



GOLD  
FRANKINCENSE  
AND  
MURDER

BARBARA EARLY

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### **Gold, Frankincense, and Murder**

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## Dedication

To Rob, who can now relax knowing why I have all those books on murder.

# 1

Food pantries are lousy places to meet men.

I slammed another dusty can of sauerkraut into the rough wood shelving to punctuate that thought, enjoying the reverberation through the brick storefront. Don't get me wrong. That's not why I volunteered. My days of pining after some testosterone-charged he-god passed a decade or so ago when all my friends married and started having kids. I'd officially become "Aunt Donna," and I was pretty okay with that.

Most of the time.

I had my friends, my students, and my cat. Only my friends were all busy chauffeuring their kids to basketball practice and dance recitals, my students at the high school drove me up the wall, and my black cat was one of those independent sorts, content stalking birds from the window. He rubbed against my leg twice a day when I filled his food dish, and that was pretty much the extent of my physical contact with other living things.

The bell over the door announced our first client of the morning. Linda Bartz blew in with a flurry of snow and stomped her boots into the mat. Linda was a rather matronly African-American woman, not obese exactly, but hippy and big bosomed. Underneath her long red coat, her figure could be perceived as fat. Then again, warm winter outerwear was a great equalizer.

Everyone looked a little plump these days.

I handed her two paper grocery bags.

"One is fine." She shook open the sack in one fluid motion. "I'm getting my paycheck on Wednesday, and the first thing I'm going to do is get me some food that don't come in cans."

One bag was our normal limit, but Linda was the sole provider for three bulky teenage boys. When I'd started at the food pantry, Sandy clued me in. Linda's husband used to gamble away most of the family's budget. When a bus coming back from the casinos in Niagara Falls flipped over almost a decade ago, he had been one of seven passengers killed. Sandy suspected the family might be better off. It didn't seem to work that way, so everybody at Saint Mark's looked the other way. Linda always got two bags.

"What? No more sauerkraut and lima bean casseroles?" I asked. "I tried that recipe you gave me."

"How'd you like it?"

"I've got to hand it to you. It was almost edible."

"That's what my Johnny says. But I've kind of developed a taste for it. Still, I'm looking forward to fresh veggies for a change."

"How do you like the new job?"

"It's awful hard on the feet, but I think I'm going to like the pay. I just gotta get me some shoes that don't come from the thrift store. Maybe some of them fancy orthotics. But whoever heard of waiting a whole month for your first check?"

"Crazy." I watched Linda bag her chosen items with geometric perfection. I'd have to remember that the next time one of my students asked how geometry related to real life. "I'll miss having you around."

"Maybe I'll come and do some volunteering of my

own. It looks like you could use more help.”

“That’d be great. Just talk to Sandy. She arranges the schedule.”

“Gotcha.” She tugged on her gloves. “Now I think I’m going window shopping for them shoes.”

I went back to stocking the shelves with a vengeance, unloading a case of Spam in record speed. “Get out of the house. Volunteer somewhere. Meet people,” my mother said when she called from her Palm Beach condo. It seemed logical. And the Saint Mark’s Community Food Pantry was nearby and familiar. Mom and I stocked our shelves with mac and cheese and peanut butter from their supplies during much leaner times. Besides, there were worse ways to pass a snowy December afternoon in Buffalo than spending a couple of hours giving back. When I met Neal the first day, I thought maybe Mom had been on to something.

I whacked the final can of Spam into the shelving and brushed my hands on my jean skirt. Being hauled out of my warm bed to cover the morning shift in addition to my normal afternoons didn’t make me happy, especially since it meant Neal hadn’t bothered to show up. Again. Last Saturday I’d worried about him. The second week of doing his job and mine transformed my worry to annoyance. And the tinny Christmas music droning from the portable radio did little to get me into the holiday spirit. “Let It Snow.” Yeah, right. That little ditty was obviously written by someone who lived surrounded by palm trees, not snowdrifts tall enough to alter flight patterns.

The next time the bell above the door jangled, a petite blonde pranced in. She wore a form-fitting coat and dainty blue fuzzy earmuffs. “Whew! It’s cold out

there!" At least she appeared blonde. I had doubts. She spotted me behind the counter and her shoulders sagged.

