

PATRICIA G. STEVENSON

A Professor Del Channing Murder Mystery™



The
MURDER
Manuscript

PROLOGUE

From their lofty rock perch on the east side of Sutter Island, they watched the sun rise. It appeared like a bright, orange ball floating up out of the sea, reminiscent of a gas balloon at a lighter-than-air rally.

“Beautiful,” Del said.

“My favorite time of day,” Leah said. “Makes me feel young again.”

They sat in a shroud of silence enjoying the ambiance of the island.

Del eyed the narrowing margin of open sand. “Much as I hate to break this up, we’d better get moving or we won’t make it past the high tide line up ahead.”

He helped Leah up and they scrambled down the rocks to the sand. With a smile, Del lead,

running off around the jutting cliff only to hear the crack of a gun and the zing of a bullet ricocheting off the rocks. By the time he heard the second shot and felt the wet sand fly in his face as it splattered near his feet, he had turned and grabbed a startled Leah to drag her back around the protruding rocks. He heard the third shot, but not the fourth for as he gained the protection of the rocks he fell, face forward, into the wet sand, blood running down his face.



With a loud bang, a chrysanthemum of light blossomed in the dark sky, followed by white zigzags, a blue circle, and yellow sparks that hung for a second like the branches of a willow tree.

“Ooo-ahh,” uttered the group seated on the dock of Sutter Island, just off Maine’s coast. The Fourth of July fireworks were being set off on the mainland just south of the South Port Marina. From there the twinkling lights of the small boats and yachts moored at the dock appeared to float in the air. The fireworks continued getting larger, more frequent and louder; sprouting before them with every vibrant color imaginable. Along with each display of beauty came a sharp bang and Del Channing flinched at each sound.

Bif Fredrickson, seated on Del's left, his round face shining, his short red hair standing at mandatory attention, did not flinch, but blonde haired Nan, Bif's cousin, seated on Del's right, did. She clutched Del's arm with each sound.

"Ooo-ahh," they all said. "Ooo-ahh."

The finale came with an intensity of colors, lights and sound. then died, leaving only whiffs of smoke drifting toward them out to sea.

"Beautiful as usual," Nan said, standing up. She flipped her long, blonde hair over her slim shoulders.

"Great display," Del said in agreement.

"Bet that cost a bundle," Bif said.

Subconsciously Del heard the shuffle of feet on the dock and then a loud gasp.

"Get help," he heard a female voice say, and he directed his line of sight to the upper dock where a man in a wheel chair sat slumped. A uniformed nurse huddled over him, then straightened and announced, "Mr. Sutter's dead."

"What?" a voice from the crowd called out in amazement. "Old man Sutter's what?"

"Dead," the nurse said firmly. "He's been shot."

Bif took off like a shot himself through the double row of chairs and up the stairs toward the man in the wheelchair. Del moved quickly, hot on his heels.

“Stand back,” Bif shouted. “Don’t touch anything and everyone stay on the dock.” He searched the crowd behind him. “Nan?” he said.

“I’m here Bif,” Nan called. She waved her hand from the midst of the group milling around the chairs.

“Do you have your cellular with you?”

“I do,” Nan said.

“Call the cops. Tell them there’s been a mishap.”

Del could faintly see Nan as she dialed, then spoke into the phone. From where he stood he could just see the man slumped in his chair, a trickle of blood dripping onto his knees.

Bif stood in front of the man with the nurse, intently studying what Del surmised must be the direction of the bullet’s entry.

The nurse turned to one side, then another, looking for site lines. Her white uniform gave a ghostly appearance as the gentle breeze moved her skirt, and her face remained hidden in the shadow of her nursing cap.

Del moved back to Nan’s side.

“The police are sending the Coast Guard. They’ll be here tout de suite,” she said.

“Good,” Del said.

“When did it happen?” Nan asked.

Del shrugged. “Any of the explosions we heard

during the fireworks could have been the report of a gun," he said.

"Who did it?" Nan asked. "Oh, that's a stupid question, sounds like I expect you've seen the smoking gun. When the police get here they'll find the gun on someone."

"If it happened toward the last of the fireworks and wasn't a long-range rifle."

"You're just like cousin Bif, always complicating things."

"Sorry," he said. "It's just important to look at every possible aspect before you set your mind in a direction. If you don't, you'll end up nowhere close to your intended destination."

"You mean there's nowhere to run until you know where to run?"

