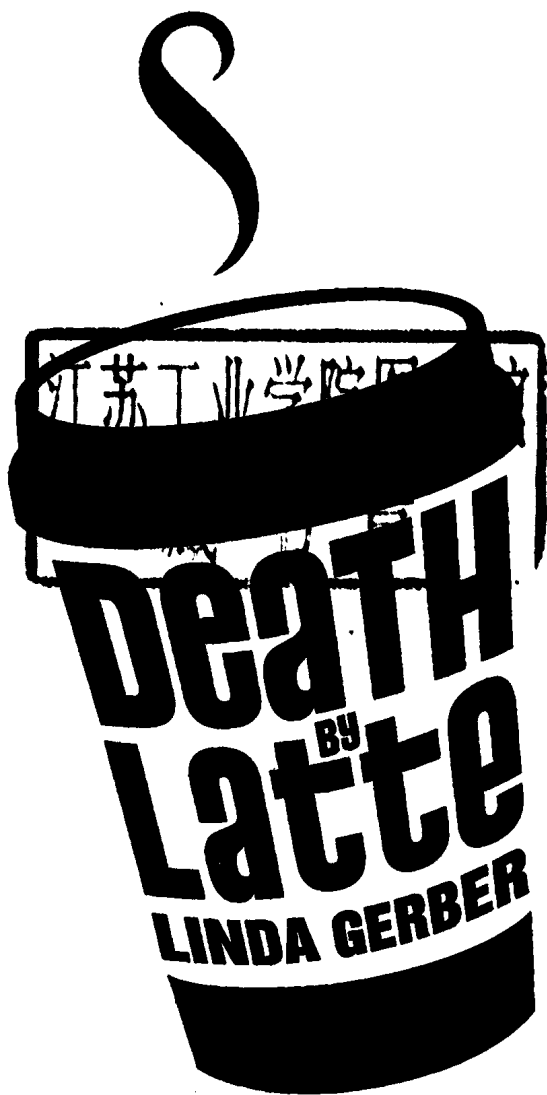




DEATH BY Latte

LINDA GERBER



SLEUTH
S P E A K

An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

For my girls

SLEUTH / SPEAK

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 345 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700,

Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,

Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,

Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Registered Offices: Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

This Sleuth edition published by Speak,
an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2008

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4

Copyright © Linda Gerber, 2008

All rights reserved

CIP Data is available.

Speak ISBN 978-0-14-241118-6

Printed in the United States of America

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.



lat-te

(lā-tā)
noun

1. ESPRESSO MIXED
WITH STEAMED MILK

2. ENERGY IN A TO-GO CUP

3. A THREE-DOLLAR
METHOD FOR WARMING
UP CHILLY SEATTLE NIGHTS

4. A SOMETIMES DEADLY DRINK...

CRASH

Seth grabbed my hand and pulled me back by him and my mom.

"Tie yourself in!" she yelled.

We wrapped the nets and the ties and anything else we could find around us as the plane bucked one last time. The propellers sputtered. The sound of the engines died. My stomach tumbled as the g-force pressed me back against the wall.

"Put your head between your knees!" Mom yelled. "Lock your hands behind your head like this!" She illustrated, lacing her fingers.

I followed her directions, trying to stay as calm as she appeared to be, but my hands shook and tears welled in my eyes.

"We're going to be okay," she yelled.

I nodded, even though I wasn't so sure.

She broke her crash position and gave me a rough hug. "I love you, Aphra," she said hoarsely. "No matter what happens, always remember that." I hugged her back—for the first time in four years—just before we went down.

OTHER SLEUTH BOOKS YOU MAY ENJOY

Double Helix

Nancy Werlin

Haunted

Judith St. George

Hunted: Fake ID

Walter Sorrells

In Darkness, Death

Dorothy and Thomas
Hoobler

Lulu Dark Can See Through Walls

Bennett Madison

LINDA GERBER'S *DEATH BY* SERIES

Death by Bikini

Death by Latte

Death by Denim

Acknowledgments

They say that being a writer is a solitary pursuit, but that just isn't so. The making of a book takes much more than just the efforts of the author; it takes an entire team of smart people working together. It has been my good fortune to work with the best of the best.

