood-soaked caftan, pulling her pantyhose on, slipping her arms into the blouse and the jacket, buttoning the skirt, taking off her jewelry, forcing her feet into pumps. He winced as he remembered the way he'd held her up so that blood spurted over the blouse and the suit. But it was necessary. When she was found, if she *was* found, they had to think she'd died in that outfit.

He had remembered to cut out the labels that would have meant immediate identification. He had found the long plastic bag in the closet, probably returned by a cleaner on an evening gown. He had forced her into it, then cleaned the bloodstains that had spattered on the Oriental throw rug, washed the kitchen tile with Clorox, packed the suitcases with clothes and accessories, all the while working frantically against time. . . .

He refilled the glass to the brim with bourbon, remembering when the phone had rung. The answering

machine had come on and the sound of Ethel's rapid speech pattern. 'Leave a message. I'll get back when and if I feel like it.' It had made his nerves scream. The caller broke the connection and he'd turned off the machine. He didn't want a record of people calling, and perhaps remembering broken appointments later.

Ethel had the ground-floor apartment of a four-story brownstone. Her private entrance was to the left of the stoop that led to the main entry. In effect her door was shielded from the view of anyone walking along the street. The only period of vulnerability was the dozen steps from her door to the curb.

In the apartment, he'd felt relatively safe. The hardest part had come when, after he hid Ethel's tightly wrapped body and luggage under her bed, he opened the front door. The air had been raw and damp, the snow obviously about to begin falling. The wind had cut a sharp path into the apartment. He'd closed the door immediately. It was only a few minutes past six. The streets were busy with people coming home from work. He'd waited nearly two hours more, then slipped out, double-locked the door and gone to the cheap car rental. He'd driven back to Ethel's apartment. Luck was with him. He was able to park almost directly in front of the brownstone. It was dark and the street was deserted.

In two trips he had the luggage in the trunk. The third trip was the worst. He'd pulled his coat collar up, put on an old cap he'd found on the floor of the rented car and carried the plastic bag with Ethel's body out of the apartment. The moment when he slammed the trunk down had brought the first sense that he'd surely make it to safety.

It had been hell to go back into the apartment, to make certain that there was no trace of blood, no sign that he'd been there. Every nerve shrieked at him to get to the state park, to dump the body, but he knew that was crazy. The police might notice someone trying to get into the park at

night. Instead he left the car on the street six blocks away, followed his normal routine and at 5 A.M. set out with the very early commuters. . . .

It was all right now, he told himself. He was *safe*!

It was just as he was draining the last warming sip of bourbon that he realized the one ghastly mistake he had made, and knew exactly who would almost inevitably detect it.

Neeve Kearny.

2

THE RADIO WENT on at six-thirty. Neeve reached out her right hand, groping for the button to tune out the insistently cheery voice of the newscaster, then stopped as the import of what he was saying sifted into her consciousness. Eight inches of snow had fallen on the city during the night. Do not drive unless absolutely necessary. Alternate-side-of-the-street parking suspended. School closings to be announced. Forecast was for the snow to continue until late afternoon.

Terrific, Neeve thought as she leaned back and pulled the comforter around her face. She hated missing her usual morning jog. Then she winced, thinking of the alterations that had to be completed today. Two of the seamstresses lived in New Jersey and might not get in. Which meant she'd better get to the shop early and see how she could juggle the schedule of Betty, the only other fitter. Betty lived at Eighty-second and Second and would walk the six blocks to the shop no matter how bad the weather.

Hating the moment she abandoned the cozy warmth of the bed, she threw back the covers, hurried across the room and reached into her closet for the ancient terry-cloth robe that her father, Myles, insisted was a relic of the Crusades. 'If any of the women who spent those fancy prices buying your dresses could see you in that rag, they'd go back to shopping in Klein's.'

'Klein's closed twenty years ago, and anyhow if they saw me in this rag they'd think I'm eccentric,' she'd told him. 'That would add to the mystique.'

She tied the belt around her waist, experiencing the usual fleeting wish that she had inherited her mother's pencil-thin

frame instead of the square-shouldered, rangy body of her Celtic forebears, then brushed back the curly coal-black hair that was a trademark of the Rossetti family. She also had the Rossetti eyes, sherry-colored irises, darker at the edges so they blazed against the whites, wide and questioning under sooty lashes. But her skin tone was the milk white of the Celts, with a dotting of freckles against the straight nose. The generous mouth and strong teeth were those of Myles Kearny.

