

TRUTH KILLS

by Nanci Rathbun

Chapter 1

Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles.

—Analects of Confucius

I'm a professional snoop and I'm good at it. While on the job, I can look like the senior partner of an accountancy firm in my pinstriped navy business suit, or the neighborhood white-haired old-lady gossip. Off the job, I'm a fifty-something hottie—white hair gelled back, dramatic eye make-up, toned body encased in designer duds. Gravity has taken a small toll, but who notices in candlelight?

As I rubbed potting soil into the cooking oil that I'd already smeared on my Salvation Army second-hand clothes, I examined myself in the mirror. A short, plain woman (five foot, three inches) with choppy white hair and no make-up, wearing dirty, baggy clothes, looked back at me. A homeless person. I nodded and headed down the fire stairs to the parking garage, trying to avoid meeting any of my neighbors.

The beauty of being a woman, as the French say, "of a certain age," is that I can be invisible. Young people, both men and women, look right through me, unless I make the effort to be noticed. Older men look past me, too, to gaze upon the tight, toned, tanned bodies that they wish they could possess. Only older women seem to notice me, because they're judging me against some invisible standard and wondering how I measure up compared to them. It's not usually malicious, it's just how we were raised. Believe me, I do it myself. Is her ass tighter than mine? Are her boobs perkier? Any cellulite on those thighs?

It's competition at the most primitive level, the female equivalent of two silver-backed gorillas thumping chests and roaring at each other.

Today, however, wasn't a hottie day. Elisa Morano, one of the aforementioned tight, toned and tanned, was suspected of playing house with my client's husband, Anthony Belloni, a.k.a. Tony Baloney. Tony's cellular phone bill listed lots of calls to Ms. Morano's apartment, coincidentally located in one of Tony's many real estate holdings. His credit card statement showed purchases of lingerie, perfume and a fur coat, stuff that his wife, Gracie, had yet to see. To top it off, Gracie was eight months pregnant with their fifth child and spitting mad. She hired me to find out whether Tony was indeed cheating with Elisa Morano.

Which brings me back to my bag lady persona. Dumpster diving is legal. Once the trash is on the curb, it's public property. The Supremes ruled on it, and I mean Scalia and company, not the group Diana Ross fronted. People like me make a good living, finding out stuff from the trash. The problem is getting to it. The super will stop an average Jane from digging through the garbage, but if he sees a bag lady, he'll likely turn the other way. No harm in recycling, right?

So on this hot Thursday morning in August, I parked my car a block away, shuffled up the drive to Elisa's building and jumped into the dumpster that squatted behind it. My short stature made it easy for me to hide in there, as I searched for something with her name on it. These people were upper class, everything was nicely bagged and I didn't think I'd have to worry about getting crap on my car seat when I was done.

It took about twenty minutes to find the bag, full of paper that was run through a shredder. I couldn't be sure until I put it all back together, but there was a piece with an "El"

still intact. Maybe it was “Elisa.” It was all I found that even remotely fit, so I tossed it over the side and heaved myself out, straight into the path of a hulk in a black suit.

“Watcha doin’ there, lady?” Tony Baloney’s bodyguard, Jimmy the Arm, asked as he grabbed me and pinned me to the side of the dumpster. Jimmy’s sleeve-defying biceps compensate for his tiny mental gifts.

I realized that Jimmy didn’t recognize me, despite having seen me on numerous occasions, both social and professional. My bag lady persona was my best defense. “Nothin.’ I ain’t doin’ nothin.’ Just lookin,’” I responded.

“For what?”

“Stuff ta sell. Clothes. Shoes. Books. Cans. These rich folks toss out good stuff.” I pulled a face. “But not much today, one bag. Just my luck.”

“Well, leave it and get goin’ and don’t come back to this building. Unnerstan?” He gave a little shove for good measure, not enough to hurt. His mama must have raised him well. Of course, he’d toss a rival into a cement mixer with no qualms. But I’m not averse to using whatever advantages come my way. I earned all the white on my head, and if it gets me out of a jam, it’s just one of the perks of being slightly older.

I sloped off down the driveway, looking behind me as if scared that Jimmy was following. Actually, I was checking that the bag was still lying next to the dumpster. Sure enough, Jimmy ignored it and entered the building by the super’s door. Guess Jimmy’s mama never taught him to pick up trash. I scuttled back, grabbed the bag, and sprinted down the street to the lot where I left my car, to drive back to the office.

I share office space on Prospect Avenue, on Milwaukee’s east side, with the firm of Neh Accountants. The “s” on the end is misleading. It’s a one-person company run by Susan Neh,

a third-generation Japanese-American. Susan and I met when we both worked for Jake Waterman. She conducted his financial investigations and I did his legwork—computer searches, tails, background checks. It didn't take Susan long to earn her CPA and go out on her own. I joined her when I got my P.I. license and needed a place to hang my shingle. Most of Susan's clientele are of Japanese descent, but lately, she's working with a few Hmong and Vietnamese. She kids me about my super-expressive Italians and Sicilians, and I jab her about her inscrutable Asians. I was glad to find that Susan was out on a client call today. It saved me from explaining my less than glamorous appearance.

It took me six hours of tedious, neck-straining, eyeball-screaming work to piece the shredded paper from the bag back together. Luckily, Elisa didn't have a cross-cut shredder, just the kind that produces long strips of paper. I can reassemble cross-cut, too, given enough time and motivation. The only way to be absolutely sure that no one can read your letters is to burn them and pulverize the ashes, or soak the paper in a pail of water mixed with a half-cup of bleach to destroy the ink. Then you can toss the blank paper with no worries.

