

The Belen Hitch

Chapter 1

“Aiiiiieeee, ha, ha, ha!!” wailed KANW—my favorite radio station—as I drove, one hand holding a cup of java and the other tapping rhythm on the steering wheel. 7:30 a.m. Zoom, zoom on the freeway, my Toyota pulling to the right at the high speed. In less than half an hour I’d be interviewing Phillipa Petty, the internationally known artist—and royal witch—according to Mom who’d been her friend for a couple of centuries.

I drove through sleepy Belén feeling optimistic for no good reason. Just being on the road, pushing my business plan forward, was enough on this frisky fall morning.

Over the railroad track onto a little blue highway, I wound my way towards the secluded house owned by the cantankerous painter who’d made the tiny community of Las Jefas her home for more than fifty years.

Another turn, then down a long, dirt drive, ka-bumping my coffee all over the place. Who cared? Nothing could faze me. Sure, I had other clients—but this was my second gig as a roving PR pro marketing the little New Mexican towns I loved.

“*Vida triste, vida dolorosa*,” I sang along with my mourning *compadre*, windows open to wake me at this ungodly hour. Trumpets brassy with woe sighed as they lost volume and the song finished. One last swig of caffeine before I silenced the music and parked the car.

A wooden bridge girdled a sludgy irrigation ditch, beyond that stretched a cobbled walkway. Then steps. Why did anyone need so many steps? I climbed them, huffing by the 27th, cussing by the 31st.

I rang the doorbell.

“Ms. Petty?” I called, nudging a yellowed cottonwood leaf with my foot. “Anyone home?” I pushed the button again. “Hello? It’s Sasha Solomon . . . Hannah’s daughter.” I pushed the bell again.

“We have an appointment.” I kicked the screen door. Just a bit.

Inside the house, a phone jangled. It was an old sound. I imagined the machine, a black rotary job, heavy and inconvenient, with iffy reception. The perfect instrument for an aged and contradictory artist like Petty. Just when I had the image secure in my mind, I heard a recorded voice, a beep, then another voice much like my mom’s. A moment later, a dial tone droned an empty, sad sound. Obviously, Petty liked to make everyone wait.

“All right. I get the picture,” I muttered, rapping on her window this time. The glass refracted light like tin foil and my once tidy brown braid unraveled in its reflection.

I pulled a brush from my purse and proceeded to straighten up, puckering my lips with new color, and trying to assess the pantsuit I’d chosen. A bit tight, damnit. I still needed to lose those ten pounds. If I were vain, I’d pluck my unruly eyebrows too. Bob, my semi-boyfriend, always picked at me about how little I did to “present myself to the world”—his words, not mine. I always told him, “Hey, this is New Mexico. We go for natural here. If you want a fashion model, go to Paris.”

My nose itched. I pinched it, forestalling a sneeze, and tapped the window again. “Anybody home?”

Did the lady have a hearing problem? It didn’t sound like it on the phone yesterday when we’d spoken.

A little look-see wouldn’t hurt anyone. Would it? So, I, uh . . . Petty’s front doorknob turned with just-greased ease.

“Hello?” I let myself in. Morning sunbeams filtered through thick curtains and barely illuminated an overstuffed pink couch that resembled anemic lox. Vases filled with

dead roses the color of dried blood covered bookcases that had never known magazines, let alone books. Fine but copious dust served as a major element in her interior design.

A hissing noise, a burning smell.

I found the kitchen, its windows fogged from steam spewing out of a large pot of boiling water. The liquid, now down to its last quarter inch, had left a high white mineral rim. Two plump loaves of burned-black bread dried in the oven.

"Ms. Petty?" I turned off the appliances.

A dark corridor beyond the kitchen led to brightness. I took out my new digital camera—a toy I hoped to convert into a work tool as soon as I figured out how to use it. Maybe I'd catch the artist at work in her studio. Almost to the door, I saw the puffy top of a foot in a rubber-soled tan shoe. A knee-high, flesh-colored stocking had inched its way down the age-speckled leg that lay motionless in the perversely cheerful sunlight of a greenhouse-like structure. I snapped a photo, then another, before I realized what I was doing. My trembling fingers clicked a third picture as I lowered the camera back into my purse.

"Ma'am? Ms. Petty?" I said, tiptoeing further in.

The artist sprawled face up on the floor, a jumble of death. She clutched a paintbrush in one hand, the handle of a large ceramic coffee mug in the other. Dried blood crusted around the opening of her right nostril. A horrid, corrosive smell—like rotten eggs—slammed into my nose. I tried to hold my breath, but was too late.

I ran down the hall and found the toilet in time to throw up. In my life, I'd only seen two dead people. The first had been horrifying, the man brutally murdered. Today, it was an old lady who'd expired, a heart or brain that had given out. But the proximity of death, the smell and look of it, rendered me limp.