Six years ago when she graduated from college and persuaded Myles that she had no intention of moving out, he'd insisted she redo her bedroom. By haunting Sotheby's and Christie's, she'd assembled an eclectic assortment of a brass bed, an antique armoire and a Bombay chest, a Victorian chaise and an old Persian rug that glowed like Joseph's coat. Now the quilt and the pillows and the dust ruffle were stark white; the reupholstered chaise was covered in turquoise velvet, the same turquoise tone that ribboned through the rug; the stark-white walls were a background for the fine paintings and prints that had come from her mother's family. *Women's Wear Daily* had photographed her in the room, calling it cheerfully elegant, with the peerless Neeve Kearny touch.

Neeve wiggled her feet into the padded slippers Myles called her booties and yanked up the shade. She decided that the weatherman didn't have to be a genius to say this was an important snowstorm. The view from her room in Schwab House at Seventy-fourth Street and Riverside Drive was directly over the Hudson, but now she could barely make out the buildings across the river in New Jersey. The Henry Hudson Parkway was snow-covered and already filled with cautiously moving traffic. The long-suffering commuters had undoubtedly started into town early.

Myles was already in the kitchen and had the coffeepot on. Neeve kissed him on the cheek, willing herself not to remark

on how tired he looked. That meant he hadn't slept well again. If only he'd break down and take an occasional sleeping pill, she thought. 'How's the Legend?' she asked him. Since his retirement last year, the newspapers constantly referred to him as 'New York's legendary Police Commissioner.' He hated it.

He ignored the question, glanced at her and assumed an expression of amazement. 'Don't tell me you're not all set to run around Central Park?' he exclaimed. 'What's a foot of snow to dauntless Neeve?'

For years they had jogged together. Now that he could no longer run, he worried about her early-morning sprints. But then, she suspected, he never *wasn't* worrying about her.

She reached into the refrigerator for the pitcher of orange juice. Without asking she poured out a tall glass for him, a short one for herself, and began to make toast. Myles used to enjoy a hearty breakfast, but now bacon and eggs were off his diet. So were cheese and beef and, as he put it, 'half the food that makes you look forward to a meal'. His massive heart attack had restricted his diet as well as ending his career.

They sat in companionable silence, by unspoken consent splitting the morning *Times*. But when she glanced up, Neeve realized that Myles wasn't reading. He was staring at the paper without seeing it. The toast and the juice were untouched in front of him. Only the coffee showed any sign of having been tasted. Neeve put section two of the paper down.

'All right,' she said. 'Let me have it. Is it that you feel rotten? For heaven's sake, I hope you know enough by now not to play the silent sufferer.'

'No, I'm all right,' Myles said. 'Or at least if you mean have I been having chest pains, the answer is no.' He tossed the paper onto the floor and reached for his coffee. 'Nicky Sepetti gets out of jail today.'

Neeve gasped. 'But I thought they refused him parole last year?'

'Last year was the fourth time he came up. He's served every day of his sentence, less time for good behavior. He'll be back in New York tonight.' Cold hatred hardened Myles's face.

'Dad, take a look at yourself in the mirror. Keep it up and you'll bring on another heart attack.' Neeve realized her hands were trembling. She gripped the table, hoping Myles would not notice and think she was afraid. 'I don't care whether or not Sepetti made that threat when he was sentenced. You spent years trying to connect him to . . .' Her voice trailed off, then continued, 'And not one shred of evidence has ever come up to tie him to it. And for God's sake don't you dare start worrying about me because he's back on the street.'

Her father had been the U.S. Attorney who put the head of the Sepetti Mafia family, Nicky Sepetti, behind bars. At the sentencing, Nicky had been asked if he had anything to say. He'd pointed at Myles. 'I hear they think you done such a good job on me, they made you Police Commissioner. Congratu-lations. That was a nice article in the *Post* about you and your family. Take good care of your wife and kid. They might need a little protection.'

Two weeks later, Myles was sworn in as Police Commissioner. A month later, the body of his young wife, Neeve's mother, thirty-four-year-old Renata Rossetti Kearny, was found in Central Park with her throat cut. The crime was never solved.

Neeve did not argue when Myles insisted that he call for a cab to take her to work. 'You can't walk in that snow,' he told her.

