

A JERSEY SHORE MYSTERY

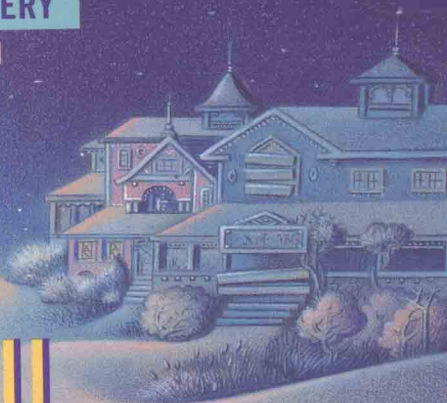
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riveting mystery."

Carolyn Hart

THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

BETH SHERMAN

Author of Death's a Beach



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Acknowledgments

My novels need lots of TLC, not just from me, but from people who provide me with esoteric information free of charge, people who read my work and offer suggestions on how to improve it, and most importantly, people who help me find time to write. Thanks to Andy Edelstein, Jessie Rose Edelstein, Dominick Abel, Trish Grader, Johanna Keller, Lindsey Murphy, Harriet Ellner, Luci Zahray, Cyndi Raftus, and Maryellen Rowley, R.N. I'd also like to thank the following law-enforcement officials for their help and expertise: Neptune Police Chief James A. Ward and Mauro V. Corvasce and Joseph R. Paglino, detectives with the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office in New Jersey. Any mistakes, intentional or otherwise, are mine.

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Chapter 1

*Raising children is
one of life's greatest
challenges. Nobody tells
you how hard it is until
after it's too late to send
the kids back.*

*Dr. Arlene Handelman,
From Diapers to Dating:
Becoming the Perfect Parent*



The body lay at an angle about forty yards from the ocean, surrounded by tall dune grass that rippled softly in the early-morning breeze. Around it an imperfect circle had been traced in the sand in such a way that each limb was carefully circumscribed within the circle's confines. It was the body of a girl, a teenager with a deep tan and curly black ringlets fanning out from her face like dark tendrils. Her eyes were closed, her head

tilted to the side, her chin jutting skyward. She wore short denim cutoffs and a tight black top with a plunging neckline. Around her throat, choker-style, she wore a rectangular piece of amber fastened with a black velvet ribbon. On her feet were black sandals with lots of crisscrossing straps and chunky three-inch heels.

They were the type of shoe favored by Jersey girls that summer, along with butterfly-shaped hair clips, tie-dyed tank tops, and violet-pink lipstick. This girl was wearing the lipstick and had painted her nails and toes the same color. She wasn't especially pretty. Her nose was too big for her narrow face. Her mouth, which hung open, revealed a prominent overbite and slightly crooked teeth. She would have looked vulnerable lying motionless in the sand had there not been a certain toughness about her features, a hard, brittle aspect, as though somewhere during her adolescence she'd learned life would kick her in the face if she didn't kick hard first.

It was just after dawn on a hot August morning, the kind of day when the heat started building early and got more and more oppressive as the hours wore on. But now the sun was partially hidden by a strand of clouds, and a fine layer of mist hung over the beach, obscuring part of the water and the entire horizon.

Anne Hardaway had been out for her usual morning three-mile run and was heading home along the boardwalk. She had her Walkman tuned to a jazz station and was in what she called the "zone," an endorphin-induced state in which the pounding of her feet, the pumping of her arms and the steady melodious flow of the music made it feel like she was gliding over the gray wooden planks. When she caught sight of the girl she pulled up short and stopped, instinctively flicking the radio off.

The body lay fairly close to the boardwalk, facing the ocean. Anne approached the railing, swung herself over it, and dropped down onto the sand. She knew the girl was dead. She knew by the way the body was sprawled on the beach, legs askew, absolutely still. But it was the last thing she expected to see on a morning jog through Oceanside Heights, and her brain was having trouble processing the information. The mist that hung over the beach seemed to bathe the air in white gauze. Anne was aware that her heart was flapping noisily in her chest, that all her senses were keyed up. Colors had become sharper, the pounding of the surf and the keening of the gulls throbbed in her ears.

She stepped closer, moving carefully through the dune grass. The girl was a local. Anne had seen her around before, hanging out on the beach, maybe working behind the counter at one of the inns that served the tourist trade. A friend of Tracy's, that was it. Anne had seen them both on Main Street last week, their heads bent close together, talking loudly and steadily the way teenagers do, lost in their own private world, as if nobody else existed.

