

CHAPTER ONE



TONGUE AND GROOVE

Under ordinary circumstances, I could ring a doorbell as well as anyone. Nothing to it—one push, mission accomplished.

But not that Sunday afternoon on Perry Terrace. My hands had begun to tremble when I'd boarded the downtown R train at Astor Place, and they were fluttering like hummingbirds by the time I arrived at Bay Ridge Avenue a seemingly endless nineteen stops and forty minutes later. I poked at the bell multiple times, jabbing and missing, jabbing and missing, like a cyclops devoid of depth perception.

Not to mention common sense. I was taking a risk just by being there. But there was where I was, standing on the threshold of the “3BR, 2B, spac liv rm w/ det gar!” on Perry Terrace, about to take the grand tour.

If I could just manage to make contact with the damn doorbell and gain access.

Not that I had any intention of relocating to Brooklyn, any more than I was attending Bay Realty's Sunday afternoon open house in order to check out the property on Perry Terrace. I was there to check out the real estate agent, Renée Devine—who happened to be the daughter of the former love of my life.

As I could have predicted, my risk-averse best friend deemed my fact-finding mission a singularly boneheaded idea when I'd mentioned it during our regular morning phone call.

"Renée Devine is going to take one look at you and rip your face clean off," Elinor Ann said.

"That's not going to happen. She won't even recognize me. We met only once, for maybe ten seconds, when she was barely a teenager. Don't forget—I haven't seen her father for twenty years." Twenty-one years, to be precise. Literally half my lifetime. Long enough, one would think, for me to forget all about Ray Devine. Long enough, one would hope, for Ray Devine's daughter to forget all about me. "I figure she'll be so busy extolling the virtues of the spacious living room or the detached garage that I'll be lucky to get five minutes with her." Which was all the time I needed, I calculated, to discover her father's whereabouts.

"Funny; a detached garage would be a drawback in Pennsylvania. Too far to lug the groceries—especially in winter. You city folk can be so backward."

"Oh, please. You hayseeds out there in Kutztown have detached garages all over the place. You just don't call them garages. You call them barns, and you park your tractors in them." I love Elinor Ann, my best friend ever since we were thirteen and sharing a bunk bed at summer camp. We have absolutely nothing in common. Luckily for her.

"And another thing," she said. "Even if Renée Devine doesn't recognize your face, don't you think your name might jog her memory?"

This was a strong possibility. Based on what Ray used to tell me, Renée's mother, Rhea, invoked my name with great frequency in those days. Evidently she was given to hollering, "You're having an affair with Dana Mayo, you bastard!" every time he'd arrive home late from work, which was pretty much every night, all winter long and well into the spring, twenty-one years ago.

But it was a possibility that had already occurred to me, which was why I would be attending Bay Realty's Sunday afternoon open house under an alias and in partial disguise.

"Simone Saint James," I introduced myself, presenting one of the business cards I'd designed on my computer the previous afternoon. They'd turned out great. Renée Devine would never suspect I wasn't a canine behaviorist—unless one of the other prospective buyers showed up with an out-of-control mongrel, or the card somehow got wet and smeared ink-jet toner all over her white cashmere turtleneck.

Renée Devine had turned out great as well, which in my experience isn't always the case with the daughters of handsome men. But Ray's strong features were softer on her, and she'd been lucky enough to inherit his perfect, pearly teeth, and his wavy, sandy brown hair, and—

Oh man, I thought, frozen in place in the hallway. *I'm still hung up on this girl's father—so much so that now she's even starting to look good to me.* And I'm straight. Really straight. Elinor Ann had been right all along. No good could come from this mission. I should have stayed home on East Ninth Street with the Sunday *Times*. I'd have finished both the regular and the diagramless puzzles by now. *And* avoided being ambushed by memories of my first love and his perfect, pearly teeth, and his wavy, sandy brown hair.

