Matt McKay knew this diet was a killer the instant he heard the scream slice through the quiet night as easily as a spoon through chocolate mousse. Bracing himself on the back steps of the old mansion that had been transformed into a glitzy health spa, he listened as the scream continued to rise. All at once it stopped. And Matt knew. Someone in the kitchen below had been murdered.

He could have turned back and crept out of SpaWest, the terribly exclusive fat farm, but that was not Matt McKay's nature. As teenagers, he and Elizabeth Atwood, the woman he hoped to find here, had been America's daring detectives, their exploits providing the basis for a weekly television program. And even though that was almost twenty years ago and he was now graying, he could ignore neither his hunger nor his curiosity. He had to find out what happened down there in the kitchen.

The back staircase twisted down to a completely dark basement kitchen, and Matt felt his way one careful step at a time. Sensing the cool walls of the old mansion under his fingertips, the wooden stairs beneath his feet, he tried to keep quiet. The food area was strictly off limits, and one person had suffered already tonight for breaking that rule.

"Hey," called Matt in a whisper, "are you all right down there? If there's anything to eat besides sprouts and rice, save some for me."

In response to his call, he heard someone running, the steps beating against the kitchen's tile floor. Then a far door opened and closed, and the running steps faded into the night.

"Wait!" he called.

Had nothing happened? Had he merely stumbled upon someone raiding the refrigerator, just as he intended to do? Was something so good to eat that someone had cried out not in pain but in joy? With visions of roast beef, smoked salmon, fettucini Alfredo, and cakes and ice cream rippling through his mind, Matt, in his hurry, missed the last step.

"Ahh!" he cried as he stumbled into the depths of the blackened kitchen. He ricocheted off the corner of a stainless steel table, tripped over a bucket, grazed the stove, spun around, and landed on his back on the floor. He reached out and his fingers sank into a creamy mess he'd recognize anywhere, Cheesecake.

No sooner had he crashed than another door was thrown open. The overhead lights were switched on. Squinting, Matt looked across the room and
saw two women; one a slender blonde, the other — the one he knew — was dressed in a long terrycloth robe.

"Matt!"
"Elizabeth!"
"What...?"
"... are you...?"
"... doing..."
"... here?" he asked. "This is a real surprise."
"Matt!" she screamed, anger spreading across her face. "Don't lie. You knew I was here."

"Okay, okay. Don't get upset. Is it a crime that I wanted to talk to you?" he said, propping himself up on one elbow. "I didn't know what a long drive it was. And you know what else? I skipped both lunch and dinner. So, I'm upstairs and I'm thinking about all the food that's down here and..."

The attractive brunette shook her head. "Matt, this is Beverly. She's the senior partner of SpaWest, the one in all the brochures. Beverly, meet Matt. He's one of my long-lost friends — who won't stay that way."

Beverly pointed at the mess on the floor. "At least you could have used a plate."

Matt lifted his left hand from the cheesecake. "I'm sorry, really I am. But that's what happens when you leave desserts out on the floor. People trip over them."

"Say, I didn't think you were supposed to have this sort of thing around here."

"It's one of our famous recipes, made from a blend of yogurt, tofu, and secret cheeses." Suddenly she spotted something seeping around the edge of the refrigerator, and screamed, "B-b-blood!"

"Blood?" said Matt. He reached to his left and dabbed his finger in the bright red cherry sauce that smothered the cheesecake. "No," he said, after a taste, "it's a dessert topping."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Blood, Matt."

He licked his fingers. "Dessert topping, Elizabeth."

"Blood!"

"Dessert topping!"

Elizabeth smiled. "Matt," she said, "look on your other side."

He glanced over his right shoulder and around the corner of the refrigerator. A gray-haired woman, also wearing one of the spa's aqua robes, lay motionless on the floor. He scammed to his feet.

"You always have to be right, don't you?" he exclaimed. "That is blood."

"A lot of it, too, seeping out of the woman's body and into a pool on the tile floor. Elizabeth pulled up the bottom of her aqua robe, stepped over the cheesecake, then bent down to the body. She searched for a pulse, but found none.

"Looking first at Matt and then at Beverly, Elizabeth said, "She's dead."

"No!" gasped the spa owner. "That's Claudia Culpepper. The poor lady, this is terrible. It's terrible for us, too. Our guests pay thousands a week for serenity — not murder!"

Matt nodded toward a large kitchen knife that lay on the floor. "And I don't think it was the cheesecake that did it."

Beverly took a step back, glanced at Matt, and then looked at Elizabeth. "You don't think he... he..."

"Matt?" Elizabeth shook her head. "No, he couldn't. He wouldn't. Don't worry. He's harmless."

"Harmless? Me?" He scowled at her. "How do you know it wasn't me?"

