

Chapter One

If Lydia Vivaldi hadn't tried to read the Cape Cod Times Help Wanted ads while driving, she wouldn't have wound up on the side of 6A with a flat tire. Her yellow Morris Minor wouldn't have caught the eye of Alistair Pope, passing in his vintage Mercedes. Lydia wouldn't have joined Alistair at Leo's Back End for lunch; Leo wouldn't have hired her to replace his assistant cook, Sue, who had just stormed out in tears after Leo diluted her split-pea soup; and the murder rate in Quansett, Massachusetts, might have stayed at zero.

"Taste it!" Leo clunked down two cups. "On the house. Now tell me that's not perfect exactly how it is."

Lydia tasted. She was feeling dizzy—whether from not sleeping, skipping breakfast, or falling down a rabbit hole into Wonderland, she couldn't tell. Her mind groped for facts she could cling to. *Cape Cod is a sixty-mile peninsula which juts into the Atlantic Ocean south of Boston like a bent arm. The fingers are Provincetown, the elbow is Chatham, the armpit is Bourne. Quansett, on the biceps, dates to the late 1600s.*

That patchwork wall behind Leo must be the Back End's menu: squares of colored paper hand-printed with today's specials ("SPESHULS"). And this must be the Splat P Soop. Its problem (in Lydia's opinion) wasn't thickness but flavor. If you didn't mind losing the vegetarians, as Leo clearly didn't, why not throw in a ham hock?

"I ask you! Any thicker you'd have to eat it with a fork."

She fished unobtrusively, found only a few meaty shreds. If stinginess was what kept Leo so skinny, it hadn't affected his customers. Of the twenty or so people in this two-room cafe, only the kid behind the cash register could be called thin. The mountainous aproned woman slinging burgers in the kitchen outweighed even Alistair.

Winters are milder than in Boston, thanks to the Gulf Stream bearing sea-warmth up from Florida and bouncing off the Cape toward Portugal. Springs are shorter, autumns longer. Golf is commonly played till Thanksgiving.

Her fingernails had gotten the worst of her battle with the flat tire. Yesterday's sparkly green polish was half chipped off. Green, like the streaks in her hair. Like her eyes, on the off chance anyone ever noticed.

Lydia set down her spoon and removed her sunglasses.

A stranger wouldn't even guess this place was here. She hadn't noticed it a year ago, on her first and only visit to Cape Cod. Its name she hoped was geographical: Leo's Back End stood at the far edge of a long parking lot behind a cluster of shops up on Main Street. She'd fallen in love at first sight with the dollhouse village of Quansett: ancient oaks and stone fences, gray-shingled shoebox houses, white porch railings, windowboxes overflowing with red geraniums and striped petunias—

No beach worth mentioning, Alistair Pope warned her, slowing his Mercedes. The nearest shopping mall is five miles away in Hyannis. Welcome to downtown: the post office, the drugstore, the firehouse, the Whistling Pig Tea Shoppe, the Frigate Bookstore, the town library, and one cluster of retail and office spaces. That's why we have the highest proportion of year-rounders on the Cape. Lunch is a social highlight.

Everybody in here did seem to know each other. Was it always this down-homey? Or had she arrived just in time—with Memorial Day over and June starting tomorrow—for one last Norman Rockwell moment before school let out and vacationers flooded over the bridge demanding lobster rolls?

No lobster on Leo's bulletin-board menu. Under Alistair's guidance Lydia took a slip to write down her order. Did he recommend anything? Her knight-errant smiled, shook his head. "It's a crap shoot." And added, "You don't come to Leo's for the food."

Back at her car he'd been more talkative. "I can see you've got this undah control," he'd begun graciously, "but I'm a Maw-ris fan from way back and it would be an aw-nah to assist

you.” His Massachusetts drawl recalled Jack Kennedy, although Alis-tayah had several years and at least fifty pounds on the late president. “I live just up the road. Pre-Civil War farmhouse, zealously guarded by our Historical Commission. You can stable horses in your back yard, but don’t try to change your mailbox or paint your front door without a lawyer.”

He’d kept up the flow of conversation while they worked, as if to reassure her of his intentions. What year was this beauty? Still the original engine? That was quite a load she’d packed in there. No wonder her tire blew. Moving to the Cape for the summer?

Lydia glanced at the suitcases piled beside the open trunk, the boxes crammed with books and clothes, lamps and plants, in the back seat. “Maybe. There’s somebody I kind of need to find.”

A raised eyebrow told her he wondered if he might be that somebody. Not a can of worms she cared to open.

He hadn’t asked her the obvious question: “Is that your real name?” She’d braced for it, prepared to zing back: “It is now!” Instead he’d rolled the syllables around in his mouth, *Lydia Vivaldi*, like a sip of fine wine, and smiled at her: “Pleased to meet you.” Then pushed up his sleeves and bolted on the spare tire faster than she’d been able to pry off the hubcap.

