

A M Y S T E R Y

CATERING TO NOBODY

"Delicious...

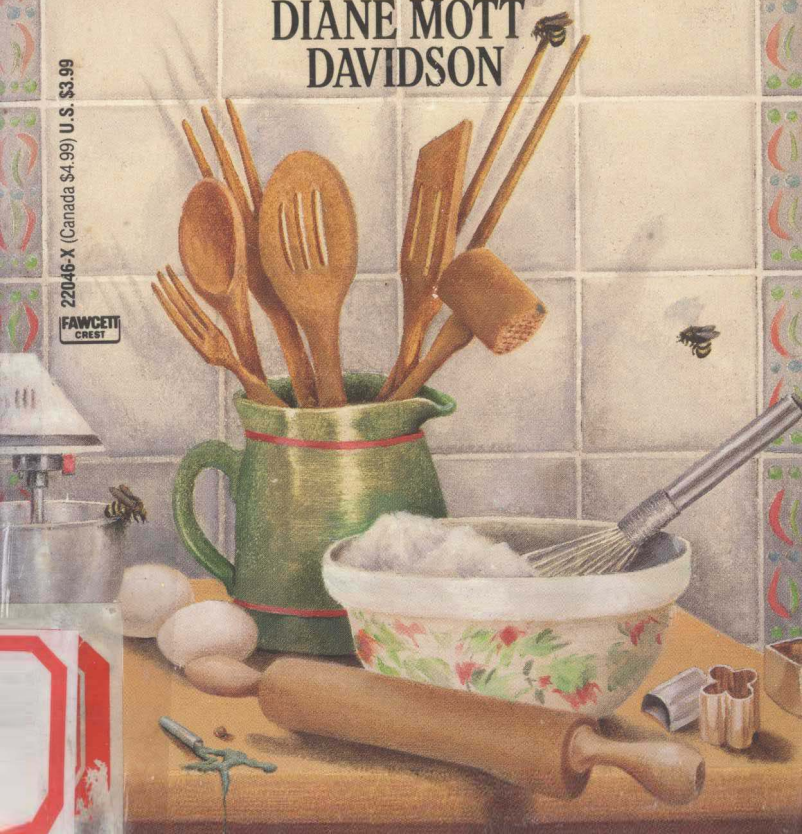
Clever, well-constructed,
with an engaging cast of
characters...Sure to satisfy."

SUE GRAFTON

DIANE MOTT
DAVIDSON

22046-X (Canada \$4.99) U.S. \$3.99

FAWCETT
CREST



CATERING
TO NOBODY

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

Diane Mott Davidson

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as "unsold or destroyed" and neither the author nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

A Fawcett Crest Book

Published by Ballantine Books

Copyright © 1990 by Diane Mott Davidson

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and places are fictitious or are used fictitiously. The characters are products of the author's imagination and do not represent any actual persons.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 89-78086

ISBN 0-449-22046-X

This edition published by arrangement with St. Martin's Press, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: October 1992

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the following people: Jim Davidson; Jeffrey Davidson; Sandra Dijkstra; Katherine Goodwin; John William Schenk, J. William's Catering, Bergen Park, Colorado; John B. Newkirk, D.Sc.; William Harbridge; Charles Blakeslee; Emerson Harvey, M.D.; John Hutto, M.D.; Alan Rapaport, M.D.; Doug Palczynski, R.Ph.; Deidre Elliot, Karen Sbrockey, and Elizabeth Green; Kitty Hirs and the writing group that assembled at her house; and Investigator Richard Millsapps, Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, Golden, Colorado.

GOLD BUFFET FOR FORTY

Poached salmon

Mayonnaise mixed with wild Maine blueberries

Asparagus vinaigrette with minced tomatoes

Wild rice salad

Herb rolls and honey muffins

Strawberry shortcake buffet

Vouvray, lemonade, coffee and tea

John Richard started screaming as soon as he saw me.

“You did this, you bitch! You poisoned my father!”

At first, I thought some kind of shock had made John Richard accuse me. What was worse, debonair, ever-in-control Fritz was not getting any better. Someone was phoning for help; others were applying damp cloths and asking questions. Was it the mayonnaise, the cream, the fish?