As always, special thanks to my family for their encouragement and for picking up the slack when I wander off into the writing zone. GUSH to my CPs: Jen, Ginger, Barb, Nicole, Julie, Kate, Karen, and Marsha.

Resounding thank-you to Diane Lutz, Christine Solberg, and Wendy Clark of the Greater Seattle RWA for sharing their experience and perspective and for having the patience to answer countless questions.

Words cannot adequately express my gratitude to the good folks at Puffin for their continued work and support. Huge, HUGE thanks to the sales team for spreading the love, to designers Theresa Evangelista and Linda McCarthy for giving me the best covers ever, and especially to my phenom editor Angelle Pilkington and to Grace Lee for their collective editorial genius. Working with you all has been a sincere pleasure!

DEATH BY Latte



CHAPTER

1

I lied to my dad. That's how the whole thing started. I told him I was going to South Carolina to visit a friend, but instead I hopped a flight to Seattle. It made complete sense at the time, but being alone and far from home can make a huge difference in perspective. And lies have a strange way of catching up to you in ways you never imagined.

You have to understand my situation: I hadn't seen my mom in four years. She stayed behind when my dad left for the Pacific to open an exclusive island resort. He took me with him . . . and she let me go. She never came to visit. Not once. All I wanted was to see her again. I didn't intend for things to go so terribly wrong.

Looking back, I guess I should have known better; before we even touched down in Seattle, my stomach felt like it had been stuffed with broken glass. I suppose my body was trying to tell me what my head refused to accept—that sneaking off wasn't such a great idea.

By the time the taxi dropped me off in front of Pike Place Market, I was having serious second thoughts . . . but it was a little late for that then. All I could do was wait for the Market to open, find my mom, and hope she'd be happy to see me.

Oh, yeah. Did I mention that I hadn't told her I was coming?

That part is not my fault. I might have told her if I'd had the option, but I didn't have any way of contacting her. The only reason I even knew where to find her was that a mutual friend had let me in on the secret. But that's a whole other story.

My flight got into Seattle at eight that morning. The Market didn't open until ten. So even after the taxi ride, I had over an hour to wait. That hour passed excruciatingly slowly. It probably didn't help that I kept checking the glowing plate-shaped clock over the entrance every two minutes, but I couldn't help it. Now that the wait was almost over, each passing second was torture.

Delivery trucks came and went. Tarp-covered carts clattered over the bricks around me. Vendors called out greetings to one another as they hauled buckets of bright flowers and crates of vegetables and fish inside the arcade. *They* all seemed to move in real time, so why did the minutes tick by in slow motion?

I had to literally force myself to turn away from the clock. Obsessing wasn't going to do me any good. I had to find something—anything—to take my mind off the time or I'd to go crazy. Some of the shops across the street looked like they were open, so I wandered over to take a look.

Shop windows framed everything from fresh pastries to Native American art, but none of the displays really

registered. Even the aroma of fresh coffee and frying dough from the coffee shops couldn't draw my attention. Physically I might have been looking in windows, but mentally I was still counting down minutes.

Finally, I noticed people filing through the main entrance. The doors were open. My stomach began to churn again. Now that the moment had arrived, I wasn't sure I was ready for it.

I hugged my arms and trudged back across the street. Just inside the entrance, people clustered four or five deep around a fish stand. They were all gawking at something, but I couldn't tell what. I worked my way through the crowd until I saw a worker in orange-and-black overalls in front of the long glass counter, his finger hooked through the gills of a huge silvery fish. He was talking to a lady in a floral sundress, projecting his voice like a stage actor.

"What time's your flight?" he asked.

"Three."

"Where do you live?"

"San Diego."

"Are you single?"

The crowd laughed and the sundress lady blushed prettily. The fish guy hefted the fish and flung it over his head. "One king salmon packed for California!"

The salmon flew through the air to where another worker behind the counter stood waiting with a sheet

of brown paper. The fish slapped into his arms and he wrapped the paper around it in one fluid movement. "One king salmon packed for California!"

The first guy worked the crowd, posing for pictures, hawking the fish, joking with the customers. I watched for a couple of minutes, but I realized I was just avoiding the inevitable.

