

CHAPTER 1  
Monday, July 10

A MOUND OF MANUSCRIPT PAGES ribboned with blood-red handwritten corrections and angry cross-outs blanketed the small desk. "Damn!" Amanda Sellinger tossed her pen down in a fit of frustration. No way would she finish editing this mess by the time the publisher's messenger came for it at 5:00 p.m.

Amanda generally enjoyed being a freelance editor. The pay was pretty good and it allowed her free time to do her own thing. But her current project -- transform an A-list celebrity's barely literate random scribbles about the joys of teaching her pet monkey to sing into a fascinating coffee table book - was proving to be more difficult than she had anticipated. And the three phone calls she received earlier had unnerved her. Wrong numbers she was used to, but these were different. Though there was no response to her frantic "Who's calling?" demands, Amanda was positive that she heard breathing on the other end of the line.

Just one line of coke would calm her down, but she had finished her supply last night and Thomas wouldn't bring more until much later.

*Bee-ennng!*

Amanda tensed at the shrill sound of the doorbell. It was only 3:15 -- too early for the messenger. But if it was him, how did he get into the building? The part-time doorman didn't arrive for another 45 minutes, and Amanda positively had not buzzed anyone. The high rise where she lived on Manhattan's Upper East Side, East 76<sup>th</sup> Street to be exact, was a "semi-luxury" building. True luxury buildings had three shifts of round-the-clock doormen. A lone doorman stood guard in the lobby of "semis" only between the hours of 4:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. The rest of the time, it was the residents' responsibility to buzz in their guests and delivery people and not to allow unexpected visitors into the building.

Amanda cocked her head to one side. Perhaps it was Thomas. Bless him. He was good at sneaking in. No, she decided, he never came early. Late was more his M.O. The caller had to be her neighbor DeeDee Winters. DeeDee was a flight attendant and the only other person on the floor who was home during the day.

Amanda flung open the door. A wide smile lit her face. "Hi, Dee..." Her mouth froze in mid-greeting. Her eyes

were riveted to the big, shaggy gorilla that was doing a jaunty tap dance on her heart-shaped welcome mat.

For one ridiculous moment, Amanda wondered how petite DeeDee had morphed into this hairy primate. But before she rationalized that her neighbor could not be the dancing apparition, the ape lunged toward her.

"For me?" Amanda pointed to the gold box of Godiva chocolates that had magically appeared in the ape's meaty paw.

The large latex head bobbed up and down.

Amanda hesitated before she accepted the box. *Do I tip the gorilla, and, how much,* she wondered. Amanda raised a finger to signal the mammalian messenger to wait. She turned to get her purse then spun around. The gorilla had followed her into the foyer.

A wave of fear surged through Amanda's body when she stared into the primate's dead, cold eyes. Then her fear gave way to wild terror as she heard the ape's low voice deliver a familiar monologue.

"It's you?" she stammered.

The ape delivered its reply.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO SHOCK or surprise Manhattanites. Every day they see oddly attired people, like an S&M dominatrix dressed in full leather gear casually strolling down the street to make a house call, or a bride roller blading to her City Hall nuptials, or a giant pickle distributing free samples on a street corner. So few people gave a second glance to the gorilla as it tap danced away from Amanda's apartment building. To those who did stop to stare, the primate nonchalantly offered a menu from a nearby Chinese dining spot.

When the ape came abreast of an elegantly restored Victorian townhouse on East 73<sup>rd</sup> Street, it put a paw into its concealed pocket and withdrew the same candy box that minutes ago it had gallantly offered to Amanda Sellinger. Then it executed a buoyant hop-one-two-three, hop-one-two-three tap dance up the marble staircase. After the terpsichorean creature reached the landing, it danced in place while it twirled the box with one paw and pressed the shiny brass bell with the other.

"Who's there?" A female voice floated through the intercom box.

"Delivery for Ms. Loretta Galloway," the ape replied.

"That's me. Don't go away." Loretta screeched into the intercom.

She'd been waiting patiently by the intercom ever since "Gift Gorillas" had phoned to say that a box of chocolates would be delivered shortly. Loretta loved chocolates. What she didn't love, however, was standing on her Jimmy Choo three and one-half inch high heel slides for over an hour.