I herded Arch back to the kitchen, found the pack of Kools, and smoked one after another. When my ex-husband had left, I went back into the other room. What could he possibly have told the police? Would they believe that I was trying to poison anyone? I, who had, earlier in the afternoon, tried to keep an abusive ex-husband from suffering an allergic reaction to tomatoes? Would they believe me, a caterer? Or would they believe him, a doctor?

I wondered what the food would be like in jail.

1

Catering a wake was not my idea of fun.

First of all, there was the short notice. A person died. Three days later there was a funeral. In this case the body had been discovered on a Monday, autopsy Tuesday, funeral Saturday, seven days after the presumed day of death. In Colorado we didn't call the buffet after the funeral a wake. But whether you called it a reception or coming over for a bite to eat afterward, it still meant food for forty mourners.

I dumped a mound of risen dough as soft as flesh onto the oak countertop. Eating, I reflected, was a way of denying death.

I had known her. I did not want to think about it now. My fingers modeled soft dough around dill sprigs, then dropped the little rolls onto a baking sheet, where they looked like rows of miniature green-and-white sofa pillows. This was the last two dozen. I rubbed bits of yeasty mixture off my hands and let cold water gush over them.

A professional caterer has to keep her mind on the job, not the reason for the job. October was generally a slow month for parties in Aspen Meadow. Despite the fact that Goldilocks' Catering, Where Everything Is Just Right! provided the town's only professional food service, making a living here was always a precarious enterprise. Like it or not, I needed the income from this postfuneral meal.

Still. I would rather have had Laura Smiley alive. She had been Arch's fifth-grade teacher last year. She also had taught him third, when he was recovering from the divorce. They had become special friends, had worked on games and out-

door projects. They had written letters over the summers. I could picture Laura Smiley with my son, her arm around his slender shoulders, her cascade of brown-blond curls just touching the top of his head.

Psychologists and social workers had come into the elementary school to work with the students after the news of Ms. Smiley's death broke on Monday. Arch had not spoken much about it. I did not know what the counselors had said to him, nor he to them. All during the week he had come home from school, taken snack food into his room, and closed the door. Sometimes I could hear him on the phone, acting as dungeon master or playing television trivia games. Perhaps losing Ms. Smiley was not much on his mind. It was hard to tell.

But now because of her death we had this job, which would help pay the bills for October. Laura Smiley's aunt from Illinois, acting in place of parents long dead, had ordered the food and sent me an express mail cheque for eight hundred dollars. This covered my second problem, usually my first, and that was *money*.

Above the steel hand-washing sink, one of several required by the county for commercial food service, the booking calendar showed only two parties between tomorrow, October tenth, and the thirty-first. Clearing four hundred dollars on each of those plus four hundred for tomorrow's buffet would take us to the Halloween-to-Christmas season, where I made almost enough money to get Arch and me through May. Long ago I had learned to stop depending on regular child support payments from Arch's father, even if he did have an ob-gyn practice with as dependable an income as procreation. The payments were invariably wrong and invariably late. But arguments between us were bad for Arch and dangerous for me. Peace was worth a lower income. I stared grimly at the calendar. Lots of parties between Halloween and Christmas. That was the ticket to financial security.

Problem number three after short notice and money was getting all the supplies for a job. My food supplier was doing

an extra run for me because she too had known the financial strains of single motherhood. Her truck was supposed to be rumbling up from Denver right now bringing a salmon and out-of-season asparagus and strawberries. After she delivered them, she'd give me a lecture on going out. She'd say, It's not that tough to have fun.

But tough was like a roll in the microwave. I didn't have time for a harangue about my social life because in addition to needing the supplies, I'd just used the last of the honey to make the rolls. This meant the muffins were on hold. The local honey supplier was a handsome fellow named Pomeroy, lusted after by every unattached woman in the county, a fact my supplier usually did not fail to mention. Unfortunately Pomeroy had said he wouldn't be able to get over for a while to resupply my stock. The unusually warm weather had brought out a predator that had raided one of the hives. And he had his hands full.

Of what, I had wanted to say, but hadn't. Sugar would do for the muffins.

The phone rang.

"Goldilocks' Catering," I said into the receiver, "where everything is just—"

"Spare me the greeting, Goldy," came the voice of Alicia, my supplier. "I called Northwest Seafood. Fish's all yours."

"You're great."

She mm-hmmed and then said nothing.

I said, "What is it?"

"How well did you know this Laura?"

"She was Arch's teacher. For a couple of grades."

"Young?"

