

CHAPTER ONE
of
Overdue For Murder
by Teresa Trent

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"You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try."
Beverly Sills

"Now don't be nervous. We just need you to stand here behind this counter, and when the red light comes on the camera, talk into it as if you were talking to a neighbor or a friend."

Stan, the station manager of NUTV gently squeezed my arm. His voice was so calming, so friendly. Too bad his efforts didn't seem to have any effect on me.

When Stan asked me to do a weekly fifteen-minute segment for the local cable channel he ran in our small town of Pecan Bayou, Texas, I thought I wouldn't have any trouble at all filling the time. I'd prepared a couple of the columns I had written for the Pecan Bayou Gazette, but when I spoke them aloud to my mirror at home and timed them, I wasn't so sure. I only hoped I had enough material to make it to the time the little red light went off on the camera.

What I was doing today was a vast contrast to the quiet life I had been living in the last eight years. I started out as a single mom and blogger who preferred to stay out of the limelight. Last fall, when Stan and I had both been involved in an investigation run by my aunt and the Pecan Bayou Paranormal Society, he asked me to do this tiny segment on his station.

"Betsy? Are you listening to me?"

"Oh, yes, sorry." It had seemed like such an easy thing to do at the time, but now here I was staring into a blinking red light struggling to talk about freezing dinners ahead of time.

"And 5, 4," Stan counted down the last three numbers on his hand without sound.

"Hi there," I squeaked. "My name is Betsy Livingston, and I am the Happy Hinder!" I heard cheerful music going on behind me making me feel like I should be wearing pearls instead of my dark pink cardigan, white tank and blue jeans. I grasped for the next thing to say as the music started waning. "And today we're going to talk about ... um ... well ..." I cleared my throat and put my hand on the foil-covered dish I had brought with me for a prop. Suddenly I felt my heart beating so fast that I felt a crazy rhythm creeping into my entire nervous system. I simply couldn't go on. What, was I

insane trying to do something like this?

I was Betsy Livingston, a single mom who got that way by being rejected by a man who turned out to be nothing but a con. I had worked my way out of it years ago, and today's freeze-up was startling to me. I thought I was past all of this kind of garbage. I thought my meek and mild self died the year I decided to become a writer. There were times when I could actually be quite feisty if I felt I was being run over. At least I thought so. But I guess I hadn't completely transformed myself, and that was why I told Stan I would have to seriously think about whether or not I wanted to be on NUTV.

That afternoon I leaned over the bathtub, my knees hurting on the tiny bathroom tiles. The drain was clogged again, and the thought of calling a plumber was in the back of my mind. This would have been a good time to have a man around the house. Preferably a man in overalls with the name Bob stitched neatly on a white patch. I remembered how my now ex-husband responded to household problems.

"What did you do to it Betsy? We're not made of money, you know."

I knew. Well, I eventually knew. I leaned over the tub again and with great force tried the plunger in the drain. The water bubbled up around the rust-colored rubber stopper, but nothing seemed to be changing. What was that quote about insanity? If you keep doing the same thing over and over and keep getting the same result then you must be insane? Something like that. Inside, a creeping notion kept hitting me that I needed to call up the plumber and pay his \$150 to clean the drain. It would be so easy. It would be so expensive.

Sometimes it seemed like life was like that. You could take the easy way out and sacrifice something in the process, or you could go the hard way and find yourself on your knees getting splashed by day-old bath water. Today, I had taken the easy way out and left the TV studio in tears. I felt the shame of my cowardice rising up inside of me. I pushed at the plunger once again with no result. I was even failing at this simple act. As I felt anger building, my thoughts went round and round in self-disgust. As if powered by my own misery, I went all-out and plunged and plunged and plunged, letting out a scream of frustration as I did it.

"Mom, are you alright?" My son came running into the bathroom holding a shiny blue book almost too big for him to carry comfortably.

"Slurrrrrp!" went the drain as the clog cleared.

I pushed back the dark brown bangs that had fallen into my eyes in my moment of exuberance. I had done it, and without help from anyone. Maybe I wasn't so hopeless. "I'm just fine now. Better than fine, I'm great. What are you two guys up to?"

My cousin Danny now stood in the door behind him. He was much taller than Zach, and even though I called him a boy he was only a few years younger than I was.

"We're going to be famous. We're finding a world record to break," Zach said. As I put away the plumber's helper, the boys talked as they went down the hall.

"Look, Danny – this guy did 127 wheelies in one minute. I can do wheelies."

"Not that fast, Zach. Not that fast." My cousin Danny spoke with a slight speech impediment.

