

Rubbed the Wrong Way

My massage therapist Sondra Johansson ran out of her office to the shaded courtyard where I sipped iced tea from the Sweet Nothings coffee shop nearby and awaited my appointment. “Call 911,” she shouted. When she saw me, she yelled, “Jeanette. Get Rita and her AED.”

At my blank stare, she clarified. “For CPR. Go. Fast.” She disappeared into her office. No “I’m running a bit late, Jeanette, my sweet. Enjoy that raspberry iced tea.” *So much for my massage today.* I dashed into Rita’s office, next door to Sondra’s.

A sign on the door to her treatment room announced, “In Session. Please wait.” I figured an emergency overruled that. I knocked on the door. In seconds, it opened a crack and Rita tilted her head up at me. “I’m occu—”

I interrupted her, my tone calm despite the urgency. “Sondra needs you. Bring the AED thingy.”

She spoke into the room behind her as she joined me. “I am called away for a few moments. Relax. Do not let this woman’s squawks disturb you. I shall return shortly.”

Squawks? “I don’t squawk.”

She ignored that. From behind her desk she lifted what looked like a large canvas laptop case. Black, with a distinctive red cross on both sides. “Ah, yes. Here we have it. I trust Sondra called for an ambulance?”

I nodded, only guessing that my efficient therapist had that covered. Outside, we turned right and took the few steps on the sandstone walkway that led to Sondra’s office. The walk skirted the inviting courtyard of the u-shaped, one-story adobe structure known as Ma Placita that housed offices for a half-dozen small businesses and a small café.

We hurried into Sondra’s therapy room and found her next to the massage table, singing. “Ah, ha, ha, ha, staying alive.” She bounced as she sang.

“A disco emergency?” I muttered.

“She’s doing CPR,” Rita said. “This ‘thingy’ is more effective.”

I shot her a sideways glare but said nothing. Someone lay on the table. Who?

Rita moved to the other side of the table. “Thank Goddess you’re here,” Sondra gasped. “This is hard work.”

Maybe singing counted as hard work for Sondra, but listening to her had been harder for me. Good thing she chose massage therapy over a stage career.

Rita busied herself with the equipment. As she took it out, I saw the label: “Automated External Defibrillator.” In a moment, she said, “Keep the pressures going while I attach the electrode pads.” How composed, how professional. That’s Rita, as precise in her language as she is with her acupuncture needles. But she didn’t even mention who the victim was. How annoying. From the hairy legs and large feet, I gathered it was a male. I edged sideways so I could see more.

I immediately wished I had not. The landlord of Ma Placita, Jeff Compton, a Tucson real estate developer, lay face up on the table. Peaceful. Something no one would have called the

living Jeff. Always on the go, always stirring up something. He called himself an activator, as opposed to an activist like my daughter and her friends. Isn't an activator the piece in a washing machine that makes the clothes go up and down?

"Stop," said Rita. Had she noticed me backing out of the room, anxious to escape the awkwardness of death? Because he sure looked dead to me.

I stopped. Sondra stopped pumping away at Jeff's chest and backed a few paces away.

"Clear."

I peered at Jeff, expecting to see him jump from the shock, but saw nothing.

After a few seconds, Rita repeated, "Clear." Again I saw nothing. She said, "Begin CPR."

Sondra restarted the chest thumps. Before she could start singing again, I left the room, murmuring, "I'll just keep an eye out for the EMTs."

Outside, I stood at the entrance to the patio and waited for the rescue squad.

What had happened to Jeff? Maybe because I'm looking at 60 in a few short years, seeing the physically fit, self-professed health and exercise nut getting his heart resuscitated instead of a relaxing massage, made me especially edgy. What some would term obsessive about his health, Jeff never missed his health work-ups. In fact, just this week he'd bragged to me that his latest EKG showed the "heart of a teenager." True, healthy people are felled by heart attacks all too often. I sent up a small silent prayer for Jeff's recovery, wondering how many of his tenants would wish the same.