"Exactly," Del said.

In the distance they could see the lights of a Coast Guard cutter, moving toward them at full speed.

The crowd restlessly milled around on the lower dock watching the ship pull alongside and throw its forward and aft lines to the dock. With great agility, a figure disembarked hurrying toward to the upper dock.

Del could hear the man in charge hail Bif and ask for particulars; the color of his uniform

graying beyond the lights of his ship. He heard him call out to someone onboard to direct the large forward spotlight to engulf him, Bif, the nurse and the late Mr. Sutter.

“Del,” Bif called from above, “will you get everyone down there seated and ready for the Captain here?”

Del’s white boat shoes squeaked on the dock as he circulated among the guests, getting them to return to the seats they were in during the fireworks. When everyone was back in place, Del himself sat down by Nan, making sure Bif’s seat remained unoccupied.

He saw another ship approaching.

“Who’s that?” Nan asked, pointing to the ship just arriving.

Del ran his hand through his longish blond hair. “I’d guess the local police and probably a doctor and the forensic crew.”

The smoke from the fireworks drifted above them and the noise from the Coast Guard cutter drowned out the subdued chatter of the guests. When the second ship docked, the first man off was large, clumsy, and obviously no sailor. His dark suit, white shirt and dark tie set him in a class with Bif’s work attire.

“By the great blue whale,” he called up to Bif,

“is that you?”

“It’s me all right,” Bif said. He reached out his hand and shook the large man’s hand with apparent enthusiasm.

From the back, Del could see the telltale wrinkles which indicated that today had been long and hard for the policeman.

“Del,” Bif called and waved, “come up.”

Del rose from his chair and mounted the stairs, coming face to face with the pair of policemen.

“Bingo, this is Professor Del Channing,” Bif said. He looked at Del. “Sheriff Bing’s the head honcho here.”

“Yeah,” Bingo said.

Del’s six feet two inches came up to the sheriff’s ear lobe. As he shook hands he pondered the liability of the man being so large a target. His own large hand seemed lost in Bingo’s.

“What’d you see, Professor?” the sheriff asked.

“Nothing out of the ordinary for a fireworks display. Lots of beautiful lights to distract, lots of noise to hide a gun shot.”

“Not quite open and shut?” Sheriff Bing suggested.

Del shook his head. “Sadly, no,” he said.

“Fredrickson, why not take your seat, relax, and we’ll talk after I’ve had a chance to hear what the group has to say.”

Bif smiled, gave an okay sign with his thumb and forefinger, and walked back down the stairs with Del to take their seats.

Del noted Nan's face was unusually pale and her shoulder, touching him, trembled.

"Whoever would kill a nice man like Mr. Sutter?" she asked.

"Lots of weird people in this old world," Bif said.

Sheriff Bing moved down the stairs toward them.

"Bingo," Bif said, "this is my cousin, Nan Fredrickson. She does the accounting for the Inn."

Sheriff Bing tipped his hat.

"We're going to search everyone up at the Inn, give a paraffin test, and then interview as many as possible, tonight," the sheriff said. "Bif, I wonder if I could have you sit in on the interviews and maybe you could take notes?"

"I'd be glad to," Bif said.

"We have a half a block stroll through the woods to get there. I'll need your eyes watching as we go," Sheriff Bing said. "We'll move as soon as forensics moves the body."

Nan stood up, stretched, and shivered. Her filmy, light-green dress moved, disturbed by a freshening breeze.

"Are you alright?" Del asked. He, too, stood up

and put his hand under her elbow.

“I’m freezing,” she whispered.

Del put his arm around her shoulders. “Better?” he asked.

“A little.”

Del noted that the earlier slight breeze was turning into a cold wind.

There came the sound of shuffling feet, when the Doctor and the forensic group filed down the steps followed by two coastguardsmen carrying a covered stretcher.

“Miss Fredrickson, would you lead everyone up to the Inn; to the public room just off the lobby?”

Nan nodded her assent to the sheriff.

“I’ll have a man go with you in case anyone decides to go to their rooms. Bif, please follow after four have gone past. Professor you go after the next four, and I’ll bring up the rear.

“Okay,” Bif said.

Del nodded.

“Keep a close watch as to how they walk. If they deviate from the trail, call them back. Also if they drop or throw anything on the way, remember where and tell me.” Sheriff Bing started Nan on her way along the lighted path and began directing the others up the stairs toward Sutter Island Inn.