

STRANGERS AT A TABLE

By Kerry Hammond

“You mean like the Miss Marple book?”

Michelle sipped her wine and looked at the other three passengers at her table in the dining car of the California Zephyr. Her blond bangs were a bit too long, and she had a habit of swiping her hand across her forehead to move them to the side, out of her eyes. She was a petite woman in her early fifties, with a thin face and straight, white teeth. She was shy and frequently avoided looking people in the eye when talking to them. She was at the end of a cross-country train journey, a gift to herself when her divorce was finalized.

“It was a short story actually, not a book. But yes, like Miss Marple.” Janie smiled at the others, clearly proud of herself. An aspiring theater actress in her late twenties, Janie was traveling to Denver to audition for The Denver Theatre Company. One of the actresses had quit without notice, and Janie’s best friend, Helen, had gotten her an audition. Helen told the company that Janie had already relocated to the Colorado capital and would be able to start immediately. Afraid to fly, Janie’s mother had convinced her that train travel might be fun.

“The story was called ‘The Tuesday Night Club,’ and it was one of my favorites. Everyone always underestimated Miss Marple, and she always showed them in the end.” Janie was beginning to think that her mother might be right. This trip might be fun after all.

“Full disclosure,” she said, “not only have I read every Miss Marple

mystery ever written, I'm also named after Jane Marple. My mother was a huge Agatha Christie fan but thought the name Agatha would be way too old-fashioned."

She registered confusion from the two men and continued. "Here's what we should do: let's each take turns and tell a story. Some little mystery that we have personal knowledge of because it happened to us or to someone we know. It doesn't have to be a story about murder, of course. That kind of stuff is for the movies and mystery books. I don't care if it's the case of the stolen newspaper." She said this last part in the voice of a news reporter, her expression serious.

"Just something to get us all thinking, you know? Just for fun. Look, none of us have met before, so we won't know the people involved in the stories. It's not like we're breaking anyone's confidence. And with no knowledge of the players in the story, we also won't have an unfair advantage when we try and solve the puzzle."

The others were silent as they considered Janie's suggestion. "So we each tell our little puzzler, and the others try and guess the solution. But we have to know the solution so we can confirm if anyone gets it right?" said Daniel, a forty-five-year-old attorney from Denver. He had missed his flight out of Chicago because of a snowstorm and decided to catch the train instead. The next flight with an empty seat was two days away and the thought of sitting in a hotel room in Chicago, snowed in, was worse than an eighteen-hour Amtrak train ride. "I guess it could be fun," he said, spinning his wedding ring around his finger. It was clear from the tone in his voice that he thought it would be anything *but* fun.

"If you don't know the solution, that's okay too," said Janie. "Maybe as a group we can figure it out."

The dining car was nearly empty, the dinner service was over, and just a few passengers remained, finishing their drinks. The serving staff had cleared the tables and were chatting with each other as they restocked supplies behind the bar. They appeared in no hurry to close down the room. Outside the window, the snow swirled, but the landscape was nearly invisible, swallowed by the winter night.

“What about you, Hank? Are you in?” Hank was a government employee who had recently retired after forty years with the National Park Service. He was headed back home to Denver after visiting his daughter and her husband in Chicago. He was a widower and preferred train travel to air travel because, as he put it, “I’m not in a hurry to get anywhere anytime soon.”

“I may have to go last. I’m just not sure I have a story to contribute,” said Hank, racking his brain for something, anything interesting that he could tell. He had lived a quiet life. Married at nineteen, two children by twenty-two, and only one job his whole life. Nothing exciting had ever really happened to him. Except there was that one time that...no, he couldn’t tell that story to total strangers.

“Great, then it’s settled,” said Janie. “We each tell a story, and then the others have a chance to ask questions before we reveal the solution, if we know it. The storyteller has to answer the questions honestly, though. No lying or evading the truth. Got it?”

“Got it,” they all said in unison.

“Are you going to go first then, Janie?” said Daniel. He sipped his martini as he loosened his necktie.

“I am,” she said. “Get ready, because this is a good one.” The other three passengers found themselves leaning forward in anticipation, vibrating slightly in their seats with the movement of the train.

“It happened when I was seven years old. I was small for my age, and I was born with a flair for the dramatic, so I liked to hide from my parents to see what they would do. I would slip away in department stores and hide in the middle of those circular clothes racks. It took them ages to find me and my mother always threatened to put me on a leash if I didn’t stop wandering. But she never did, of course. I even secretly suspected that she liked the few minutes of peace and quiet when I was gone. But sorry, that’s not relevant to the story.