She noticed the circle traced around the body and, taking care not to disturb it, knelt beside the dead girl. A faint unpleasant dusky odor rose from the body. The girl's right hand was curled into a fist, and there were a couple of empty Heineken bottles by her feet. Anne gazed at the body. No surface wound or any sign of blood. The only visible mark on the girl's tanned skin was a tattoo of a black, fanged snake, near her left ankle.

Anne stared at the tattoo, at the amber choker around the girl's throat. She shivered suddenly, although the morning air was warm. Something had gone very wrong here. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of a

scrap of white fluttering in the grass. Rising, she walked nearer and came upon a dirty piece of paper. She held the paper up to the light. There were three strange marks written on the paper in faint black ink.

They looked like ancient hieroglyphic symbols. Anne studied the paper for some time. When she looked up, the mist seemed to have thickened. The water fanned out before her and abruptly stopped, swallowed up by a curtain of white. She put the paper back where she found it.

Then, heart pounding, she turned from the body, sprinted home, and phoned the police.

In the summertime, the population of Oceanside Heights swelled to three times its original size. Tourists from as far away as Australia and Alaska descended upon the tiny town on the Jersey shore known as "God's own acre" for a glimpse of the historic Victorian architecture and the chance to attend one of the gospel sings, sermons and concerts at the Church by the Sea, the largest Methodist church on the entire Eastern seaboard.

The Heights had been founded in 1896 by a Methodist minister who organized fervent camp meetings by the ocean. That tradition had grown and flourished over the years until there were more than a hundred tents surrounding the church each summer and a long waiting list of people who wanted nothing more than to spend three months in the Heights soaking up the spirit of Christianity.

Up until about twenty years ago, blue laws were in place, forbidding a variety of activities on Sunday. You couldn't ride a bike, swim at the beach, hang wash, or play in the streets. You couldn't do home repairs or order ice cream unless you ordered a meal first. You had to park

in Neptune and wait until Sunday at midnight to retrieve your car. Today all that survived was the ban on alcohol, which stores and restaurants were prohibited from selling. It served to make the Heights more family-oriented than some of the surrounding towns.

Of course, not everyone came for religious reasons. The town was picturesque, the beach was clean and pristine, and the accommodations much cheaper than in Cape May, its sister Victorian city to the south.

A dead body definitely disrupted the normal flow of events, especially on a hot Saturday morning when tourists and townspeople alike would normally have flocked to the narrow strip of beach and the sand would have been peppered with striped umbrellas and brightly colored towels.

Anne's yellow Victorian cottage was at the south end of town, directly across the street from the beach and about four blocks from where she'd spotted the body. From her front porch she could see police cars parked by the boardwalk and uniformed officers patrolling the sand. Two of the cops had questioned Anne for about twenty minutes. Then the girl's body had been taken to the Medical Examiner's Office in Freehold, and a section of beach had been cordoned off.

Anne had taken a quick shower, changed clothes, and was eating a breakfast of coconut donuts and mint iced tea on the porch. The mist was beginning to burn off, leaving the sun to fry everything it touched. The air felt heavy and thick. It was even hot in the shade.

Anne mopped her face with a napkin and pulled her curly red hair back into a ponytail. She loved living by the beach, but her skin was fair and if she sat in the sun for very long, she wound up looking like a boiled lobster.

In a couple of months, she'd be turning forty. Hard to believe. Each year, the summer seemed to get shorter and shorter. Maybe she needed a vacation. Or a lighter workload. Or a winning lottery ticket. Maybe if you had a lot of money, you could stretch the hours out like saltwater taffy. Then again, maybe not. The rich are different from you and me, F. Scott Fitzgerald once said. Yes, they had more problems.

Right now Anne's biggest problem was Dr. Arlene Handelman, who was upstairs in the guest bathroom singing an off-key rendition of "Love to Love You, Baby." Dr. Arlene, or Dr. A., as she was known to her fans across the country, was a radio psychologist. She was also the houseguest from hell.

It had all started ten days ago when Dr. Arlene showed up on Anne's doorstep unannounced and uninvited.

"Did you know," Dr. Arlene had said, sweeping into the living room with a suitcase, a bulging leather briefcase, and a black Prada bag, "that the Jersey Turnpike is one of the ten worst highways in America? Forget the rotten drivers, forget the fact that the whole damn road is one gigantic parking lot after five o'clock. You know what the worst thing is? The rest stops. You can't even get a decent cup of coffee at any of them and believe me, I've been trying. I stopped at the Vince Lombardi, the Thomas Edison, the Grover Cleveland." She paused for a split second to snap her gum, before barreling on. "Why do they all have such peculiar names? Whatever happened to Food/Gas/Lodging?"