"Early forties," I said. "She acted young." I paused. "I knew her."

She grunted and said she would be up in an hour.

I opened the refrigerator, a walk-in needed for the business. John Richard Korman, my ex-husband, had found the cost of this item ridiculous. Ditto the van and the required new sinks and shelves to store food above insect level. Other

purchases out of my sixty-thousand-dollar divorce settlement had included a six-burner stove, extra oven and freezer, and enough cooking equipment to outfit Sears. Retrofitting our old house off Aspen Meadow's Main Street had not been terribly difficult.

What *had* been difficult was hanging up on John Richard's alternately shrieking and pleading voice, and then finally getting the locks changed when he had shown up repeatedly to do one of two things. At first, even though we were separated, he would try to seduce me. Sometimes successfully, I was ashamed to admit. Or he would start a fight to demonstrate his opposition to my financial independence. And by *demonstrate*, I don't mean like Gandhi.

In the walk-in I reached for the butter, eggs, and cream. I backed out and whacked the door with my foot, then regarded my balancing act in the mirror-black surface. Blond curly hair. Freckles on a face unbruised for three years. Brown eyes. These stared back at me, saying, Don't think about it now, just cook. At thirty I was doing okay, single but with good friends, and only slightly pudgy from all the fancy cooking that made the living for Arch and me.

But I was preparing a wake for someone I'd known. Early forties. Also single. Had been.

For the dessert shortcakes I used an old trick: make giant scones. Another thing I'd learned in this business: involve the clients with the food. Make the spread good to look at, smell, touch, taste. Gauge action by needs. At a bridal shower, don't give the guests much to do with the food since they're already involved with the presents. But keeping people active at a wake was essential. Being busy, like working, allayed grief. By splitting cakes and heaping on berries and cream, the mourners could start to get their minds off death.

Getting one's mind off it. Not easy.

Laura had smiled broadly and flourished papers with Arch's drawings of mountain wildlife at our parent conferences, which I'd always attended alone, as John Richard couldn't be bothered. Arch is so talented, Laura had said,

one of the most unusual students I've ever had. It's too bad he doesn't have more friends.

The food processor blade whirled and bit through the butter and flour. Soon the kitchen would smell divine. Arch could have a hot scone when he came in from school. Maybe he would eat it in the kitchen instead of heading off to his room.

The phone rang again.

"Goldilocks"—"I began, but was interrupted.

"Shut up, it's me!" shouted Marla Korman, John Richard's other ex-wife, now a good friend of mine. "Arch home yet?"

I strained to see out the window that overlooked Main Street, then listened for the bus. Yellow aspen leaves as bright as lemon disks shook in the warm breeze. No children's shouts announced the bus's afternoon rounds. Instead there was only the roar of a motorcycle and the rushing sound of Cottonwood Creek, already frigid with October snow melt from the high mountains.

I said, "Not yet. Ten minutes or so."

"I've been shopping," Marla said, "because I don't want to think about Laura. The stores are empty now that the tourists have gone. They didn't leave much."

"Maybe we didn't have much in the first place," I said.

"*This place*," wailed Marla.

I poured a cup of coffee and steeled myself for the coming barrage of complaints. The town would be the warm-up for the ex-husband.

She said, "How demoralizing to live in a terminally quaint western village."

I made sympathetic noises.

"Of course, I don't know why I would need a size sixteen cowgirl dress anyway," Marla complained, "since I'm not coming to this shindig tomorrow. The Jerk's going to be there, isn't he?"

"He certainly is," I said. "But I'm leaving the rolling pin at home."

Bad joke, but we chuckled anyway. The Jerk was what

Marla had dubbed our mutual ex, for his personality and his initials, J.R.K. Marla so intensely disliked seeing John Richard that it was hard to understand why she talked about him so much. Seven months after my divorce was final, John Richard ended a fling with a married woman who sang in the church choir and wedded Marla's bulk and wealth. They were divorced fifteen months later and she and I promptly became partners in anger. But before that point Marla's disgust with his extramarital antics had ballooned her up another thirty pounds, weight she'd used to good advantage when he came at her with a rolling pin. She had managed to heave him into a hanging plant, dislocating his shoulder.

I looked down at my left thumb, which still would not bend properly after John Richard had broken it in three places with a hammer.

"That rolling pin," Marla was saying between giggles, "that damn rolling pin. You could use it to fix him green tomato pie."