'It isn't the snow, and we both know it,' she retorted. As she kissed him goodbye, she put her arms around his neck and hugged him. 'Myles, the only thing that we both have to

worry about is your health. Nicky Sepetti isn't going to want to go back to prison. I bet if he knows how to pray he's hoping that nothing happens to me for a long, long time. There isn't another person in New York besides you who doesn't think some petty crook attacked Mother and killed her when she wouldn't give up her purse. She probably started screaming at him in Italian and he panicked. So please forget Nicky Sepetti and leave to heaven whoever took Mother from us. Okay? Promise?'

She was only slightly reassured by his nod. 'Now get out of here,' he said. 'The cab meter's ticking and my game shows will be starting any minute.'

The snowplows had made what Myles would call a lick-and-a-promise attempt to partially clear the accumulated snow from West End Avenue. As the car crawled and slid along the slippery streets and turned onto the west-to-east transverse road through the park at Eighty-first Street, Neeve found herself wishing the fruitless 'if only'. If only her mother's murderer had been found. Perhaps in time the loss would have healed for Myles as it had for her. Instead for him it was an open wound, always festering. He was always blaming himself for somehow failing Renata. All these years he had agonized that he should have taken the threat seriously. He could not bear the knowledge that with the immense resources of the New York City Police Department at his command, he had been unable to learn the identity of the thug who had carried out what he was convinced had been Sepetti's order. It was the one unfulfilled need in his life - to find that killer, to make him and Sepetti pay for Renata's death.

Neeve shivered. The cab was cold. The driver must have been glancing in the rearview mirror, because he said, 'Sorry, lady, the heater don't work so good.'

'It's all right.' She turned her head to avoid getting into a conversation. The 'if onlys' would not stop running through

her mind. If only the killer had been found and convicted years ago, Myles might have been able to get on with his life. At sixty-eight he was still an attractive man, and over the years there had been plenty of women who had a special smile for the lean, broad-shouldered Commissioner with his thick head of prematurely white hair, his intense blue eyes and his unexpectedly warm smile.

She was so deep in thought she did not even notice when the cab stopped in front of the shop. 'Neeve's Place' was written in scroll on the ivory-and-blue awning. The display windows that faced both Madison Avenue and Eighty-fourth Street were wet with snowdrops, giving a shimmering look to the flawlessly cut silk spring dresses on the languidly posed mannequins. It had been her idea to order umbrellas that looked like parasols. Sheer raincoats that picked up one color in the print were draped over the mannequins' shoulders. Neeve joked that it was her 'don't-be-plain-in-the-rain' look, but it had proved wildly successful.

'You work here?' the cabby asked as she paid him. 'Looks expensive.'

Neeve nodded noncommittally as she thought, I own this place, my friend. It was a realization that still thrilled her. Six years ago the previous shop at this location had gone bankrupt. It was her father's old friend the famous designer Anthony della Salva who had bullied her into taking it over. 'So you're young,' he'd said, dropping the heavy Italian accent that was now part of his persona. 'That's a plus. You've been working in fashion since you got your first after-school job. Better yet, you've got the know-how, the flair. I'll lend you the money to get started. If it doesn't work, I can use the write-off, but it'll work. You've got what it takes to make a go of it. Besides, I need another place to sell my clothes.' That was the last thing Sal needed, and they both knew it, but she was grateful.

Myles had been dead set against her borrowing from Sal. But she had jumped at the chance. Something she had

inherited from Renata besides her hair and eyes was a highly developed fashion sense. Last year she had paid back Sal's loan, insisting on adding interest at money-market rates.

She was not surprised to find Betty already at work in the sewing room. Betty's head was bent down, her frown of concentration now a permanent set of lines on her forehead and between her brows. Her hands, slender and wrinkled, handled a needle and thread with the skill of a surgeon. She was hemming an intricately beaded blouse. Her blatantly dyed copper-colored hair accentuated the parchment-thin skin on her face. Neeve hated to realize that Betty was past seventy. She didn't want to visualize the day when she decided to retire.

'Figured I'd better get a jump on things,' Betty announced. 'We've got an awful lot of pickups today.'

Neeve pulled off her gloves and unwound her scarf. 'Don't I know it. And Ethel Lambston insists she has to have everything by this afternoon.'

'I know. I've got her stuff ready to do when I finish this. It wouldn't be worth listening to her jabbering if every rag she bought isn't ready to go.'

'Everybody should be such a good customer,' Neeve observed mildly.