"Good morning," I said, as she leaned in to sign the client sheet, giving me the perfect vantage from which to examine her roots. I was right.

I handed her one bag, and she headed straight to the canned fruit section. I glanced at the name on the sheet. Daphne. Of course, she is.

"We just got in some peaches, Daphne," I called out after her.

"I see them. Thanks." She tossed a few cans into her bag. "Hey, what happened to the guy who's normally here?"

"Neal? I don't know. He's AWOL."

"Hmm." She turned to our meager selection of protein and snagged two cans of tuna. Odd. I would have pegged her as a vegetarian. She must have seen me looking at the cans. "For my cat," she said. "Anyway, I'm a little concerned about Neal. He didn't say anything to *me* about going anywhere. Maybe he's sick or something." She ran a hand through her hair. Static held one strand straight up. I considered telling her, but I enjoyed it too much.

It's not that I had anything against petite, blonde vegetarians in particular. But throughout my life, I'd watched many of my male friends fall head-over-heels for that particular species, only to be dumped for a new flirtation. And then old pal Donna, the gangly brunette with pale blue-gray eyes hidden behind thicker and thicker glasses and no flirtation skills whatsoever, was always right there to help—with the heartbreak and their math homework. At least until the next cute blonde batted her eyelashes. But that was



high school. And college. And grad school. Okay, maybe I did have a problem with petite, blonde vegetarians.

She went on, oblivious to her hair issues. "You know, that nasty flu is going around. Wouldn't that be difficult, don't you think? Being all alone, languishing with some foul disease, and so close to Christmas? Maybe someone should check on him. See if he's all right or if he needs anything. Now, if you were to give me his address..."

"Sorry. It's against policy to give out our volunteers' personal information." I had no idea if we had such a policy, but it seemed like we should. I wondered how many other female clients that morning would be disappointed to see me.

Not that Neal and I had anything exclusive, or even overtly romantic. What we had was canned pears in heavy syrup. He worked the mornings, and I the afternoons; our shifts overlapped by an hour. One day I'd rushed in straight from a conference at the high school. Neal had one foot out the door when my stomach started growling.

"Hungry?" Neal's clear blue eyes crinkled at the corners. I wouldn't call him drop-dead gorgeous. His sandy hair had already started to evacuate from his forehead, and his nose was a tad redder than his face, especially in the winter. But with his contagious smile and charming personality, I had trouble believing he'd made it to forty without marrying.

"No one is allowed to go hungry at Saint Mark's." He gestured toward the stocked shelves. "Look around you."

"I don't have a can opener."

"You don't need one." He went to the fruit section

and pulled out a can with a pop top. "You like pears?"

"I love pears."

"Then lunch is served, mademoiselle." And he winked.

We'd split the can of pears, and from then on I always skipped lunch before coming. Later, I made sandwiches to go with the pears, and we would eat together in the back room. Only rarely did clients interrupt us. We'd become friends. Neal had a gift for parody—a talent for making the world seem as absurd as it often was while still allowing me to laugh at it.

The bell above the door interrupted my recollections, and clients started pouring in. By the time Sandy arrived to help close down for the afternoon, the floor mat was sopping and the aisles drenched. She grabbed a mop while I continued the work at the counter.

"Sorry, Sandy," I said. "We've been swamped all afternoon."

"I can see that. Call if you get overwhelmed, okay? I can run over any time." Sandy was an accomplished woman, slang for old, but with a résumé. She had short, thinning silver hair, and, as usual, wore a vintage polyester pantsuit. A large gold cross hung from her neck. She exuded a grandmotherly aura, but the food pantry was her only baby. I felt badly she'd walked in when it so desperately needed a diaper change.

When five o'clock came, she flipped the closed sign.

"Sandy, someone came by asking about Neal." I forced my voice to sound casual. "Have you been able to get in touch with him?"

"I left a couple messages on his answering

machine, but he hasn't called back." Sandy rubbed a handkerchief along the back of her neck and sighed. "I have a feeling I need to find someone to take over his shift permanently."

"But he seemed happy working here. For him to leave without saying anything—"

"Donna, volunteers quit all the time. And when people leave, they seldom want to be put on the spot to explain why."

"This person asked if she could have his address."

"Let me guess. Daphne?"

I nodded.

"You didn't give it to her, did you? We shouldn't give out that information."