Without thinking, I looked at the menu. Tomatoes. Damn. Amid all the other grouching he had done, John Richard had been at pains to remind me of his allergies to chocolate and tomatoes. I was planning to mince some of the latter and sprinkle the red bits on the asparagus vinaigrette, for color. John Richard would have to get mushrooms if I didn't want to make him sick. Oh, I thought as I poured my coffee down the sink and finished mixing the scones, the adjustments we make after divorce.

Marla had stopped laughing. "I have news," she announced. "He's bringing his new girlfriend . . ."

I shook my head and began to spoon mounds of batter onto cookie sheets.

"Think of it," Marla went on, "you could poison both of them."

"Wouldn't you just love that," I muttered.

"On second thought, maybe one death is enough for a while," said Marla. "Since the funeral's tomorrow, I guess our women's group won't meet tonight."

"I'm swamped," I said truthfully. "How about later in the month?"

"Don't know if I can wait that long. I need to order some cookies."

I said, "Can we talk about it later? I'm awful busy right now." I wedged the phone between my chin and shoulder and scraped the last of the scone-shortcake batter out. It made a sucking noise before plopping on the sheet.

"The cookies can wait. My pantries are full, anyway. You're getting upset because we've been talking about you-know-who. Sorry."

"Not to worry," I said. "If I hadn't wanted a family so badly, I'd never have made the mistake of marrying him in the first place."

Marla sighed. "Oh God, think of Laura. She didn't even have the chance to get married."

I checked inside the proofing box; the dill rolls had risen. I snapped the other oven button to Preheat.

I said, "I am thinking about it. I am thinking about her. I'm fixing all the food, aren't I?"

"Where's your housemate? What's her name, Patty Sue? Can't she help you? What about Arch? You going to draft him to serve?"

"Patty Sue will help tomorrow," I said. "She's at the doctor now. Korman senior. Arch is going to have to help. I hate to do that to him since he was so close to Laura. Plus the aunt decided to have this reception over at Laura's house, all the worse. Just a sec." I grunted. I was thrusting my free hand through my dry goods shelves. "Oh my God," I said, "I've let my supplies get too low, even if this is the slow season. I'm out of honey *and* sugar."

"No honey and no sugar," observed Marla. "You're not doing very well. And as Laura would have said, you're not acting too *sweet* either, Goldy. I'll call when you're in a better mood. Let me know how the *affair* goes." She suppressed a laugh. "Laura would think it was all a big joke, you know. She'd say, Man, this party is *dead*."

"Goodbye, Marla."

The front door swept open and let in a gust of aspen-sweet October air. Arch traipsed into the kitchen and threw his backpack onto one of the counters before heading for the refrigerator.

I said, "How'd it go today?"

He groaned. "Terrible. As usual."

He turned his small, earnest eleven-year-old face full of freckles and brown hair and tortoise-shell glasses to me.

He said, "Larry and Sean attacked me. They said I was stupid for still going around on Halloween. They say I'm stupid about everything, and they're the ones. Halloween isn't even here yet!" He shook his head, disgusted. "They said it was like believing in Santa Claus. Look, they tore my shirt." He fingered a rip in the blue-and-red flannel.

"Hmm."

He gave me a grim look. "And don't tell me all that stuff about turning the other cheek because I already tried that and it doesn't work. I'm going to have to think of something else."

I said, "Sorry. Want a hot biscuit in two minutes?"

"Can't." His voice wrapped around the open refrigerator door. "Todd's calling as soon as he gets home. We're doing a role-playing game and then TV trivia. I've been reading a book about the old shows all week." He emerged clutching a pitcher of peppermint tea, his favorite. "Don't worry. I'll use the other phone line in case any clients call in."

He smiled, and I wanted to hug him, ripped plaid shirt and all. But he was at the age where this made him uncomfortable, so I just lifted one eyebrow at the tea.

"You use the last of my sugar in that?"

"I had to use something," he said in defense. "I needed it."

I shook my head and began to mince leeks for the wild rice salad. The rich scent of baking scones filled the kitchen. Arch loaded a plate with oatmeal cookies, a sure sign he was not going to stay and chat.

"Listen up," I said. "You remember I need you to help tomorrow?" He nodded. "Your job now, please," I went on

as I handed him two dollar bills, "is to pop on down to the convenience store and get me another bag of sugar. And don't open it for a sweet fix on the way home. I have to have it for the muffins and strawberries and lemonade."