“One day, my mother took me with her to the mall. I was mad at her for some reason, and to this day, I can’t remember why. Anyway, I was up to my usual tricks, and I found a rack full of men’s pants and I hid in the middle. I sat down on the leg of the rack, pleased with myself, hoping to make her

suffer. I heard someone coming near the rack and expected my mother to part the pants and grab me, but instead, I heard two people talking. It was a man and a woman, and they were arguing.

“He was telling her that she needed to stop calling him at home because his wife was starting to get suspicious. I was only seven, but my parents had a friend who left his wife for his dental hygienist, so I knew what was going on. This guy was cheating on his wife, and this woman was trying to break up his marriage. The thing was, I knew the man’s voice.

“I held my breath and peeked out between two pairs of corduroy pants, and sure enough, I did know him. He was the guy who always waited on my mother at the post office. Mr. Riley, or Rawlings, or something like that. He actually lived a couple of streets away from us. I’d seen his wife before, walking her dog around the neighborhood.”

“Did he see you when you poked your head out?” asked Michelle, speaking to Janie but looking down at her wineglass.

“No, they were too intent on each other. He was so mad, his face was bright red. He had a grip on her arm, and she was trying to yank it free. She was like, ‘If you don’t let me go, I’m going to call your wife right now and tell her about us.’

“That seemed to startle him, and he let go of her arm. That’s when I stuck my head back in. I was scared of being seen. But here’s the kicker.” Janie paused for effect. She knew she had them in the palm of her hand. She would nail that audition; she was sure of it.

“A couple of weeks later, I heard my mom tell my dad that Mr. what’s-his-name, Riley or Rawlings, at the post office was getting a divorce. His wife caught him cheating and left him. Took him for everything he had.

“The mystery you have to solve is, how did she find out?” Janie finished her story with a flourish, waving her hand in the air and tipping her head in a kind of bow.

“Well, that’s easy,” said Hank. “The mistress told her.”

“Nope,” said Janie. “Try again.”

“How do you even know how she found out?” said Michelle.

“That isn’t relevant to the mystery,” said Janie. “You just have to trust

that I know and give me your best guess. Any more questions?"

"No questions, but I know the answer," said Daniel with a smirk. "It's elementary, my dear Watson."

"Wrong detective, but okay smart guy, tell us. How did his wife find out?" said Janie.

"It's easy, *you* told her."

"And what makes you think that?" said Janie, with a smirk that told him he was headed in the right direction but wasn't quite there.

"Because you knew his wife and where she lived. It would be easy for you to approach her when she was out walking her dog." He paused, and a look from Janie made him change course. "Or, you wrote her a note and slipped it under her door."

"Is he right?" said Michelle.

"He is," said Janie. "Or mostly. I actually slipped the note in her mailbox. Even at seven, I had an understanding of irony. What better way to call out her postman husband's infidelity than to leave a note in her mailbox? I found a note my mom wrote to my dad and tried to mimic how an adult would write in cursive. I don't know if I pulled it off or if she guessed that a child had written the note. What I do know is that she must have believed me and confronted him because she divorced the jerk soon after. Well done, Daniel. Since you guessed correctly, you get to go next."

"Alright then," said Daniel. "I've got a story, but I don't know the solution. It's either unsolved or not the mystery it appeared to be at the time."

"Cool," said Janie. "Maybe three fresh sets of eyes can solve the cold case."

"Well," began Daniel, "it was about three years ago. I had an elderly client who came to me for a will. I'll call this client Mr. Smith." His brow furrowed, and he paused for a moment. "Let me back up a bit. I think I told you that I was an estate planning attorney. I recently retired from practice but have retained my license to practice law. When I did have my practice, I prepared documents like wills, trusts, and powers of attorney for my clients. In the course of business, clients tended to confide in me about extremely personal matters, sometimes with information that wasn't even related to the legal

work I was handling for them.

“On this occasion, my client told me that he had two daughters. One was a bright and beautiful woman who had gone to culinary school and had successfully started her own catering company. She was the apple of his eye, as the saying goes, and he wanted to leave his vast fortune to her. She was his little princess, the good daughter.

“The problem was, he had another daughter. She was the black sheep of the family. She’d dropped out of high school and gotten caught up with the wrong crowd. She got involved in drugs at a young age and had been in and out of rehab several times. He had tried to help that daughter, but all of his attempts had failed, and he wanted to leave her out of the will completely. He was afraid she would spend any money she inherited on drugs and alcohol.

“Disinheriting a child is sticky, but not uncommon. I created a will that left everything to the good daughter and nothing to the black sheep.”

“So, what’s the mystery?” asked Janie impatiently.

“I’m getting to that, Miss Marple. Keep your pants on,” said Daniel teasingly. “My client was in his seventies but in good health and very active. He could theoretically have lived for another twenty years. However, three months after I delivered the paperwork to him and he signed all of the documents, he was dead.