"I couldn't if I wanted to. I'm not sure where he lives." I hesitated while Sandy gathered the paperwork. "But maybe someone should check on him."

Sandy smiled briefly. "Might not be a bad idea. I can pull his address from the personnel files."

I followed Sandy into her tiny square office just behind the counter. She plopped down in her desk chair and pulled open her file drawer, before copying the address in careful, precise script onto a sticky note.

"Thanks." I stuffed the note into my purse. "I'll let you know what I find out. And if he did quit, I may have a lead on someone to take over Neal's shift. Linda Bartz is thinking about volunteering."

"How's that new job of hers coming along?"

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The address Sandy gave me led me to a multi-unit apartment building a few blocks away. I had deduced

it was nearby. Neal always headed home on foot.

I parked my car in the slushy lot and entered the main door. My glasses steamed up, so I pulled them off and waited for them to defog. Clothes tumbled in a dryer nearby, and the pervasive odor of microwave popcorn and anise filled the narrow hallway. I pounded the snow and salt from my boots.

Squinting, I recognized Neal's name scrawled on a piece of tape above one of the mailboxes just inside the door. Apartment 104 was at the back of the hall. A couple weeks of flyers hung from his doorknob in blue plastic bags. Not a good sign.

I raised my hand to knock, but then pulled back. What would I say to Neal? I wouldn't want to appear silly or overbearing.

So I rehearsed several lines.

"Oh hello, Neal. I *really* missed you, so I stopped by to see how you were feeling."

That sounded too desperate.

"Oh hi, Neal." I added a casual wave. "Sandy wanted me to stop by to check on you."

Now, that wasn't exactly true.

"Neal, good to see you. The clients were missing you, so Sandy agreed I should come over to make sure you were all right."

Wordy. And if he asked which clients, I'd rather not bring up Daphne.

I hadn't finished trying various combinations and permutations of lines and gestures when the door swung open. The door across the hall, that is. I whirled around, my hand stuck in mid-wave and my mouth agape.

It remained agape. A totally forgettable man stood in the doorway of apartment 103. I say "forgettable"

because I could forget any chances I had with him, and he could probably forget me while I stood there in front of him.

He wore jeans and a sleeveless tee, washboard abs showing through the thin cotton fabric. His dark hair showed just a touch of gray at his temples. His olive skin glistened and he held a hand weight. With his warm brown eyes and heavy five o'clock shadow, he was calendar art.

I worried my glasses might fog up again.

"Something you need?" he asked. The smell of anise grew stronger, mingled with cinnamon and vanilla.

"I'm looking for Neal... from across the hall. Have you seen him?"

His eyes widened as if noticing the flyers on Neal's door for the first time. He brushed past me and grabbed them from the doorknob. "Neal always tells me if he's going away. We try to keep an eye out for each other. Two single guys, you know?" Goliath pounded on the door. I think the building shook. "Neal?" he called. "Are you in there?"

"He hasn't shown up at the food pantry for two weeks. I...we... were getting concerned."

A buzzer went off in the hulk's apartment.

"Just a sec." He dashed back into his own apartment, leaving the door ajar.

I peeked in. A typical generic living room with white walls and nondescript carpeting greeted me. A black leather loveseat was his only furniture, unless you counted the gym equipment. Total testosterone. Yet when he rounded the corner from the kitchen, he carried, not the dumbbell, but a plate of assorted cookies. He offered me one.

"You bake?" I reached for a delicate rolled cookie dusted with powdered sugar.

"Italian grandmother. She owned a bakery, so we all learned our way around the kitchen. I made my first cannoli when I was three. But it hardly seems like Christmas without cookies, now. Does it?"

I nibbled. Still slightly warm, the morsel melted in my mouth. I found myself melting along with it.

He leaned forward, awaiting my reaction. "Good, huh?"

"Amazing."

"Unfortunately the sugar makes them a bit of a mess to eat." He handed me a napkin, making me wonder just where I was wearing the powdered sugar. "I'd better find that key."

When he excused himself, I found a framed photograph on the wall, and tried to use the glass as a mirror. I brushed some sugar from my upper lip, then focused on the photo behind the glass. A younger, leaner version of the man I'd just met stood clad in a tuxedo, his arm wrapped around the waist of his bride. It figured he was married. And she must be a saint to allow half of their living room to be filled with the gym equipment.