He groaned dramatically and clomped out, yelling something over his shoulder about Todd calling back in half an hour.

I washed the food processor and started on the mayonnaise. When Todd rang I gave him the message. Halfway through drizzling in the olive oil for the mayo, Alicia banged through the front door. With all the interruptions I'd be lucky not to end up mixing vinegar into the whipped cream.

"Let's put it on the counter," I yelled over the buzzing and gulping of the processor.

We heaved a Styrofoam box up next to the mountain of chopped vegetables for the salad. Inside would be the salmon, wrapped in plastic and packed in ice. I planned to poach it that night and slice the strawberries, whip the cream, and make the lemonade all in the morning. Laura's aunt was providing the Vouvray and dishes. I was bringing the cups. Arch and Patty Sue, who had lived with us for two months, would help serve, and we would get through this.

"That's it," said Alicia after she'd downed the scone I'd offered. "How's your love life?"

"No news that's fit to print."

She eyed me. "Something you're not telling me?"

I said, "Maybe." In a gossipy small town one does not discuss one's social hopes. "Don't worry," I said. "I'll get out eventually." She sighed and left.

The silvery salmon slapped my hands as I rinsed it and wrapped it in muslin. It too had been dedicated to mating and spawning and look at how far *it* had gotten.

Arch marched in and lobbed a two-pound bag of sugar onto a chair before heading for the phone in his room. The opened bag snowed part of its contents onto the kitchen floor.

"The Television Trivia Championship is at hand," Arch, ignorant of his mess, hollered over his shoulder.

The rolls enveloped the kitchen with the smell of dill. In

a large ceramic bowl I sloshed oil and egg and sugar for the muffins and was about to add the flour when my business line rang again.

“Goldilocks’ Catering—”

“Stop.”

Marla again. I began to measure the flour into the bowl, but some blew up my nose and onto the floor on top of the sugar. New powder on top of packed powder. Soon we could ski in the kitchen.

“What now?” I said.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t heard the *latest*.”

“How could I? I just talked to you within the last hour.”

“*He is marrying this girl.*”

I set the bowl down.

“Goldy, did you hear me?”

I reached for the mushrooms.

“Goldy, do you believe this?”

I said, “Hmm.”

“Well, my dear,” she demanded shrilly, “what are we going to do?”

“Feel sorry for her. Not give tomatoes to him,” I answered as I began to mince.

“Anyway,” continued Marla, “the thought of a third daughter-in-law was too much for Vonette. She got drunk, I mean really *gone*, and Fritz called the cops and had her hauled down to Furman County detox.”

“Not again,” I said as bits of mushroom fell from the side of my knife. “Did someone go get her?”

“Yes, she’s home, doing better. She’ll be at the wake tomorrow. Fritz, for all that silver fox routine, isn’t exactly what you’d call compassionate. Must run in the family.”

I said, “Should I try to keep Vonette away from the Vou-vray?”

“No way,” said Marla with a snort. “I can’t believe that in your eight years with John Richard, you never saw Vonette’s flask. She keeps it in her purse. You must be blind.”

“I am not blind,” I replied before hanging up, “but I will be broke if I can’t finish the food for this party.”

With the mushrooms minced and wrapped and the muffins steaming in the oven, I headed down the hall toward Arch's room, sugar bag in hand.

"Do you realize the mess you made by tearing into this?" I demanded after knocking and entering and offering the bag as evidence. He told Todd to hang on and cupped his hand over the phone.

"Please, Mom," he said as he held up a book, something about TV facts. "Let me talk. Besides, I didn't do that. See," he said as he tongued forward a wet pink mass, "I had bubble gum."

I cocked my head at him. "Arch, alibis are like food service. They have to do more than look good and hold up. They have to be palatable. And yours," I added, "doesn't even look good."

"Sorry, Mom," he said. "Really. I'll clean it up."

I wanted to open his head and look in, to see what he was really thinking, how he was dealing with everything. I wanted to say, Are you okay? And have him say, Yeah, Mom.

"Don't bother," I said. "I swept it. Just be more careful, all right?"

He nodded solemnly and said nothing. And then I turned away. I did not know what the right grieving behavior should be from a boy whose favorite teacher ever, Laura Smiley, had only six days before slashed her wrists and bled to death.