Anne had watched Dr. Arlene with a sinking feeling in her heart. The suitcase looked awfully heavy. "What are you doing here?"

"On-site interaction. We're not making much progress,

as you must have noticed." Dr. Arlene had taken a silver compact out of the Prada bag and checked her face. The perm had fallen out of her dyed brown hair, which rested limply on her shoulders, windswept and disheveled, as if she'd been doing eighty on the Turnpike with the top down. Bright red lipstick was smeared on one of her front teeth, and two of the buttons had popped off the jacket on her too-tight flesh-colored gabardine pants suit. "God, I'm a wreck. I need a hot shower, a foot massage, and coffee that doesn't suck."

"You're not planning on . . ."

". . . staying with you? Just for tonight, Anne. Tomorrow, I'll check out some inns. See if any of 'em have a room that isn't falling apart at the seams and reeking of mildew."

Anne had sunk into a chair, trying to process the fact that Dr. Arlene was in the Heights, that they were going to have to work together, face-to-face, *mano a mano*. This was not supposed to be happening. When she'd signed on to be the ghostwriter for *From Diapers to Dating: Becoming the Perfect Parent*, it was with the usual understanding. She'd work from home, translating Dr. A.'s parenting advice into a coherent, easy-to-read manuscript, and the radio shrink would stay in Manhattan, hosting a radio show, running workshops on becoming a perfect parent, and sending Anne copious notes, via fax, phone, and e-mail. Yes, the book was due to Triple Star Publishing in seven weeks and yes, they weren't even close to putting together a first draft, but this was an outrage.

"You should have called first," Anne had protested, as Dr. A. headed back to the car and began removing what looked like copious amounts of food from her black Grand Cherokee sport utility vehicle. "We should have talked this over."

"Not necessary," Dr. A. had said, carrying several grocery bags into the house. "We're running behind schedule. We're not going to make our deadline unless we take drastic action."

How drastic, Anne had wondered grimly, watching Harry glare at the intruder. Harry was an old one-eyed black-and-white cat. He didn't care for strangers. To be perfectly honest, he didn't like many people, including most of Anne's friends. He watched with disdain as Dr. A. unpacked bag loads of food. She'd brought enough provisions for a month. And whose fault was it anyway that they were behind?

Despite the take-charge image she projected on her show, Dr. Arlene was indecisive when it came to the book. Each time she sent Anne a new batch of notes, she changed her mind about what she wanted to say or how she wanted to say it, which slowed their collaboration down considerably.

It was the exact opposite of what Dr. Arlene preached to parents across the country: Take charge. Take command. Take control of the situation. Her message had been enthusiastically received. Dr. Arlene charged parents \$1,200 per workshop, and there was a six-month waiting list to sign up. Anne had sat in on one a couple of months ago and observed twelve insecure mothers fret about potty training and tantrums and whether it was okay to feed kids canned veggies instead of fresh ones. She wondered what her mother's generation would have made of it. Those women hadn't relied on books or radio shrinks for advice. She doubted whether her mother had even read Dr. Spock.

"This is going to work out great, you'll see," Dr. Arlene had said cheerily, opening the refrigerator and sticking

goat cheese and radicchio next to Anne's leftover chili.

No, it's not, Anne had wanted to shout. But she knew she couldn't. And Dr. A. knew she knew. Dr. A. was the "expert," Dr. A. had the clout. The terms of Anne's contract clearly stated that if Dr. Arlene Handelman was unhappy with their working relationship, she could find herself another ghost writer. Which wouldn't be a problem if Anne hadn't already spent the first half of her advance money. She couldn't afford to get fired.

She had watched in silent fury while Dr. Arlene opened a kitchen cabinet, extracted a glass, and poured herself mineral water exported from New York. "Someone told me," Dr. A. had said, "that there's a Howard Stern rest stop on the turnpike. Is that true?"

"I take it you're not a fan of the Jersey shore," Anne had said, trying in vain to stem her sarcasm.

"Anyplace that's not Manhattan is bound to be deady dull," Dr. A. had said, pouring a second glass for Anne. "If I have to leave the city, I prefer the Hamptons or the Vineyard. But I'm willing to sacrifice big for this book. You and I have got to be on the same page from now on. No more delays. No more setbacks. We start working on how to survive your child's high school years tonight."

Anne had groaned inwardly. The survival notes Dr. Arlene had faxed her were an incoherent mess. The radio shrink tended to hopscotch from one topic to the next, jotting down random bits of advice without any thought to how they should be organized and presented.