Alistair laid their slips beside the cash register. With a hand on her elbow he steered her to a bin of flatware. Armed with forks, spoons, and mugs, they slid into a booth. His leg pressed against hers. Was this why he’d brought her to Leo’s?—because it gave him so many chances to touch her?

And why, dammit, did each touch jolt her like a hot wire?

On first sight she’d pegged Alistair Pope as a NFW. Too old, too hefty, too retro-suburban. His wavy salt-and-pepper hair was combed across a thin spot on top, splayed over his collar on the sides. His army jacket looked like it hadn’t been washed since the Vietnam war. Who wore rugby shirts anymore? tucked into threadbare jeans? She did like his gold earring: small and simple, with a question-mark curve and an etched design.

Was her heart so shredded, was her betrayed body so starved, that any doofus off the street could get to her?

No. There was something about Alistair Pope—a presence, a magnetism she couldn’t pin down. His eyes? Amused, curious, intelligent, flirtatious. His mouth? Wide and expressive, with a cryptic smile. When he spoke, husky and confiding, you felt he recognized qualities in you that no one else could see.

A big man with strong hands. Wrapped in those arms, you’d feel safe.

No wedding ring. Divorced? Maybe he’d bought the Mercedes to celebrate.

Maybe after lunch—

“Is this fella bothering you, young lady?”

A tall concave presence loomed beside their table. Lydia looked up at an electric shock of ice-white hair and eyebrows over icicle-sharp blue eyes.

Then: “Taste this!” And she and Alistair listened, with suitable expressions of sympathy, to the tale of the traitorous sous-chef.

Across the room, Edgar Rowdey skimmed the Cape Cod Times obituaries. Not (as a reviewer had once speculated) because he made his living from death. Yes, his miniature black-and-white books did follow one odd character after another through a dismal set of perils to a grotesque end. Edgar Rowdey’s interest, however, was not in death per se. What fascinated him was people’s reactions to death.

Take that poor girl last month. DeAnne Ropes.

Local Artist Tragedy, the Times had trumpeted. Even if you’d never actually spoken to her, you could hardly be unmoved. However! *Local artist*? DeAnne had spent one semester taking art classes up in Cambridge before retreating over the bridge. Her job for the retired Broadway-musical team of Song and Penn was to answer their phones, open their mail, make coffee, and

walk their dog, Arson. *Tragedy?* In such a retirement haven as the Cape, perhaps the Times slapped that label on any fatality before age 70. Still! Why not call her death *untimely* or *premature*? Why not *shocking*? There's the film crew waiting for her at the Whistling Pig, toasting the end of their shoot while DeAnne closes the studio, and suddenly medics are rolling her out on a stretcher. What about (for instance) *ironic*? Her parents drag her home to find a suitable job and/or husband, and the Barnstable County medical examiner rewrites her résumé: Caucasian female, age 22, height five four, weight one thirty-nine, hair black, eyes brown, not a virgin but with no recent sexual activity. What about *heartbreaking*? After four months of doing as little work as possible, DeAnne decides to take down a heavy curtain alone, overbalances and crashes to her death.

Carlo Song had looked positively ashen over lunch. The news had spread through Quansett by then; still, everyone at Leo's wanted details. Head first? Died instantly? Damn! Hell of a price to pay for being in a movie. Not even Hollywood, either, just that PBS thing of Al Pope's. Poor kid, couldn't stop talking about it—dreaming of fame, her parents telling Oprah about her childhood while she cruised around in designer gowns and stretch limos.

Carlo's Eggz Bennie congealed untouched on his plate. Caroline Penn had stayed home. Neither of them had slept. Headlights coming and going in the driveway all night. Gusts of blurred music from car radios. Reporters? Rubberneckers? Looking for what? In the morning they found their boxwood hedge abloom with plastic-wrapped bouquets, photos, notes, even teddy bears.

Edgar Rowdey had squelched an impulse to head straight for his drawing room and start a new picturebook: *Alack, A Lass, A Ladder*.

Over the month that followed, he'd watched as—ironically—one after another of DeAnne's dreams came half-true. A candlelight vigil was held outside Carlo and Caroline's studio. News teams from Provincetown to Boston interviewed her parents. So many people attended the funeral that St. Pius X had to open a side room. Before the ceremony, on closed-circuit TV, mourners watched DeAnne's family holidays, school picnics, senior prom, and her brief interview about working for Song and Penn. PBS urged Alistair Pope to include a clip in his documentary, and to wrap in time for their summer pledge drive. The police investigation, which had just wrapped last week, found no evidence that DeAnne Ropes's death could have been anything but a tragic accident.

Nothing in today's obituaries came close.