Like most people, Elisa simply put a plastic bag into the can and shredded it into the bag. When she lifted it out and discarded it, the remains were in distinct layers, making it easier to separate and reassemble. It helped that the paper had different colors and textures. It's like working a jigsaw puzzle, without the picture on the box for a guide.

Six hours later, I had a pretty fair understanding of the woman—vain (online article about Botox, with list of local practitioners), fertile (Ortho-Provera drug interaction statement from a mail-order prescription company), savvy (year-old Vanguard mutual fund

statement showing a 70K balance), cautious (no intact papers with her name in the dumpster, she apparently shredded everything).

I wasn't any closer, though, to discovering if Tony was indeed making it with the beautiful Ms. Morano, and my back was screaming from hours of bending over the office work table. My skin itched, even though I'd changed out of my clean dirty clothes, and it was already six o'clock. I made copies of the pieced-together papers, tossed them in my briefcase, and headed for home in my Black Cherry Miata convertible. There aren't enough top-down days in southeast Wisconsin, but this was one and I felt good, tooling down Lincoln Memorial Drive with the cool air of Lake Michigan on my skin. Heaven.

The Miata, like my condo, was a gift to myself following my divorce. The decree restored both my self-respect and my maiden name—Angelina Bonaparte, pronounced Boe-nah-par-tay, not Bo-nah-part. Napoleon was a Corsican-*cum*-French wannabe, so he left the last syllable off, but I'm one hundred percent Sicilian and I pronounce it the way it was meant to be pronounced.

I love my car. It symbolizes my post-marriage financial and emotional independence, and the sense of personal daring that I kept under tight wraps while I was Mrs. Bozo (I call him "your dad" when the kids are around, even though they're grown and have their own kids). I still shudder to think of twenty-five prime years spent trying to fit the pattern of wife, lover, mother, housekeeper. Picture June Cleaver wearing a sassy red thong under her demure shirtwaist dress.

Bozo started playing around when he turned fifty. Funny, whenever I heard about some guy running around on his wife, I always told my best friend, Judy, that the door wouldn't hit my butt on the way out. When it happened to me, though, I decided that I owed a

twenty-five year marriage at least one chance. Or two. Three was when I changed the locks, packed his clothes and put the suitcases on the front lawn. I reminded him of Papa's toast at our wedding—"There are no divorces in our family. There are widows, but no divorces." It scared him purple.

Of course, we did divorce and I did manage to dissuade Papa from having Bozo fitted for lead sneakers, or seeing to it that his body was made unfit for further nookie. The Miata was my first indulgence after the proceedings. I went down to the dealer with a check in hand that very day. Then I put the house on the market and signed the papers for my East side high-rise condo. I heard the whispers about "middle-aged crazy" and "trying to prove something," but I ignored them. This was me, the real me, not that convention that I'd tried to squeeze myself into all those years.

I stepped into my foyer and locked the door behind me. Shedding clothes as I walked, I tossed the dirty duds into my bedroom closet's built-in hamper and walked naked into the bathroom. If driving the Miata is car heaven, standing under a steam shower with five heads massaging from toes to crown is surely water heaven.

Thirty minutes later, moisturized, gelled, dressed in yoga pants and a tee shirt, I sipped a glass of Chardonnay and stared into the fridge. Then I glared at the goods in the freezer. Why is it that there's never anything to eat when you just want to stay in? It would have to be another deep dish Milwaukee special night—cheese, sausage, mushrooms, onions, the famous "SMO." I was either going to have to step up my exercise program and cut back on the fat, or buy a bigger wardrobe. While I love shopping for clothes, the second option didn't appeal. Bozo used to pinch my waist and smirk when he could get an inch between his fingers. I love to see him assess my figure now, when we attend family functions like

birthdays and baptisms. There's no way I'm gaining back that inch, so I resolved to do some grocery shopping soon. Just for good measure, I did twenty minutes of yoga/Pilates while waiting for the pizza. A couple chapters of the latest Sue Grafton (I love that Kinsey, but, jeez, one black dress for her whole adult life?) and I was ready to pound the pillow. Solo.

It's been months since my last serious involvement. He thought I wouldn't find out about the bar-time pickups. "Honest, Angie, it doesn't mean a thing. I just like a little variety." Sometimes I wish I was a lesbian, it would make life so much easier. I hear they're more than ninety-percent faithful. What a concept!

I met Kevin, my current guy, four weeks ago. My neighbor Sally and her son, Joseph, introduced us. Joseph was diagnosed with Muscular Dystrophy at age six. Kevin is his physical therapist. Picture Harrison Ford as Han Solo in the first *Star Wars* movie—a little rough, killer body, redeeming lop-sided smile that gets him out of all sorts of trouble. He's thirty-eight, so, yes, he's a few years younger than I am. Given the actuarial tables and my energy level, that's good.

We've been doing that painful boy-girl dance ever since, the one we all first learned in adolescence. Is he available? Cute enough? Is she needy? Pretty enough? Will he want to go to bed right away? Do I want to? Should I? Add today's refinements —STDs? Last HIV test? Last lover? *Ad infinitum. Ad nauseum.* Even my best friend Judy is getting sick of me. "Just DO IT," she yelled at me last week.

"Can't," I responded. "You know me." She groaned. We've been through this a lot in the course of the five years since my divorce. I have this little hang-up. I won't deal with dishonesty on a personal basis. Go figure, someone in my line of work! So I operate on the assumption that everyone is hiding something. I run credit checks and criminal and civil

court searches on the men who ask me out. I watch them for signs of fooling around—scents they don't normally wear, clothes changed in the middle of the day, long lunches when they can't be called, lots of little clues that mean nothing and everything. I'm not proud of it, but I won't be a fool again. I haven't figured a way out of the morass that women and men seem to sink into. Most nights, like tonight, I sleep alone.