"Okay, how about we build the biggest rubber-band ball in the world?"

Danny thought for a moment and then counted on his fingers. "I only got four in my desk at home. How many you got?"

"Mom, how many rubber bands we got?" Zach called out, expecting me to have thousands of spare rubber bands sitting in a shed somewhere waiting for his attempt at an earth-shaking world record.

"Uh, gee Zach, let me look." I put away the plunger and walked down the hall to my office. I pulled out my center desk drawer and started counting. "I see about ten."

"Can we have them?"

"Sure." I pulled the wriggling strings of tan rubber and handed them to him. Zach took one from the bunch, folded it over and then tried to put a second one over it. His little fingers fumbled with stretchy bands.

"Here, let me do it." Danny reached over to grab the rubber bands. His stubby fingers couldn't even get a start on it.

"You guys," I sighed. "Let me show you how to do this." Most boys never have to put up a ponytail with a hair fastener the way a girl would have. Here they were ready to break a world record and couldn't even manipulate the rubber bands. I twisted and turned the tiny piece of rubber until we had a lopsided ball.

"Cool, Mom. We only have to get it to a little over six feet seven inches."

"How big?"

"That's what the guy in the world record book did."

"Zachary, do you know how many rubber bands that would take?"

"I don't know, five bags?"

"Try hundreds of bags – and where do you find a rubber band big enough to stretch six feet?"

"Mr. Simmons' store?" asked Danny. Mr. Simmons' store was our local hardware store downtown. Mr. Simmons would get pretty excited at the thought of selling a giant rubber band.

"Sorry, guys. This plan isn't going to work."

"Aw, Mom. We just have to break a world record. Could we at least try?"

"Try?" I ran my fingers through my straight brown hair. Being the only parent in the house had its

days. Today we had Danny over while my aunt was out doing some shopping and having some respite time. Danny and Zach could cook up some big trouble when they wanted to.

"I guess you can try," I said, "but there has to be something that is easier and less expensive than collecting thousands of rubber bands."

The boys settled back onto the floor and opened the world record book. Zach slurped at the straw sticking out of his little red juice box. Danny carefully started turning the pages of the reflective blue world record book. He pointed to a picture of a man with his tongue sticking straight out. "Cool guy," he said with great reverence. "Look Betsy, he's got an earring in his tongue."

"Cooooool, he has the record for the most piercings," Zach stroked his chin in thought. "Nope, too painful."

For both of us, I thought. Why do kids always want to do something to make them famous? What is the force that makes us all want to shine just a little brighter than everyone else in the room?

The phone rang next to me. Pecan Bayou Gazette came up on the caller ID.

"Betsy, got a little job for ya," Rocky Whitson, the editor of the paper, crackled on the other end. He always reminded me of sort of a hip grandpa type. He was in his sixties with pale gray hair in the process of going white. Being a single, handsome man over fifty in a town full of divorcees and widows, he had his share of dinner invitations. Although flattered by the attention, he was busy managing our small-town, once-a-week paper, which included only one full-time reporter, who spent most of his time doing sports. Rocky did the rest of the reporting, classified ads and all of the other general jobs. He also had a couple of local bloggers writing weekly columns. I was already writing for my blog five days a week, so having it published in the local paper wasn't any increase in my workload, just more money. With the unpredictable fate of print journalism, Rocky had created a Pecan Bayou Gazette online that he updated daily. The other blog featured in the Gazette covered fashion and style and was written by Vanessa Markham, the wife of the sports reporter. Rocky said he eventually wanted to include blogs about gardening, home repair, politics, religion and whatever else he could find locally.

"Can you cook?"

"Uh, yeah. I do write a helpful hints column and have included tips for cooking shortcuts."

"Right, but can you cook?"

I was a little insulted by that. Of course I could cook. Okay, only cooking for two, and we did often partake in grocery-store precooked meals, but still, I cooked.

"Yes, I cook all the time. That's how we stay alive."

"Good, glad to know it," he chuckled. "The mall is puttin' together its first annual Creative Cooks Day, and I signed you up for it. You and Peter's wife, Vanessa, will be representing the newspaper. This is a way for us to increase visibility and maybe sell some more print subscriptions."

"Creative Cooks? What does that mean exactly?"

"Oh, you know, all that Betty Crocker stuff about frosted pine cones and stacking cake balls into little bitty trees. Whatever it is all you women do with that stuff." I think he had an image in his mind of the secret language of women. Somehow in that world we were elevated to a more aesthetically pleasing existence where we created all things stylish. Unfortunately, it seemed no one had ever sent me the official codebook.

