



Chapter 1

Pat was still several miles away from her first appointment of the day – an initial unpaid assessment with a potential new client – so she let her mind wander as she drove along the smooth, tree-lined road to the outer, more wealthy suburbs. As always, she thought about the little pockets of mess she had left at her own house. *Why am I going out to organize someone else when I should be staying home and organizing myself?* And she thought about what a lovely late summer day it was, and how it would be just perfect to sit in her screened-in sunroom with a glass of lemonade and begin working on one of the

many books she planned to write. *Someday* ... And she thought about the class she had taken last evening on personal safety when working with clients. There were three things the instructor said should always signal safety concerns: guns, ...

“In fifty feet, turn left on Grovewood Road,” directed the disembodied male voice of Pat’s new GPS device, jarring Pat from her daydreams. She instinctively flipped on her turn signal and began to brake, squinting at the street sign to make sure the GPS knew where she was. Until this point, there had not been another car on the road, but now there was one approaching from the other direction, requiring Pat to come to a complete stop and wait before making her turn.

Once she was able to proceed, she saw a sign, positioned just a few feet in from the turn. It read: “Grovewood Estates, Private Drive, Residents Only.” Pat paused.

Grovewood Estates. This was the right place. Once the sprawling homestead and farm of Harvey Grove, pioneer and businessman, the land had since been divided into generous twenty-acre parcels, each graced with its own residence.

Private Drive. That meant that the residents of the Estates had to maintain this road, including making sure the snow was plowed in the winter.

Residents Only. *Hmm.* Maybe Pat should be worried about guns after all. But surely the people who lived here had family and friends who would visit. And didn't they ever need plumbers or electricians? And what about professional organizers, such as Pat? Pat looked around. There was no gatehouse. No intercom system. If there were surveillance cameras, they were well hidden.

"In one quarter mile, turn right on Grovewood Lane," the disembodied GPS voice commanded for the third time, finally breaking through Pat's thoughts to her conscious brain. Grovewood Estates, Grovewood Road, Grovewood Lane. Pat proceeded toward her destination, hoping her potential new client had more creativity than the real estate developers who had named this subdivision.

Eleanor Grafton's driveway was easy to identify. It was flanked by a boulder on each side – the house number painted on one, and the family name painted on the other. Pat drove another thousand feet before she saw the mansion itself. On the way she reviewed

what she knew of Eleanor, which wasn't much. Pat had only spoken to Eleanor for about two minutes yesterday afternoon and had not had time to do her usual Internet sleuthing. Eleanor had merely stated that she was recently widowed and wanting to sort through all of her husband's personal possessions which, she claimed, in recent years had pretty much taken over the house.

Halfway up the driveway Pat was joined by two sizable dogs that she hoped would have the good sense to stay out from under the tires of her minivan. As she eased to a stop under the house's porte-cochère, the dogs took up positions just outside the driver's door, bared their teeth, and began a low growl. Pat rolled down her window partway to try to calm them, but they only growled louder. She rolled the window back up. While it was not the best way to begin an appointment, Pat had no choice but to phone Eleanor.

Pat waited for the answering system message to finish. Then she began, "Hello, Eleanor, it's Patience Oaktree, the professional organizer. I know you're probably screening your calls since it's time for our appointment, but please pick up." Pat did not want to pause for too long because she knew that would

cause the recorder to shut off, so she continued to babble, “I’m in your driveway right now, but ...”

“Hello!”

“Hello, Eleanor? It’s Patience Oaktree. I’m here in your driveway, but your dogs seem to be a little concerned about it.” Pat tried to sound unfazed.

“Oh, don’t mind them. They’re a German Shepherd-Collie mix, so they like to herd everything. They won’t hurt you.”

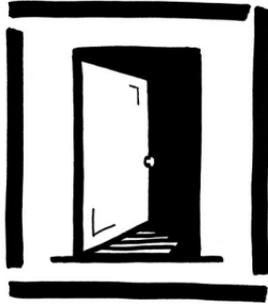
Pat remembered the safety instructor’s admonition to trust her instincts. “Thanks, but I always like to have a friendly, personal introduction before stepping onto any dog’s turf.” Pat wanted to be amiable, but firm at the same time.

“Okay, I’ll be out in a minute.” Eleanor clicked off the phone, but she must have been on her way even as they were speaking, because it was not two seconds before she flung open the front door, phone in one hand, two leashes in the other.

Pat watched as Eleanor called the dogs, “Come here, Fluffy! And you, too, Friskers!” Eleanor was quite tall and lean, elderly but not old-looking, with neatly curled ear-length white hair with just a touch of blonde color to it. She wore a crisply pressed pale

blue broadcloth shirt with little embroidered flowers, slender blue jeans that accentuated her height, and canvas clogs. She looked both wealthy and down-to-earth at the same time.

With the dogs secured, Pat grabbed her briefcase and hopped out of her minivan to make a proper introduction.



Chapter 2

Pat thought Fluffy and Friskers had sniffed her acquaintance with more suspicion than playfulness, and was relieved that, as she and Eleanor went inside, Eleanor released the dogs back to the outdoors. Pat took a deep breath, as unnoticeably as possible, to refocus her attention on her prospective client.

“First, let me show you around, so you get an idea of what I’m dealing with,” Eleanor said assertively.

“Sure,” replied Pat, and she took out a pad and pen from her briefcase so she could take notes as they went. She had the sense that Eleanor had already

given the situation a lot of thought. With some clients it was so hard to get them to show anything, but not with Eleanor. Of course she made it clear that all of the stuff she was dealing with was not her doing, but rather had been left by her late husband.