Betty nodded. 'I suppose so. And, by the way, I'm glad you talked Mrs. Yates into this outfit. That other one she tried on made her look like a grazing cow.'

'It also was fifteen hundred dollars more, but I couldn't let her have it. Sooner or later she'd have taken a good look at herself in the mirror. The sequin top is enough. She needs a soft, full skirt.'

A surprising number of shoppers braved the snow and slippery sidewalks to come into the store. Two of the saleswomen hadn't made it, so Neeve spent the day on the sales floor. It was the part she enjoyed most about the

business, but in the past year she'd been forced to limit herself to handling only a few personal clients.

At noon she went into her office at the back of the shop for a deli sandwich and coffee and dialed home.

Myles sounded more like himself. 'I would have won fourteen thousand dollars and a Champion pickup truck on *Wheel of Fortune*,' he announced. 'I won so much I might even have had to take that six-hundred-dollar plaster-of-paris Dalmatian they have the gall to call a prize.'

'Well, you certainly sound better,' Neeve observed.

'I've been talking to the boys downtown. They've got good people keeping tabs on Sepetti. They say he's pretty sick and hasn't much fight left.' There was satisfaction in Myles's voice.

'And they also probably reminded you that they don't think he had anything to do with Mother's death.' She did not wait for an answer. 'It's a good night for pasta. There's plenty of sauce in the freezer. Yank it out, okay?'

Neeve hung up feeling somewhat reassured. She swallowed the last bite of the turkey sandwich, gulped down the rest of the coffee and went back to the sales floor. Three of the six dressing rooms were occupied. With a practiced eye, she took in every detail of the shop.

The Madison Avenue entrance opened into the accessory area. She knew that one of the key reasons for her success was the availability of jewelry, purses, shoes, hats and scarves so that a woman purchasing a dress or a suit didn't have to hunt elsewhere for accessories. The interior of the shop was in shadings of ivory, with accents of blush pink on the upholstered sofas and chairs. Sportswear and separates were contained in roomy alcoves two steps up from the showcases. Except for the exquisitely gowned display mannequins there was no clothing in sight. A potential customer was escorted to a chair, and the sales clerk brought out dresses and gowns and suits for her selection.

It had been Sal who advised Neeve to go that way. 'Otherwise you'll have klutzes yanking clothes off the racks. Start exclusive, honey, and stay exclusive,' he had said, and as usual he was right.

The ivory and blush had been Neeve's decision. 'When a woman looks in the mirror, I don't want the background fighting what I'm trying to sell,' she'd told the interior designer who wanted her to go into great splashes of color.

As the afternoon wore on, fewer clients came in. At three o'clock Betty emerged from the sewing room. 'Lambston's stuff is ready,' she told Neeve.

Neeve assembled Ethel Lambston's order herself. All spring clothes. Ethel was a sixtyish free-lance writer with one best-seller to her credit. 'I write on every subject under the sun,' she had breathlessly confided to Neeve on the opening day of the shop. 'I take the fresh approach, the inquiring look. I'm every woman seeing something for the first time or from a new angle. I write about sex and relationships and animals and nursing homes and organizations and real estate and how to be a volunteer and political parties and . . .' She had run out of breath, her navy-blue eyes snapping, her white-blond hair flying around her face. 'The trouble is that I work so hard at what I do, I don't have a minute for myself. If I buy a black dress, I end up wearing brown shoes with it. Say, you have everything here. What a good idea. Put me together.'

In the last six years, Ethel Lambston had become a valuable customer. She insisted Neeve pick out every stitch she bought as well as choose accessories and compile lists to tell her what went with what. She lived on the ground floor of a brownstone on West Eighty-second Street, and Neeve stopped there occasionally to help Ethel decide what clothes to keep from year to year and what to give away.

The last time Neeve had gone over Ethel's wardrobe was three weeks ago. The next day Ethel came in and ordered the new outfits. 'I've almost finished that fashion article I

interviewed you about,' she'd told Neeve. 'A lot of people are going to be mad at me when it comes out, but you'll love it. I gave you lots of free publicity.'

When she made her selections she and Neeve had differed on only one suit. Neeve had started to take it away. 'I don't want to sell you that. It's a Gordon Steuber. I refuse to handle anything of his. This one should have gone back. I cannot stand that man.'

Ethel had burst out laughing. 'Wait till you read what I wrote about him. I crucified him. But I want the suit. His clothes look good on me.'