I staggered back to the studio, picked up my dropped purse and pulled out the cell phone. My throat hurt, my nostrils burned. I dialed 911.

There was nothing to do but wait.

An unfinished life-size painting rested on two easels, its human figures faceless. One held a broken crucifix. Another stomped on a silver chalice.

No surprise there. Petty earned her fame though blasphemy, debasing beloved religious icons with vigor—Moses kissing a pig, Buddha driving a BMW. Her most famous painting, *The Cross-Dressing Christ*, had thrust her into artsy-fartsy spotlights in Paris, New York, and later, Berlin. Hey, controversy sells. Gallery owners and museum curators loved her.

Petty earned other responses as well. Millions of religious devotees—Christian, Moslem, Jewish and Jain—hated her guts.

I'd followed her career for years, as had many a New Mexican interested in her art. From a technical standpoint, she merited her reputation as a master painter. In this artist's deft hands, oil paints became the pulse of a beating heart, anger on a parsimonious mouth, the tear in a bloodshot eye.

Technique can go only so far. There's the small question of subject matter. Petty excelled at shocking and alienating. I've gotta say, the Moses-thing upset me; and I even eat pork. If her life's goal centered on offending, she'd succeeded in spades. No wonder she and Mom got along so well.

Mom. How am I going to tell Mom?

The thought yanked me back to the here-and-now horror of the artist's death.

Striving to holster my increasing panic and revulsion, I surveyed the room further. A clutter of images dampened my adrenaline: an orchid wilting, bunches of herbs drying upside-down on a laundry line. An overturned tuberous begonia, its thick branches broken and oozing.

Windows stood open. Others had round cracks, resembling shot-out windshields. Belén's mayor warned me Petty had earned enemies in his town. Good thing they'd only broken glass.

The phone rang again, two times. Then Ms. Petty's recording sounded its terse command, "Leave me a message."

"Philly?" Mom's voice panicked with a frightening feebleness through the house. "Philly? What's happened? Philly! Answer me! Philly!"

Where was the phone? Not in the hall. Not on this table or that dresser.

Beeeeeeep. Too late.

I realized I was panting, not from the search but from anxiety. Mom's fear squeezed the air out of me and tightened my throat. My lungs worked double time, my heart quadrupled its arrhythmic beats.

Why did Mom sound so scared? It couldn't be a coincidence that she called while I was supposed to be interviewing Ms. Petty. I'd heard of people having premonitions about their friends being in danger. Maybe Mom sensed the artist had died. That could make my job easier when I went to tell her. No. Telling her would be awful no matter what.

I went back to Petty's studio. Papers lay willy-nilly on a wooden table and some had cascaded onto the floor. My stomach revolted again, my throat seared. I swallowed hard and stepped closer. Next to her body lay a black-and-white photograph of three people leaning against a 1957 Ford T-Bird, a hardtop convertible, with its wonderful portholes and ostentatious tail fins. It had to be Mom's car—white exterior with red leather interior—the car I'd learned to drive in. The paintbrush in Petty's hand obscured the faces but I recognized one woman's stance. To get a better look, I stooped so near I could detect the artist's musty odor sneaking through pungent baby powder.

Mom looked straight at the camera. The edges of her lips tipped up with a smile I'd never seen before. She wore clippy shoes and bobby socks. Her pleated skirt triangulated out from her young hips to below her knees. Had she really had such a small waist? Her hair! A black poof up top with a weird indentation as if someone had smashed his hand right in the middle of it and hairspray had shellacked the assault in place. Her ponytail was only hinted at, but I knew it was there tickling her mid back. I'd seen it in other cherished pictures from the same era.

The woman beside Mom had to be the one now at my feet. Lithe and blonde with an impish expression, Phillipa Petty stood arm-in-arm with the man. With her other hand, she shielded her eyes, perhaps to get a better view of the photographer. The man she held had short dark hair and eyebrows that slashed across his forehead as if they'd been drawn in black permanent marker. He, too, smiled as his tie blew to one side and his other hand held a highball glass midway to his mouth.

Outside Petty's studio, sirens now shrilled, making the room even colder. With a cough, I stood up, then bent again succumbing to the temptation. I wanted the photo. I wanted to own that frozen image of my mother—young, beautiful and alive to the world's possibilities. Petty wouldn't need it now. From what I knew, she'd never been married, never had kids. This picture was *mine*. Finders keepers. I put it in my purse.

Ah, Mom. How would she deal with this blow? A woman she'd known longer than I'd been alive. A dear friend whose artistic career she'd helped to launch more than 45 years ago. Maybe I'd give her the photo—her friend ambered in that long-ago happy moment.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs and across the wooden porch. A hard knock sounded. I walked through the kitchen and into the living room of a house that had become too familiar. Another knock, closer to a thud this time.

"I'll be right there," I said.