The little business center housed several alternative health practitioners. My massage therapist, Sondra; Rita, the acupuncturist; and Beth, a naturopath and herbalist. Ma Placita also housed Sweet Nothings, a small coffee house. Its owner, Connie, worked as a barista by morning, and tax accountant by afternoon. Jeff, who had properties throughout Tucson, kept his office at Ma Placita, "to keep an eye on my harem," as he often told me. I cringed but didn't call him on his sexism. I leave the activism to my daughter. However, just last week I'd asked Sondra how he got away with that attitude. Always kind, always gentle, she'd told me I was naïve.

"Think, sweet one. He's kept this place open and the rents low because he likes to lord it over us. I imagine the others are like me: don't want to find a new space and pay ridiculous rents."

The patio remained empty, despite what Rita termed my squawking. I briefly wondered where the other tenants were, but decided it was best to keep our emergency quiet.

The crunch of gravel beneath tires announced the arrival of the rescue squad. Three firemen trotted up. I led them to Sondra's room and then backed out, admiring their tight young glutes.

Sondra and Rita emerged from the massage room. Normally unflappable Rita ran her hands through her short dark hair, her face mottled. She headed to her own office and her by now well-punctured patient. Sondra, always thoughtful, toted three bottles of water. She sat at one of the cast-iron tables and I joined her. The poor woman looked like someone who'd been overdoing the sunscreen. Sunscreen's almost as necessary as water for Tucsonans, but if you don't rub it in well, some of the zinc-based creams leave you an unattractive pale gray.

Sondra stared into the distance. “They're sure to blame me. Negligence, leaving a client alone that long. And given who it was”

I raised my eyebrows. “Is he dead?”

Sondra gave a tiny nod. “The EMTs never give up, but I saw their expressions when they thought I wasn't looking. Not good news.” She rubbed her face.

“From what I heard around here, Jeff wasn't a popular man. Married, but catting around.”

Sondra turned her head so she looked right at me. “Jeanette, my dear. I was one of those cats.”

“Oh.” I fiddled with the plastic bottle cap, and eventually got the safety strip off and the lid removed. Took a swig. “Recently?”

“Last year. Over in a few months. Jeff didn't have much staying power.”

“Contrary to his bragging?” My small smile was soon matched by Sondra's. Then we both burst out in giggles that turned into guffaws.

I handed Sondra a tissue and while we both wiped away the tears of our laughter, I peered at the best masseuse I'd ever known, a woman who'd become a good friend. Yet she'd never mentioned her affair with Jeff. “I gather from the rumors that you weren't his only . . .”

“Pussycat?” Sondra snorted and giggled again. She shook her head and blew her nose.

I recognized that Sondra was in shock from seeing a man die on her table. Talking might purge some of it. And would definitely help my curiosity. “Tell me what happened.”

“I went to get the rocks I'd warmed to put on his back. I couldn't have been gone more than two, three minutes. I came back into the room and found him.”

“He mentioned how much he loved those hot rocks to me.” I recalled Jeff making the comment a few days earlier, when he and I ran into each other at Sweet Nothings, Connie's coffee shop. “He said those rocks were his favorite part of the massage. Except you.” I pictured the moment and the look on Connie's face at Jeff's offhand statement. Malice glittered in her eyes and I recalled thinking, *someone's jealous*.

“Is it possible the heat from the rocks brought on heart failure?”

She shook her head. “No, he was unconscious when I got back to the room.”

Or dead, I thought.

“He must have gone fast. Jeff never mentioned heart problems.”

“Was he on his back when you found him?” I asked. Sondra always put the warmed stones beneath my back. Heavenly.

“No. His face was in the cradle. I turned him when he didn't respond.”

Therapists use face cradles so their clients can breathe. Didn't work for Jeff. Sondra looked at me as if I could give her absolution. “I wasn't gone long. He didn't complain of pain, except in his back, and that's why he asked for hot rocks.”

I stifled a grin. Told myself not to let my thoughts head in that totally inappropriate direction. Noticed that Sondra's had already gone there by the sly grin on her face. “I am being terrible, I know,” she said, “but really, sometimes he was a prick. At least every other week he asked if my massage had a ‘happy ending.’”

“Happy ending” was another euphemism for sex, a term used by men hoping a massage therapist provided for more than a man's tired muscles. “And yet you continued as his therapist? Why?”

She shook her head. “He reduced my rent by the value of the massages. He had the same kind of arrangement with Connie for doing his taxes.”