I eased behind a guy in a Mariners jersey, and as had become habit when I was anxious, my hand reached for the ring that hung on a chain around my neck. It had been only months since Seth Mulo gave me that ring, but it seemed like much longer. A lot had happened since then; my dad had gone in and out of the hospital, the CIA agents looking for Seth's family had invaded every possible sanctuary on the island, we had closed and then reopened the resort, and I had lied to my dad and flown two thousand miles to find my mom. Through it all, I could never shake that tingle-in-the-back sensation that I was being watched.

Just thinking about it made the hairs at the back of my neck prickle. I fought the urge to sneak a glance over my shoulder. With all the other doubts and misgivings in my head, the last thing I needed was to let paranoia crowd in among them. I tucked the ring under my shirt and turned from the fishmongers. I'd worry about the other stuff later. After I found my mom.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the slightest idea where

to begin looking for her. I didn't see a booth directory posted anywhere and the arcade corridor was a confusion of carts and booths and storefronts.

The closest stall belonged to a local jewelry artist, according to the banner that hung above his workspace. The center of the table had been draped in black velvet and held an impressive display of silver bracelets, charms, and chains. An elderly gentleman—the artist, I presume—sat behind the table, bent over the new piece he was crafting.

I approached hesitantly. "Excuse me."

He looked up, woolly eyebrows raised.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but do you know where Pike's Pottery is?"

The man scratched his beard with the silver tool he'd been working with. "Couldn't tell ya. Prob'ly down the hall or outside."

"They don't have a regular spot?"

"Naw. Most of us are whatcha call day-stallers. We get our space location assignments at morning roll call."

With that, he went back to his work. I mumbled my thanks and scanned the crowded arcade once again. I didn't understand exactly how the space thing worked, but I got the part that mattered: Pike's Pottery could be anywhere in the Market. I would have to look for it.

People of all sizes and shapes flowed into the arcade and down the corridor like a swift-rising river and I

allowed myself to be swept along with the current, craning my neck to look at the booths as I passed each one.

Heavy perfume from incense and flower carts swirled about my head. Harmonica music drifted through the air. The produce guy across the hall laughed, his voice booming over the noise of the crowd. "Hey, you squeeze it, you buy it!"

Finally, on the other side of the corridor, I spotted a booth practically groaning under the weight of a collection of pots and bowls, vases and urns. A tall, dark-haired guy stood behind the table, absently dusting each piece. No banner advertised the name of the business, but I figured if it wasn't Pike's Pottery, at least the guy might be able to tell me where that booth was, assuming that he kept track of his competitors.

I had almost reached the booth when a woman carrying what looked like a very heavy cardboard box squeezed into the space behind the booth, nudging the man out of her way. My breath caught. Her hair was different from when I'd seen her last—shorter and maybe a little darker. The bohemian skirt and gauzy shirt were worlds away from the khakis and jeans she used to wear, and four years ago, she never would have been caught dead in all the drippy beads and chains hanging around her neck. But the rest of her looked the same. Ordinary. Average. She looked like me.

My feet stopped working. I couldn't move, so I just

stood there and let people bump past me as I stared at my mom. I swallowed against the huge lump that swelled in my throat. This was it. No turning back.

Smoothing my hair with a shaky hand, I forced myself to walk forward. Mom looked up as I approached the booth.

"How can I help . . ." Her words died and she blinked at me. "Aphra?" she whispered.

Everything I had intended to say when I first saw her vanished and all I could come up with was "Hi, Mom." For the briefest of moments, I saw something joyful flicker behind her eyes. It gave me hope. But then, right before my eyes, her face went blank. Truly. It's like she purposefully erased all expression until the only thing left was an empty canvas with no feeling, no warmth.

My heart tumbled right into my stomach. It's not like I'd expected her to go all misty and climb over the table to sweep me into her arms or anything, but it might have been nice if she could have at least pretended to be happy to see me.

Instead she just frowned. "What are you doing here?"

What did she *think* I was doing? "I came to see you."

The tall dark guy stepped up beside her and jerked his chin in my direction. "What's going on? Who's this?"

"This," Mom said, "is my daughter." Her tone was distant. Annoyed. I swallowed my confusion.

His eyes narrowed and he looked me over like I