He returned a moment later with a key ring. "Let's see if we can find out what happened, shall we? Oh, by the way, my name's Sam." He winked at me. Patronizing, I assumed.

And then I remembered that he'd said he and Neal tried to look out for each other. "Two single guys." A reflex action caused me to check his ring finger. Empty.

"I'm Donna Russell."

"Oh, yeah. Neal mentioned you before."

"He did?" That sounded hopeful. Not only did

Neal treat me well, but he actually acknowledged my existence to another human being. My hopes of romance were looking up. Now if only I could find him.

“You run the food bank, right?”

Hopes dashed. “Uh, that’s Sandy. I just work with him.”

Sam used the key and entered Neal’s apartment with familiarity. I lingered at the doorway and felt for a light switch along the wall. The light and the foul stench hit my senses at the same time.

“Ugh,” Sam said, gagging. “Smells like something died in here.”

My pulse quickened. That’s exactly what it smelled like.

## 2

Neal's apartment was the mirror image of Sam's, and he and I quickly surveyed each room. The living room was furnished in a funky '80s retro style, that impression due mainly to the vintage couch, a teal and fuchsia monstrosity that somehow invoked an image of cotton candy. Yes, it was odd, but so were the 1980s.

Dishes lined the kitchen sink. There was one bedroom complete with unmade bed. The bathroom was cluttered, but as bachelor bathrooms go, not the worst I'd seen. Nobody home—but thankfully no *body* either.

I followed my nose back to the kitchen and lifted the garbage can lid. Chicken wing bones.

"Let me run that to the dumpster." Sam twisted the bag shut, and holding it at full arm's length, left the apartment.

I rummaged around the kitchen. A coffee mug in the sink had sprouted a healthy growth of mold. An answering machine mounted near the wall phone blinked the number nine.

I opened his refrigerator—not much inside. The milk had passed its expiration date. A partial pack of bacon had turned from pink to brown without the benefit of a trip to the stove.

I wandered back into the living room, pushed aside the beige thermal curtains, and slid the window



open to let in some fresh air. The air currents rustled a newspaper on the glass end table and sent it sliding to the carpet. Picking it up, I checked the date: the previous Saturday.

Sam came back in, rosy-cheeked, rubbing his arms to warm them. He glanced up at the curtains bobbing in the open window. "I should grab a shirt, I guess." All good things must end.

As he stepped out, I spied a small key hanging from a peg near the door. I took it down the hall and tried Neal's mailbox. Jammed at first, the door swung open with some effort. A card from the post office saying his mail would be held until he emptied his box was on top of a pile of battered envelopes and coupon flyers.

I returned the key before plopping on the couch and thumbing through the envelopes. Mostly junk mail, a few bills, and something that looked like one of those computerized paychecks. The sender, a large health care chain, ran a nursing home a couple of blocks away.

Sam returned, buttoning up a red flannel shirt. He now resembled the lumberjack from that paper towel commercial. "Did he leave a note or anything?"

"Not that I see. He left here last Saturday, but he wasn't planning to be gone long."

"How can you tell?" Sam sat next to me, picking through the mail I'd set aside.

"He left dishes in the sink. Food in the refrigerator. He didn't take out his garbage, and he didn't have his mail held."

Sam raised his eyebrows. His brown eyes twinkled. And he had those same eye crinkles Neal had. Why did I find what were basically wrinkles so

attractive?

"Are you some kind of detective or something?" he asked.

"No, just a lowly geometry teacher."

"Ah." That was the usual comment. "Geometry was never my strong suit." That was the usual corollary.

But a love of mathematics wasn't something I required in a guy, anyway. I mean, unless you long for a romantic evening bisecting angles by candlelight, or discussing pi over pie, I found it irrelevant. Don't tell my students I said that.

But I felt a prick at my conscience. Here I was, practically drooling over this hunky next-door neighbor, a possibly *married* next-door neighbor, and Neal, whom I'd shared some significant...pears with, was missing.

Prying my eyes from Sam's, I walked toward the kitchen. "Neal has messages on his answering machine, but I don't think he'd like it if—"

"Only one way to find out if there's something important there." Sam pressed the button.