She flung open the door, a well-manicured fingernail greedily pointed at the recognized candy box. "Give it to me," she snapped.

Heedless of her demand, the gorilla pushed its way into the marble vestibule. With a backward kick of its black sneakers, it slammed the front door closed. Then it repeated the same chilling monologue that had frightened Amanda Sellinger.

Loretta Galloway's white Persian cat wound itself around her bare legs as the last terrible word hung in the air like an ominous black cloud.

"What do you want?" Loretta begged.

The gorilla responded.

CHAPTER 2  
Tuesday, July 11

HIGH ABOVE THE MURKY EAST RIVER, a beam of bright, early-morning sunlight stealthily inched its way across the lushly planted terrace of an elegant Sutton Place apartment. And, like a snake slithering through the jungle, the illuminating ray sensuously slid under a pair of French doors into a stately dining room. No expense had been spared on the fine furniture or exquisite paintings crammed into the space.

Two high-back upholstered armchairs were drawn up to either side of the Regency dining table set with fine bone china, glistening silver and embroidered linens. A reed-slim, white-haired man in his late sixties, resplendent in a handsome black silk robe, was seated in one chair. An overly plump woman, slightly younger than he, sat in the other cushioned seat. She wore a lavender silk peignoir edged with marabou feathers. Both were engrossed in reading the newspapers propped up before them on silver reading stands. A Brahms sonata floated through concealed speakers. The room and its inhabitants resonated genteel elegance.

"Holy cow!" Kitty Larsen Kessledorf Houlihan Silverberg Blaumenfaux shrieked. "'DANCING KILLA' GORILLA ON THE LOOSE,'" she read the headline to her husband in a raspy voice.

Charles Darrell Blumenfaux's head poked over the top of his own newspaper. "What are you talking about? There isn't a word in *The Wall Street Journal* about a homicidal gorilla."

Kitty rolled her eyes to plead with heaven. "What do you expect from a paper that doesn't run pictures or have gossip columnists? It says right *here*..." She rattled her copy of the *New York Post*. "'Two Upper East Side women were found shot dead yesterday. According to an anonymous police source, there is a strong suspicion that they were both killed by the dancing gorilla seen in the vicinity of both murders.'"

"Do you think that there could be a connection between the two murders?" Kitty peered quizzically at her fourth husband over the top of her rhinestone-frame granny glasses.

Charlie washed down the last of his dry Melba toast with a sip of herbal tea. "I don't know, but I'm sure the police will unravel that problem. As to the ape, it's

highly unlikely that a primate could be taught to tap dance, and even if it could..."

The muted ring of the cordless telephone beside him interrupted his musing. "It's Cynthia," he said and handed the phone to Kitty without picking it up. Charlie's clients might be shocked to learn that the famous "Seer to the Stars" had relied on Caller ID rather than psychic powers to identify Kitty's niece Cynthia Collins as the caller. Two years ago, Cynthia, the youngest of five children, had exchanged tiny Sidewinder, North Dakota, where Kitty and the rest of the Larsen clan had deep roots, for the hustle and bustle of Manhattan. Ever since her arrival, she depended on Kitty to solve all her difficulties.

"What do you suppose is her trouble this time? Lost keys, or a mouse in the bathtub?" Kitty whispered before she greeted her niece with a cheery, "Hello, Cyn. What's new?"

Cynthia's one-word reply sent Kitty's thick black false eyelashes fluttering up and down fast as hummingbird wings.

"Murder?" Kitty bellowed.

"Yes, murder!" Cynthia's voice boomed through the telephone. "Murder, like in dead. The story is on the front page of the *Post*."

"You mean the story about the crazy gorilla who shot two women? I was in the middle of reading it when you called."

"Go ahead and finish. I read it earlier this morning." A stranger might mistake the even cadence of Cynthia's voice for calm, but Kitty understood that it meant her niece was stressed out to the near breaking point.

Kitty absent-mindedly nodded at the phone as she put it down on the table and poured over the rest of the article. It further related that Loretta Galloway, 48 years old, was discovered shot to death in the foyer of her Upper East Side townhouse by her husband, prominent attorney Theodore Galloway, when he returned home from a business trip. The body of divorcée Amanda Sellinger, also 48, was found by her neighbor DeeDee Winters who entered her apartment after she got no response to her phone calls or knocks on the door.