My own wavy, dark brown hair was stuffed underneath a wool newsboy cap, concealing my most distinguishing feature. Bloodred lipstick, a shade I'd ordinarily dismiss as overly drag queen—esque, turned my mouth into a Pop Art cartoon. Black-framed reading glasses, which I'd recently been forced to purchase in order to distinguish between the sixes and the eights in crossword squares, completed the masquerade. Ray's daughter would never associate this exotic (if I did say so myself) stranger with the dreaded Dana Mayo, besmircher of her father's good name.

“So happy you could make it!” Renée smiled, then wrinkled her exquisite nose and rolled her sparkling blue eyes toward the staircase leading to the second floor. “The homeowners have requested that we all remove our shoes before touring the interior. New white carpeting in the bedrooms.” She led me to a lineup of footwear in the foyer. Still in a bit of a daze, I managed to tug off my boots and add them to the row.

“Note the sunken living room,” she said, indicating the space with a practiced sweep of her right arm. She pointed in the direction of her stocking feet. “And these would be the tongue-and-groove floors I mentioned in the Web listing.”

Oh they would, would they now? I thought, suppressing a smirk. I couldn’t help myself. Hoity-toity figures of speech unleash the inner snob in me. So do errors in spelling and punctuation. In fact, my inner snob had been having a field day with Renée Devine for the better part of a week, because she hadn’t merely covered the specs of the house in her Web listing, but had gone on to describe the neighborhood [sic] she’d been born and raised in as having it’s [sic] own unique flavor, with the added bonus of highly rated school’s [sic].

A couple emerged from the kitchen with questions about the appliances.

“Mr. and Mrs. Voronokova,” Renée introduced them. “From Russia.”

“Belarus,” the wife corrected, with a look that made it obvious that referring to a Belarusian as a Russian was akin to mistaking a Puerto Rican for a Dominican in my part of town.

“But now we liff Brighton Beach,” the husband added. I pegged them as likely claimants to the spike-heeled alligator slingbacks and the slip-on Gucci knockoffs on display in the foyer. Overhead, a robust temper tantrum, accompanied by desperate shushing sounds, explained the Three-Bears-like row of Adidas lying nearby. The pale pink suede Uggs, therefore, must belong to Renée.

After a brief conference about the age of the refrigerator, the Brighton

Beach Belarusians returned to the kitchen, and I took a deep, steadying breath. “You know, Ms. Devine—”

“Please—Renée.”

“Renée. It’s just—well, I realize ‘Devine’ is probably an awfully common surname, but—”

She laughed. “There must be a million of us in this borough alone.”

Talk about an understatement. I’d hit what seemed like at least that many dead ends searching for her father on the Internet before thinking to search for his offspring instead. It wasn’t until I’d googled “Renée” plus “Devine” plus “Bay” plus “Ridge” plus “Brooklyn” that I’d finally happened upon the right picture of the almost-right face. “It’s just—I was wondering . . . Well, twenty or so years ago, I was the manager of a little dress shop in SoHo. It was right next door to an art gallery. . . .”

“Prints on Prince! Oh my god! My folks worked there! Ray and Rhea!”

I’d been employed by the gallery as well, but I didn’t want her putting two and two together, which explained the bogus career in fashion administration at the boutique next door. “I was sure I noticed a family resemblance. You’re a dead ringer for your mother.”—*Not*, I silently added.

“Funny, most people think I look just like my dad. He’s the one who actually worked in the store; Mom was one of their printmakers. She’s still at it, as a matter of fact. Has a gallery up on Fifty-seventh Street showing her work, and she’s still teaching lithography over at Queens College.”

“Terrific.” *And what’s Dad up to these days?!!! What what what what what???* I silently added.

She grinned. “You’re not going to believe this, but Mom remarried a couple of years back. To a guy named Sam Polster.” She paused to let the effect of her words sink in. “I mean, isn’t that a scream? Her new name is Rhea Polster!”

I'd figured that out already, and of course I saw the humor in it, but I was much too close to my ultimate goal to offer more than a polite chuckle. Besides, I had become understandably fixated on the word "re-married." "Oh. Uh . . . I'm sorry, but I had no idea. And, uh . . . well, I don't mean to be intrusive, but, uh . . . when did your parents divorce?"