“The foyer here is fine, and the kitchen and the kids’ rooms, too, but that’s about it,” began Eleanor, as she led Pat into the formal living room. Pat looked around. An ornate hand-knotted rug anchored the room. The furniture was appropriate – the more delicate settees and chairs covered in silk, the heavier furniture upholstered in leather. The wooden accent tables contained lamps and candy dishes – with individually wrapped chocolates that Pat would have loved to sample – and coasters. There was a small piano in one corner of the room. A sofa lined part of one side of the room, and on the wall behind it were three individually framed poster-sized photos that formed a panoramic view of a lake and fishing village. Over the mantel was an even larger single photograph of the Grand Canyon.

Pat saw Eleanor wave her hand around the room, and realized Eleanor was still talking. “... and all his photographs. After Howard caught the virus and we

had to give up traveling, he just seemed to get into a little of everything. But he never was good at cleaning up after himself, not in the whole fifty-five years we were married. Look, there's one of his projects-turned-messes over there on the floor by the couch. He obviously had it in his head to rewire that outlet, and then just abandoned the idea without another thought."

Pat saw the outlet cover, screws, voltage tester, screwdriver, and package with the new receptacle, which she could tell was the wrong color, all in a pile on the floor under an electrical outlet. The plug from the nearest lamp lay disconnected a few inches away.

Pat made a note on her pad.

"Well, never mind, I'm sure I can get the handyman to fix the outlet. And he knows to clean up when he's done," Eleanor concluded.

Pat put an "x" through her note.

"Did you say your husband took these photos?" Pat asked with a calculated tone of admiration in her voice, hoping to be able to pick up the part of Eleanor's explanation she had missed without sounding absent-minded.

"That's what I said. You'll see his work throughout

the house. ... Now, tell me, you keep all your clients' information totally confidential, do you not?" Eleanor asked as she escorted Pat into the dining room.

"Absolutely."

"Do you photograph your work?"

"Only if you want me to."

"Well, I don't."

Pat took a quick glance at another beautiful hand-crafted rug and an elegant dining set. And, again, incredible photos on the walls, this time of waterfalls and fields of wildflowers. But the thing that took Pat's professional-organizer breath away, as is so often the case, was the dining room table. Here, in this elegant room, it was completely covered with model airplane parts, tubes of glue, paint bottles, brushes, instruction sheets, and scraps of rags.

Pat made a note on her pad.

"Can you believe I let him take over my dining room to make model airplanes? He said this room had the best natural light. After a couple weeks, he said he needed a little break, and that was over a year ago! Oh well, Howard's World War II club will like this. I think the best thing to do is call them to come get this stuff, don't you?" Eleanor asked rhetorically.

Pat put an “x” through her note.

“Did I read on your website that you’ve been a professional organizer for nine years?” This time Eleanor’s question, even though she seemed to know the answer, was not rhetorical.

“That’s right.” Pat decided to stick with short, simple answers.

Next came the great room, walls adorned with geysers, mountains, and jungle wildlife. Howard had also left behind several piles of old toys. “He was sorting them for the future great-grandkids,” explained Eleanor.

Pat “x”ed through her note before she even completed writing it, as Eleanor said that all seven of her grandchildren would be visiting the next week, and she would have them each make their own selections for their future children.

“How far in advance are you booked? Would you be able to start here right away?”

Pat thought those sounded like trick questions. If she wasn’t available immediately, Eleanor might decide to look for someone else; but if she had a wide open calendar, Eleanor might think she was not very good at what she did. Fortunately, honesty

would cover both objections. “I have a few free hours in the next two weeks, but I’m holding those open for assessment meetings like this one. I haven’t put together my schedule after that, because I like to leave flexibility for whatever comes up.”

They crossed through the kitchen and up the back stairway, walked past several bedrooms that Eleanor indicated belonged to “the kids,” and entered the master suite. Here the photographic theme was family portraits. But Eleanor wasted no time in getting to Howard’s dressing room. His clothes and accessories were everywhere – on the hangers and tossed on the chairs, folded on the shelves and dropped on the floor, inside the drawers and stacked in laundry baskets.

“It’s so hard to go through someone’s clothes when they die. So emotional,” sighed Eleanor.

As Pat began to make another note on her pad, she offered some words of encouragement. “So true.” Pat felt at last they must have come to the project for which she had been called, and she wanted to encourage Eleanor so that her grief wouldn’t overtake her.

“What have you done in the past in these situations?” asked Eleanor.

Pat was happy Eleanor was finally calling on her for some professional expertise. “I generally suggest that each family member select a small number of items they will wear or want to keep for sentimental reasons. Then I encourage them to pick a favorite charity to receive the bulk of the clothes so that they can be put to good use by those who will really appreciate having them.”

“Excellent advice! I think the family can handle that,” declared Eleanor while she escorted Pat out of the dressing room and closed the door behind them.

And Pat “x”ed out her latest notation.

Heading back downstairs, Pat realized she had just been on a walking employment interview. She had nothing but her self-confidence to assure her that she had done well, but she didn’t think her performance mattered since there didn’t seem to be any work for her to do here anyway.

Back in the foyer, Eleanor led Pat to a door that was almost hidden in the shadows behind the main staircase. As she turned the doorknob, she announced, “Now this” – and there was a telling emphasis on the word “this” – “is the real mess.”

The home office was decorator-perfect. Pat made