I focused on a speck on the worn linoleum floor to help me concentrate as we listened to all nine messages. An automated telemarketer was followed by three hang-ups and four calls from the nursing home—the first of which asked if Neal planned to come to work. The messages progressed in intensity until the fourth told him not to show up unless he had a good reason for ignoring the first three. It included a choice expletive or two. Or five.

The final message was short and sweet. A woman's voice said, "Neal, call your mother. I need to know if you're coming for Christmas."

I pulled a red pen and an old grocery list from my purse and copied the number from the caller I.D.

When I glanced up, Sam's eyes met mine. For some reason, my cheeks grew hot.

"What do you think, Columbo?" Sam leaned against the counter. "Should we call the police or something?"

"I'm not sure what to think. I don't see anything definite here. No signs of violence. No threats."

"So what's the next step?"

"I might call the nursing home to see if he ever contacted them, and then maybe the local hospitals. Perhaps he became ill or had some kind of accident. I'll try to learn a little more before calling his mother. Why worry her unnecessarily?"

"That's good thinking," he said. "Neal is lucky to have a friend like you."

I had just a moment to look up into his concerned brown eyes before Sam wrapped his burly arms around me, pulling me tightly to him in an unexpected hug.

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A dull, gray twilight spanned the sky by the time I wound my way home. Still, I enjoyed the illuminated snowflake decorations hanging from the telephone poles, the cacophony of blinking lights, and the humongous inflated decorations my old neighborhood had sprouted. A cellophane-covered plate of cookies sat on the passenger seat. Most of them survived the trip.

I straightened the crumpled ribbon of the wreath hanging on the door of my yellow Cape Cod, and

entered.

After changing into my warmest sweats, I zapped a mug of instant hot cocoa before collapsing on the couch. The LED lights on my artificial tree were aglow and twinkling, but I didn't feel exactly jolly. Actually, the branches were moving. My bruiser of a cat, Soot, lay on the tree skirt, batting the lower ornaments with his paw.

Closing my eyes for a few minutes, I reflected on the day. Perhaps I overreacted about Neal. Could he have taken an extended Christmas vacation and forgotten to notify the food bank? But surely he would notify his employer.

Perhaps he was out of town interviewing for a better job. Or maybe there was a woman. I bit my lower lip. Still, there were no feminine touches in his apartment. Any woman in her right mind and without any serious visual impairment would have hauled that sofa to the curb the instant she entered.

I replayed the search through Neal's apartment, trying to draw new inferences from what I had seen. Then the memory of Sam's embrace popped into my mind, the strength of his arms and the warmth and softness of his flannel-clad chest against my cheek. But there was still that matter of the "single guy" with wedding photos to clear up. Divorced maybe? But why keep the photos on the wall?

I mentally slapped myself. I had no business drooling over some beefy gorilla, probably on steroids, even if he held the title of Grandmaster of the Snickerdoodle. Neal was missing. And Neal was my friend.

The thought of calling the hospitals made my stomach tighten. I didn't want to find him sick or

injured somewhere, or worse. I just wanted to share a can of pears and have everything back to normal. Back to being friends, and no more. I realized that after meeting Sam. I'd felt more sparks of attraction to that big lug within moments of meeting him than I had for Neal after conversing with him for weeks. Odd, the way that works. And disturbingly illogical.

After draining my mug, I popped a frozen pizza into the toaster oven, then grabbed the cordless phone. Dialing the nursing home first, I asked for Neal. Learning he no longer worked there, I asked for Neal's supervisor. The switchboard operator said he was off-duty, but I could leave a voicemail.

"But if you're a friend of Neal's, I'd be careful. MacMahon is still hot under the collar over Neal leaving him in the lurch."

"So as far as you know, Neal never called in or returned his messages?"

"No, and that doesn't seem like him. I mean, if it were someone else, I might not think anything of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." She lowered her voice. "This is not always the easiest place to make a living, you know? Kind of depressing, really. You see some of these older folk sitting here in their own urine, with hardly a visitor, and you begin to feel sorry for them. It gets you thinking about what will happen when you get old. It's no wonder people come in a little hung over sometimes. If they come in at all.

"But not Neal. He never partied at the bars with the others, and I can't remember the last time he missed a day. And he'd do his best, you know? He was just an aide, but he'd get those old folks talking and laughing. I think he did more good for them than that