Kitty studied the accompanying black and white photos of the women. Loretta Galloway looked like any number of beautiful society matrons photographed at charity events -- long, straight blonde hair, high cheek bones, perfectly

applied makeup, and perhaps a few nips and tucks performed on her face by a prominent plastic surgeon. Amanda Sellinger, on the other hand, had kinky, dark hair that appeared to be flecked with strands of gray. She wore little makeup and, though she was the same age as the Galloway woman, she looked years older.

Kitty's first reaction when she reached the end of the lengthy story was the absurdity of a big, hairy gorilla tap dancing down the street. Then she wondered how these murders could take place on the relatively safe Upper East Side. The final question she asked herself as she retrieved the phone from the table was could her niece be connected to the victims and/or the murderer.

"You know something about these murders?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, Aunt Kitty, I know both ladies, or I did know them," Cynthia stammered. "They were, you know, Olympians - members of Club Olympus." She spoke the name of the health club for the flabby rich where she was employed as assistant manager with the same hushed reverence that one might use to invoke the name of a deity.

"Yeah, Cyn, I know who you mean." Kitty knew about the Olympians before Cynthia ever heard of them or the club, because it was Kitty who had arranged Cynthia's interview with Chris Kanizowski, the handsome, 35-year old entrepreneur owner of the club. Mr. Kay, the name he used professionally, also operated several other non-related businesses.

While Charlie predicted the futures of the rich and famous, Kitty dealt in the present. She placed young people on job paths that often led them to successful careers. Kitty herself had traveled a long winding road from the family's tumbledown ranch in Sidewinder to ownership of Career Steps - The Agency with a Heart, a small but well-respected employment office on Madison Avenue in Midtown Manhattan. Career Steps, actually, was an outgrowth of Solly's Employment Agency, a seedy Times Square enterprise that Kitty won in a poker game.

"If you know anything about this mess, Cyn, call the cops or tell Mr. Kay," Kitty ordered her niece. Then to the white and champagne Shi Tzu that sat patiently beside her chair, she cooed, "Here, Tootie," and offered a piece of scrambled egg on her extended hand.

A deep sigh floated through the telephone line. "I can't tell anybody what I know because there's more," Cynthia confided. Kitty had figured as much. Ever since

Cynthia was a child, she leaked a story bit by bit, rather than tell it all at once. "Spill it, Cyn."

Her niece's voice dropped to a whisper. "I think the killer is an Olympian."

"Oh, my God!" Kitty turned in her chair to face away from Charlie, the better to ignore his insistent hand signals that emphatically asked, "What's wrong?"

"That's all the more reason to tell the cops."

"No!" her niece shouted into the phone. "The club can't afford a breath of scandal. We're losing members every day to a new club. And unless we can prove that the killings aren't connected to Club Olympus, even our fabulous fifth anniversary party won't save us. The club will fold and I'll be out of a job."

Kitty ignored Cynthia's use of the word *we*, for whenever her niece used that innocuous pronoun in conversation with her, it meant that Kitty singular, not both of them plural, would have to deal with an unpleasant situation. "That's crazy. The members..."

"They are not members. I told you, before, they are Olympians."

"Sure, sorry. These Olympians..." Kitty abhorred that pretentious word, but decided to humor her distraught niece. "why would they think someone wants to wipe them out?"

"Well, how would you feel if two people in your club were murdered?" Without waiting for her aunt's reply, Cynthia begged, "Please help me, Aunt Kitty. If you say 'yes' I'll make you a temporary Olympian."

"Now why in heaven's name would I want to be an Olympian? You know that I don't believe in exercise."

Kitty didn't understand why millions of people annually paid billions of dollars to join health clubs in order to lift weights, run on treadmills and do abdominal crunches so that they could fit into tight jeans. She firmly believed that only cowboys and farmers should wear jeans. Kitty's pleasingly plump shape gave no clue that from the time she was a teenager until she was well into her forties, she had the face and figure of old-time movie star Betty Grable, the favorite pin-up girl of World War II soldiers.