"I don't know, Rocky. This is starting to sound like a little more like art than cooking."

"Well, it is "Creative Cooks," and you're a creative gal. You can do it. Listen, I was talking to Pattie at PattieCake's when I was down getting my donut this morning, and she said she is going to make a giant cupcake tower with eight layers and one of her special cakes on top. Just think up something like that, and remember you're representing the paper."

No pressure. I gulped. I had thrown together a beef stew and lopsided birthday cake, but cupcake towers?

"I'm not a cake decorator, Rocky."

"Sure you are. Let your Martha Stewart flag fly, girl. You write all of this stuff about better ways to do things, so I know you can figure out a better way to bake a cake, right? Haven't you made cakes for your son or for your husband's birthday?" He stopped cold, realizing the mistake he had made. My husband hadn't been around for me to make a cake in the last eight years. I made my living giving other people tips to make their lives easier, and I was pretty good at it. If somebody asked me for a tip on having a fulfilling love life? Call Dr. Phil. That was way out of my league.

"So think on it, Betsy. The contest is in a week at the mall. I'll have all the signs for your table – oh, and bring some of those extra books you got. Maybe you'll sell one of 'em, for once." Rocky hung up.

Ping. That hurt. My book, *The Happy Hint*, hadn't really taken off in the literary world. It was published locally and distributed in the metropolitan areas of Texas, but that was last year. This year my publisher was spending more time pushing some book about the frogs of Texas. It was a good thing I had the column to write for the Pecan Bayou Gazette and was attempting to film the weekly segment for Stanley at NUTV. Between all of that I had enough paychecks rolling in to support both me and my son. I also did talks for various local groups and silly stuff like this. What kind of cake could I possibly bake?

"Betsy?" My Aunt Maggie was at the back door. She opened the squeaking screen and walked in pulling a sheer scarf off of her freshly teased and sprayed hair.

"Ruby Green says hello." Maggie had just left her weekly haunt, "The Best Little Hair House in Texas." There was more breaking news going on down there than Rocky could ever hope for. If he had any brains he'd plant a reporter at the salon who could cut hair. Maggie heard it all, and thankfully, she brought it back to me. "Anything going on?" I asked.

"Well, heard about one affair, and Ms. Gibbs has been dressing with the blinds up again."

"Something to that," I said as reached for a dusty cookbook, turning the pages to the cake section. I leafed through sumptuous pictures of the kind of birthday cakes you could only dream of on an empty stomach.

"Aunt Maggie, have you ever made one of these fancy cakes?"

"Like what? Like what you see at the grocery?" Maggie's voice rose at the end, exaggerating her Texas accent.

I propped up the book for her to see a cake titled "Undersea Fantasy," which featured crabs, turtles and dolphins all crafted out of what looked like marshmallows and licorice strings. She peered at it, adjusting her bifocals on her nose as I explained to her what Rocky had asked me to do for Creative Cooks Day.

"Gee, Betsy. I'm thinkin' you're in over your head this time. I remember when you tried to make Danny that smiley face cake. The black icing you used on the grin ran down the side and it about scared him to death. Surprised he made it to his next birthday without counselin'."

I scratched my head. "Oh, yeah. I forgot about that, no wonder on the video all the kids were screaming."

"Sure, and then there was the time you tried to make Judd that cake and forgot to put the eggs in."

"I should have caught that."

"Yeah, we had to put candles on a box of honey buns that day. You got a track record for bad baking, baby girl."

Zach and Danny ran into the kitchen. "Mama," Danny said. "We're going to break the world record."

"What world record?" Maggie asked.

"All of them!" Danny answered.

"We're still figuring out what incredible thing we're going to do, Aunt Maggie, so I'm glad you got your hair done." Zach stretched out his arms, imagining his future paparazzi. "There will probably be hundreds of reporters out on the lawn after we do it."

"Thanks for the warning," she smiled.

I paged through the glossy photos in the cookbook. There were cakes that looked like circuses, swimming pools, insects, hats, cartoon characters. I started having a case of baking terror. "You know, Aunt Maggie. I could always drive into Houston and buy something and bring it back. They'll never know."

"You'll know."

I sighed.

"You could make a cake out of rubber bands," suggested Zach.

I nodded. "That's original, but not too tasty." I turned the page and spotted the cake labeled

"Beginner's Crocodile Cake." How kind of them to have a cake that was supposed to be easy enough for people like me. I grabbed a pen and started writing down the ingredients I would need. Surely I could stir up some green frosting and turn it into something.