The paramedics passed us, rolling a gurney. They didn't hurry. I gripped my plastic bottle until I thought it would crack.

Rita's voice came from behind me and I dropped the bottle. “I gather they could not revive him?”

We all gazed at the gurney passing through the entrance gate. With all the comings and goings, I wondered why Connie hadn't ventured from Sweet Nothings to see what was up.

Rita seated herself. “Any death takes light from the world. Jeff's, not so much.”

My eyes popped open. The statement seemed totally out of character for Rita. Could she be yet another past lover?

Sondra shook her head slightly at me and I gathered I shouldn't pry. “I didn't see your client leave,” she said to Rita.

“I suggested she leave by the back door. She was shaken by the emergency as well as by my absence.”

I'd forgotten each office had a back door leading to the parking lot. “Sondra, was your door locked?”

“I'm not sure. Jeff came in that way.”

I rubbed my chin. “And you say he had no history of heart problems?”

Sondra's eyes grew huge. “What are you thinking?”

“Simply open to possibilities.” I strove to keep my expression blank.

“Possibilities? At Ma Placita? You can't mean—?”

“She can. She thinks Jeff's death wasn't natural. An absurd conjecture,” Rita said. “The man had a heart attack. The symptoms were patently clear.”

Rita's pedantic statement irked me. She wasn't the only knowledgeable person on the patio. “Many poisons mimic heart attacks. Oleander and Arizona Monkshood are easy to find,” I said. “And you medical practitioners have access to ways to inject it. It appears that Jeff had few friends among you.”

“Few friends anywhere,” Rita countered. “Always bragging about his next big project and calling Ma Placita small beans. I heard he planned to raze Ma Placita and build a high-rise here.”

I inhaled. That would be a tragedy, not only for the tenants here, but for anyone, including me, who lived next door in the casita complex. Increased traffic meant decreased housing prices. And the news increased the potential list of suspects.

Sondra's face tightened but she offered no comment and I saw no surprise at Rita's statement.

“Who gains most from Jeff’s death?” Maybe one of the women would crumble like the crust on one of the tarts at Sweet Nothings.

Sondra cleared her throat. “I’d heard about Jeff’s plans to raze the building, sure. But Connie told me he planned to raise our rents. I think he enjoyed keeping us all nervous, in his debt.”

“That’s odd,” said Rita. “It was Connie, I’m sure, who told me Jeff planned to raze the building. Suggested I get Martha to look into what can be done to save historic buildings. Martha’s a lawyer,” she added for my benefit.

I watched their anger at my accusation turn to speculation. Sondra spoke first. “We all gain by saving Ma Placita.” She shook her head. “But kill over office space? Safer to fight him in court.”

Rita’s lips tightened. “Oleander causes convulsions,” she said. “But the aconite in monkshood would paralyze him, keep him silent.”

Hmm. If she’d killed Jeff, would Rita admit to such extensive knowledge? Duh. She loved touting her knowledge. “Okay, we have a possible means. Now think motive—money, fear, revenge, jealousy?” I figured all those emotions thrived in Jeff’s little harem. “What was up with Connie spreading different rumors about Jeff’s plans? Of all of you, she should know. She did his taxes, right?”

Sondra smiled, but not in her typically kind way. “Connie did a lot more than Jeff’s taxes. She was his latest lover here, and I think she actually hoped he’d leave his wife for her. As if.”

“If this building is razed, would Jeff stay her lover? Or —”

“Find a new cow in a new pasture. He took up with Connie when he needed her help with the IRS,” Sondra said. “And yes, rejection bites. But really, our parting was painless.”

I looked at Rita and she smiled. “I never had an affair with Jeff, and he never gave me a cut on my rent, alas. I’m odd, I know, but I simply like this building.” She paused, her expression pensive. “Connie had acupuncture for the first time last week. Asked multiple questions.”

I concentrated on the possibilities. “Were you missing needles?” I asked.

“I use ten- and three-packs and inventory when I re-order. Connie asked how I manage to keep track of the needles I insert. Of course I attributed her curiosity to her accountant’s personality.”

Before calling the police, I went to Connie’s office adjoining the coffee shop. I found her sitting, silent, in front of a photo of Jeff and her, beside a flower arrangement dominated by lovely blue Arizona Monkshood.

###