"I know you hate to exercise, Aunt Kitty, but if you're a temporary Olympian you can nose around the club and find out if there's any connection between the two dead women or the women and some other Olympian." Cynthia spilled out her rationale quickly with one long exhale.

"And what do I do if I find a connection?" Kitty asked dubiously.

"Nothing much. Only prove that the murders have nothing to do with the club."

Kitty stabbed her fingers into her straggly platinum blonde up-do. "Cyn, honey, I've done some weird things in my life to pay the rent -- I played Mrs. Santa Claus in a department store window, I demonstrated a hundred and one ways to tie a scarf at Macy's, and I even sold underwear door-to-door -- but there isn't a chance in hell that I'm going to play detective."

"Pul-eez."

The authentic sob in Cynthia's niece's voice melted Kitty's resolve faster than fire could turn ice to water. "Where are you now, Cyn?" she said softly.

"At Club Olympus."

Kitty looked from Charlie to Tootie for advice, but got none from her husband or her dog. "Okay, I'll be there. But first I have to change into something appropriate for the gym and let my office know I'll be late." "My office" was Kitty's euphemism for her receptionist, Phyllis Kramer, a part-time actress, and Kitty's only employee.

"Please hurry, Aunt Kitty," Cynthia begged.

"Sure, Cyn, but try to stay out of trouble till I get there," she admonished her niece.

Ten minutes later, Kitty's cab rattled and shook its way uptown along a schizophrenic stretch of Manhattan. Kitty entered the cab on Sutton Place, but after it sped under the Queensboro Bridge, also known as the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge, Sutton Place mysteriously became York Avenue. This peculiar name change came about in three stages. Originally, all the land east of First Avenue was known as Avenue A. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, merchant Effingham B. Sutton purchased the stretch of Avenue A between East 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and East 59<sup>th</sup> Street and renamed it for himself. Years later, the rest of Avenue A was re-christened York Avenue to honor World War I sharpshooter hero Sergeant Alvin C. York. York Avenue, crammed with high and low-rise apartment buildings and world-famous hospitals, runs all the way up to East 93<sup>rd</sup> Street where it dead-ends with the FDR Drive. That north and south highway, which was named for the second Roosevelt president, is also known as the East River Drive because it runs parallel to the East River, which is not a river - but an estuary.

Kitty was oblivious to the idiosyncratic name changes that flashed before her. Her thoughts were focused on her niece's latest predicament.

When Cynthia moved to Manhattan, she brought with her a trunk-full of clothes, a diploma from a community college, and boundless enthusiasm to take on any job that Kitty might find for her. But after Kitty read Cynthia's wretched résumé -- baby-sitter, high school cheerleader and winner of the "Miss Congeniality" title in the "Miss North Dakota" beauty contest -- she despaired of ever finding a suitable position for her niece.

Half a dozen jobs turned out badly. There was the time at a big name ad agency when Cynthia hit the wrong button and a copier belched out 100 copies of a 20-page bound report, instead of one test copy. And Kitty never forgot the chaos Cynthia created at a bank opening by tripping an alarm that called 50 police officers with drawn guns to the scene. But, miraculously, six months ago Mr. Kay, the club's CEO, COO, president and manager, had listed the Club Olympus assistant manager position with Career Steps. The successful applicant only needed to be reasonably athletic, look terrific in spandex, and be friendly. The job was tailor-made for Cynthia. She was hired immediately and there hadn't been a breath of trouble -- until today.

Common sense told Kitty to send her niece back to North Dakota before she ruined Career Steps' reputation or got herself into deep trouble. The latter scenario, Kitty feared had already occurred. But who was she kidding? Not in a million years would Kitty turn her back on her niece.

Kitty enjoyed playing the role of surrogate mother to Cynthia and to the dozens of frightened Career Steps job applicants who put their futures in her hands, though she often hid her kindnesses under a cloak of gruffness. She lavished her maternal instincts on these young women to compensate for the fact that her three married sons, Kevin, Brian and Sean, the only good that came out of her disastrous second marriage, never asked for her advice or help.

"Stop!" Kitty snapped out of her reverie. The cab had almost zoomed by the address Cynthia had given her on the phone.