Now, as Neeve carefully placed the garments in heavy protective bags, she felt her lips narrow at the sight of the Steuber outfit. Six weeks ago, the daily maid at the shop had asked her to speak to a friend who was in trouble. The friend, a Mexican, told Neeve about working in an illegal sweatshop in the South Bronx that was owned by Gordon Steuber. 'We don't have green cards. He threatens to turn us in. Last week I was sick. He fired me and my daughter and won't pay what he owes us.'

The young woman didn't look to be more than in her late twenties. 'Your daughter!' Neeve had exclaimed. 'How old is she?'

'Fourteen.'

Neeve had canceled the order she'd placed with Gordon Steuber and sent him a copy of the Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem which had helped change the child-labor laws in England. She underlined the stanza 'But the young, young children, oh my brothers, they are weeping bitterly.'

Someone in Steuber's office had tipped off *Women's Wear Daily*. The editors printed the poem on the front page next to Neeve's scathing letter to Steuber and called on other retailers to boycott manufacturers who were breaking the law.

Anthony della Salva had been upset. 'Neeve, the word is that Steuber has a lot more than sweatshops to hide. Thanks to what you stirred up, the Feds are nosing around his income-tax returns.'

'Wonderful,' Neeve had retorted. 'If he's cheating at that, too, I hope they catch him.'

Well, she decided as she straightened the Steuber suit on the hanger, this will be the last thing of his that goes out of my shop. She found herself anxious to read Ethel's fashion article. She knew it was due to come out soon in *Contemporary Woman*, the magazine where Ethel was a contributing editor.

Finally, Neeve made up the lists for Ethel. Blue silk evening suit; wear white silk blouse; jewelry in box A. Pink-and-gray ensemble; gray pumps, matching purse; jewelry in box B. Black cocktail dress . . .' There were eight outfits in all. With the accessories they came to nearly seven thousand dollars. Ethel spent that amount three or four times a year. She'd confided to Neeve that when she was divorced twenty-two years before, she'd gotten a big settlement and invested it wisely. 'And I collect a thousand bucks a month alimony from him for life,' she'd laughed. 'At the time we broke up, he was riding high. He told his lawyers it was worth every cent to get rid of me. In court, he said that if I ever marry again the guy should be stone deaf. Maybe I'd have given him a break if it weren't for that crack. He's remarried and has three kids, and ever since Columbus Avenue got classy his bar's been in trouble. Every once in a while he phones and begs me to let him off the hook, but I tell him I still haven't found anyone who's stone deaf.'

At that moment Neeve had been prepared to dislike Ethel. Then Ethel had added wistfully, 'I always wanted a family. We separated when I was thirty-seven. The five years we were married, he wouldn't give me a child.'

Neeve had made it her business to read Ethel's articles and had quickly realized that even though Ethel might be a talkative, seemingly scatterbrained woman, she was also an excellent writer. No matter what subject she tackled, it was obvious her research was massive.

With the help of the receptionist, Neeve stapled the bottoms of the garment bags. The jewelry and the shoes were packed in individual boxes and then gathered in ivory-and-pink cartons with 'Neeve's Place' scrolled along the sides. With a sigh of relief, she dialed Ethel's apartment.

There was no answer. Nor had Ethel left her answering machine on. Neeve decided that Ethel would probably arrive any minute, breathless and with a taxi waiting outside.

At four o'clock there were no customers in the shop and Neeve sent everyone home. Darn Ethel, she thought. She would have liked to go home as well. The snow was still falling steadily. At this rate, she'd never get a cab herself later. She tried Ethel at four-thirty, at five, at five-thirty. Now what? she wondered. Then she had an idea. She'd wait until six-thirty, the usual closing time, then deliver Ethel's things on her way home. Surely she could leave them with the superintendent. That way if Ethel had imminent travel plans, she'd have her new wardrobe.

The taxicab-company starter was reluctant to accept her call. 'We're telling all our cars to come in, lady. Driving's a mess. But gimme your name and phone number.' When he heard her name, the starter's tone changed. 'Neeve Kearny! Why didn't you tell me you're the Commissioner's daughter? You bet we'll get you home.'

The cab arrived at twenty of seven. They inched through the now almost impassable streets. The driver was not pleased to make an additional stop. 'Lady, I can't wait to pack it in.'

There was no answer at Ethel's apartment. Neeve rang in vain for the superintendent. There were four other apartments in the brownstone, but she had no idea who