“The good daughter showed up one Sunday for their weekly brunch and found him at the bottom of the stairs, his neck broken.

“The police investigated and were pretty convinced there was foul play involved but couldn’t find any solid evidence. The good daughter was catering a big event when he fell and had about three hundred people who could give her an alibi, so she was in the clear.

“The police then contacted me and asked me about Mr. Smith’s will. I explained that the good daughter inherited everything and that my client had disinherited the black sheep but admitted that I didn’t know if he had told either of the girls about the changes to his will. You see, the previous will left his fortune to the two daughters equally.

“They came to the same conclusion as I did. If he hadn’t told his daughters

about the new will, the black sheep would have thought she would benefit from his death, giving her a motive to get rid of him. She would think that she stood to inherit half of his fortune, which is what would have happened if the first will were still valid.

“So, the police investigated the black sheep, and after quite a bit of pushback, she told them she had been at an AA meeting when the old guy fell down the stairs. Apparently, there were several people that backed up her story.”

“So, who does that leave?” said Michelle. “Did anyone else inherit, even a smaller amount?”

“No one else inherited. The good daughter inherited about twenty million dollars and was his sole heir. The black sheep got nothing, but to her credit, she didn’t even try to contest the will.”

“Was the good daughter married?” asked Janie. “A greedy husband who couldn’t wait for his father-in-law to live another twenty years before his wife inherited the money would have a strong motive. He could have bumped off the old guy.”

“Good guess, but no, she wasn’t married. And she wasn’t even dating at the time,” said Daniel.

No one spoke. Michelle swirled the wine in her glass, Janie stared out the window at the snow, and Hank sat with his eyes closed in contemplation, or maybe he was sleeping, it wasn’t clear.

“Have I stumped Jane Marple’s namesake?” said Daniel. “Not to worry, the police were stumped too. They found no unexpected fingerprints in the house. Even though he was a wealthy man, he had no security cameras on the premises, so there was no video footage of his last hours. His property was quite secluded, so his neighbors were miles away. The closest one worked as a flight attendant and was gone for days at a time. When Mr. Smith fell, she was on a plane headed for London.”

“Well, I’m stumped,” said Michelle.

“You’ve got me too,” said Hank.

“I’m not giving up yet,” said Janie. “I may need to sleep on it.”

“By all means,” said Daniel. “Like I said, I don’t know the answer. It’s

unlikely that the police will ever know what happened. Eventually, it was ruled an accidental death. The case isn't even cold at this point, it's closed."

One of the waiters approached the table. "I'm sorry, but we do need to close the dining car now."

Janie furrowed her brow. "Oh no, we won't be able to get to more mysteries." She pushed back her chair and gave a reluctant half-smile. "Oh well, you solved my mystery, and Daniel gave us one we can sleep on. Maybe I'll see you all in the morning before we reach Denver."

They said their goodbyes and prepared to leave the dining car. Daniel and Michelle went to their sleeper compartments, and Hank and Janie went back to their coach seats.

* * *

Janie had trouble sleeping that night, but not because of the movement of the train. She couldn't stop thinking about Daniel's client. What were the police missing? Daniel said they suspected foul play, so there had to be something there.

The next morning Janie ate a breakfast bar from her backpack and enjoyed the scenery rolling by from her seat by the window. She had blown her food budget on dinner last night, so she didn't make any reservations for breakfast in the dining car. She'd get a bite with Helen when she arrived in Denver.

As the train got close to Denver's Union Station, the passengers started to gather their belongings. Janie zipped her backpack and walked down the aisle toward the door. When the train stopped, she stepped down on the platform and looked around for Helen. She found her standing a few cars down, waving like a madwoman.

When she reached her, Janie gave Helen a big hug. As she was about to let go, she spotted Daniel over Helen's shoulder, kissing a young brunette. "Hang on a second, Helen. I want to say goodbye to someone I met on the train."

As Janie started to jog over to where Daniel and the woman stood, they

turned away from her, walking toward the parking lot. The woman put her hand on Daniel's shoulder, and the large wedding ring on her finger sparkled in the sunlight. Just as Janie was about to call out his name, Daniel stopped and opened the passenger door of an SUV that was parked at the curb. On the side of the vehicle was a sign that read *Princess Catering*.

Janie stopped and stared at the vehicle. The puzzle pieces started to slowly fall into place, and she stood on the sidewalk, her mouth frozen into the shape of an O. Ahead of her, Daniel kissed the woman and closed her car door. As he started to walk around to the driver's side, he spotted Janie standing on the curb. He looked taken aback but quickly recovered his composure. He put his hand up to shade his eyes, looked straight at her, and winked.