"Here are some more ideas I scribbled down this morning," Dr. Arlene had said, dumping a sheaf of papers on the coffee table.

Scribbled was the operative word. Dr. Arlene's handwriting left a lot to be desired.

"I'm hungry and bone tired, in need of some small town hospitality. Where can I get an edible meal and a good, hot cup of Joe?" Dr. Arlene had said, slipping off one of her high-heeled pumps and rubbing a bunion on her left foot.

"There's Quilters. Or the Pelican Café. They're both on Main Street. If you like Italian food, Vic's in Bradley Beach is good. It's right in the center of town."

"I guess it's next to impossible to mess up spaghetti, right?" Dr. Arlene had said, slipping her shoe back on.

"Try the veal piccata. It's heavenly," Anne had said. "About tonight, I already have plans. But we can start tomorrow morning."

"I'm up at six. And I'll need a key, in case you're not home when I get back."

Anne had gotten her spare key and reluctantly handed it over. The only thing worse than an uninvited houseguest was an uninvited houseguest you had to humor and cater to. As she'd watched Dr. Arlene climb into the Grand Cherokee, she wondered how soon the radio shrink would be leaving.

Not soon enough, as it turned out. Dr. A. pretended she didn't see the colorful brochures for inns that Anne left in conspicuous places around the house. And to make matters worse, they'd hardly worked on the book at all. Each morning the radio shrink left the house and didn't come back until almost nightfall. A few evenings ago, she'd done her weekly live radio broadcast, via telephone, from Anne's office. Anne felt like she was running a bed-and-breakfast for one. And it was really starting to get on her nerves.

The cat raised his head to watch a butterfly dancing overhead, then settled down for a morning snooze on the

porch as if chasing it weren't worth the effort. Harry wasn't crazy about the heat either. It made him lethargic and slow. Normally, he'd be prowling around the garden. But it was just as well he wasn't. The garden was a disaster area this summer. It was tough having a black thumb, especially when it hadn't rained in weeks and you kept forgetting to water the lawn. The grass grew tall and wild. The geraniums and impatiens looked half-dead. The tomatoes refused to ripen, and the peas had withered. So much for fresh flowers and vegetables. The lawn was an eyesore.

Anne took another bite of her donut and tried not to listen to Dr. A's singing. Anne was crazy about donuts, especially fresh-baked Jersey donuts, but this morning she was feeling slightly queasy. She couldn't get the dead girl out of her mind. How had the girl died? What had she been doing on the beach? Who had drawn the circle around her? Anne thought back to the jewel glistening at her throat, the strange symbols in the sand.

She took a small notebook off the table in front of her and started sketching the symbols from memory. The first one looked like three-quarters of a bow tie. The second one resembled an elaborate F. The third looked like two flags touching. Anne wondered if the writing could be Arabic or Greek.

What a bizarre scene to come upon in the Heights. Other towns on the Jersey shore attracted teenagers who drank beer like it was water, had delicate parts of their bodies pierced, and flocked to wet T-shirt contests held in dark, smoky bars. But Oceanside Heights was different. After all, it was a dry town. No liquor sold anywhere. The religious aspect tended to appeal to churchgoers, not kids who partied hearty. There was a wholesomeness about the Heights, a family atmosphere.

But there had been strange goings-on this summer at night: mysterious bonfires burning on the beach. Strange, primitive-looking tools littering the boardwalk. Weird chanting and drumming. Twice during the past month Anne had been jolted awake by the noise. But when she'd gone to investigate, she'd found nothing.

Several people who lived opposite the beach claimed they'd seen a horrible-looking black figure dancing above the waves at night. Anne didn't know what to make of it. Some of her neighbors might have been a little close-minded and uptight, but they weren't prone to hallucinations. Nor did they give much credence to supernatural phenomena.

"Annie," a familiar voice called out.

"Delia, hi."

Delia Graustark was the town librarian, resident gossip, and one of Anne's best friends. She was in her mid-seventies, but that didn't stop her from working six days a week. In fact, she usually had more energy than most people half her age. But not today. Now Delia walked shakily up the porch steps as if her bones were brittle. Wisps of white hair had escaped her bun and stuck out from her head like frayed cotton threads. Her wire-framed eyeglasses had slipped halfway down her long, aquiline nose. She looked more upset than Anne had ever seen her. In fact, she looked panicked.

"I need your help," Delia said weakly, reaching into her pocket and producing an embroidered linen handkerchief, which she used to dab her face.

"Sure."

Delia was usually the one helping Anne out. As a ghostwriter who'd written books on everything from astrology to wind surfing, Anne had to do a fair amount of