"Oh. Uh . . . they didn't. Dad is, uh . . . no longer with us."

As soon as she spoke the words, I knew I was doomed. Not because Ray was dead—which was undeniably traumatic in its own right—but because of my lifelong inability to handle life's curveballs.

The thing is, I suffer from a supremely embarrassing condition, one that's as uncontrollable as it is unseemly. A condition I would go so far as to call my *bête noire*. A condition that would certainly cause Renée Devine to declare herself my lifelong enemy from that awful day forward.

I must have turned whiter than the new bedroom carpeting, because she laid a steadying hand on my shoulder. "Simone? Simone? Are you all right? *Simone!*"

For a split second, I thought there was literally such a thing as the Twilight Zone and that I'd crossed over to it, but then I remembered that *I* was Simone and finally managed to snap out of my stupor.

Big mistake.

I burst out laughing.

According to the psychotherapist I once consulted out of utter desperation, reacting to tragedy with a show of hilarity is not as unusual a response as one might imagine. Unfortunately, there's no official name for the syndrome; no way for the sufferer to gasp the words, "I'm a victim of Rabelaisian-Inversion-Disorder, or RID, and I'm in the throes of an attack!" and reap sudden sympathy from formerly outraged bystanders. Instead, one is forced to simply stand there and endure all manner of shocked and withering gazes, all the while convulsed in helpless paroxysms of mirth. To call it mortifying would be a raging understatement. At that moment, all I wanted to do was sink deep down into the living

room floorboards and take up permanent residence there, in between the tongues and the grooves.

Renée froze, staring at me with the expected shocked, withering gaze, while I tried to compose myself.

“My god,” I finally managed. “I am so, *so* sorry to hearrrr . . . *bwah hab hab hab hab hab!*”

This encounter was *so* not going the way I’d imagined it would while riding the R train.

Meanwhile, Ray Devine was dead, as in No Longer of This Earth. The demigod to whom I’d pledged my undying love day after day, month after month. The archetype to whom I’d compared all my subsequent boyfriends, none of whom had measured up. No one would ever love me the way Ray Devine had loved me, and now he was dead.

And pretty soon I would be, too, judging by the look I was getting from his daughter.

Eventually Mrs. Belarus came to my rescue, bringing a glass of water from the kitchen. I would have kissed her, but I was clenching my jaw too hard to form a pucker. After I’d choked down a couple of swallows, I managed to get myself under control and find my voice.

But now that I’d found it, the challenge lay in what to do with it—a challenge I failed miserably.

“Rhea Polster,” I croaked. “That’s just about the funniest thing I’ve ever heard. I mean, what are the odds?”

Renée looked at me as if we’d just arrived at the prom wearing identical gowns.

“Guess it’s time to be going,” I said, gauging the distance from my spot in the sunken living room to the front door. I estimated it to be, oh, about seven hundred miles or so.

The sound of voices at the top of the stairs signaled that now was the optimal time to flee the premises. Not only would the Adidas family

create a diversion, but Renée would be less likely to strangle me in the presence of additional witnesses. With a nod to Mr. and Mrs. Belarus and a tight-lipped smile for my would-be real estate agent, I headed toward the foyer, and freedom.

A young couple, writhing toddler in tow, reached the bottom of the landing just as I was stepping into my second boot.

“They did a fabulous job on those upstairs bedrooms,” Mrs. Adidas said. “Aren’t you going up there to have a look?”

“No, I—I—I—”

She peered at me more closely. “Ma’am? Are you all right?”

Of course I wasn’t all right. Ray Devine was dead. Plus the bitch had called me ma’am.

I didn’t respond in words, but she got her answer anyway—in stunning fashion. I bent over and, in one interminable instant, unleashed a torrent of puke, the bulk of which landed directly inside Renée Devine’s pale pink suede Uggs.

“Ugh,” said the toddler.