"Why would you kill her?"

Matt glanced around. "We had a fight. She wouldn't give me any cheesecake. I begged, but she wouldn't. Then... then I just lost control."

"You did not."

"I did too."

"Did not."

"Did too."

Beverly cried, "No!"

Both Matt and Elizabeth turned to see the owner of the spa standing in the doorway of her office. They hurried to her. Papers, files, and drawers had been dumped and scattered all over the office. Beverly knew at once what was missing.

"The cookbook! Someone stole the cookbook!"

SpaWest was known across the country for the foods it served, the secret combinations of which were nourishing, filling, yet almost always slimming. While the ozone steamings, body peels, Dead Sea mud packs, and the fresh-cell facials were all first class, it was the cuisine that drew repeat customers.

"Our recipes are everything," wept Beverly. "They're almost priceless — last year I turned down a half-million dollar offer from a major publisher who..."
was certain he could make it the best-selling cookbook ever. I can't believe it — now it's gone! We'll be ruined!"

Elizabeth surveyed the scene of the burglary, then turned and studied the body. She quickly surmised what had happened.

"This woman must have secretly made her way down here for something to eat. Hoping no one would hear her, she quietly entered the kitchen and pulled out the cheesecake. Then suddenly she realized she wasn't alone. There was someone else — a burglar who had just stolen the cookbook."

"Right, and the thief had no choice but to kill her," added Matt. "I was on the back staircase when I heard the scream. Then I heard someone run out the back way."

"We came the front way past the mineral baths and through the dining room. We didn't see anyone," Elizabeth glanced at the double doors in the back of the kitchen. "Come on. We're wasting time."

"I'll call the police," said Beverly. "Be careful, there are only a few rooms at the top of the stairs."

Matt and Elizabeth charged out the back of the kitchen, where they found another staircase. Rushing up, Matt couldn't restrain his pleasure. This was just like old times when mystery after mystery came their way, accompanied by fame and a bit of fortune.

Halfway up the stairs, Elizabeth couldn't hold back any longer. "Matt, why are you here?"

"A little rest and re ..."

"Matt, you followed me! You knew I was coming to this spa. It didn't matter to you that I wanted to get away from the office, away from the stress."

She owned her own architectural firm and was continually hunting for new clients and battling creditors. "Why are you here? You know something like this happens whenever we get together."

"I think it's exciting."

"People being killed? Bodies and blood?" She shook her head. "I don't want that kind of excitement. In the mysteries we solved when we were kids, no one ever died."

"This is the real world," said Matt. "Listen, I came because I had this great idea and I wanted you to think it over. Elizabeth, I want us to open our own detective agency. You could sell your firm, I could move back into town, we could ..."

"No!"

"But ..."

"Matt!"

"Elizabeth, the crime rate's going up faster than inflation. Believe me, crime is the wave of the future. We'll have more work than we can handle."

"No!"

They reached the top of the stairs and found a wide, marble-clad hallway, an exclusive wing of the old mansion. Large mirrors and huge pots of fresh flowers lined the entire corridor. At the far end was an emergency exit with an alarm that would be tripped if it were opened. The door, however, was securely shut.

"Well, no one went out that way," He noticed three doors with numbers on them. "These must be guest rooms. Let me just see if there's another way out."

In the other direction, the hall led up to a door and into a large ballroom with crystal chandeliers and a parquet floor. Loud, quick-paced music filled the place, and at the far end was a slim woman in a tight, pink and purple aerobics outfit. A glass of carrot juice in her right hand, a pencil in the other, she was jotting down something in a notebook. She spotted Matt and shut off the music.

"What are you doing here?" asked the brunette. "This isn't men's week. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to ..."

"Who are you?" interrupted Matt. "An instructor?"

Joy Trenton was her name and she not only oversaw the aerobics program — she was just in the middle of developing a new routine — she was also co-owner of the spa. Putting down her pad, she crossed the room to Matt.

"I'm afraid you have to leave at once. Our guests enjoy their seclusion," said Joy, not at all pleased at Matt's presence. "Come on, I have to go find a stopwatch. I'll walk you to the front gate."

"Ah," mumbled Matt, not quite sure where to begin, "I have some bad news for you."

As gently as he could, Matt told the woman what had happened in the kitchen. Upon hearing the news, Joy Trenton gasped and ran out another door.

Before she was gone, Matt hollered, "Hey, did anyone pass through here?"
"No, no one!" called Joy.
Matt returned to Elizabeth in the hall, quickly explained who he'd met, then said, "Since no one's gone out the emergency exit or through the ballroom, that leaves us only these three rooms."
Elizabeth nodded. "Trapped. We have the killer trapped in these three rooms. I just know it. This shouldn't be too hard."
"Believe me, there's a real killing to be made in crime."
As she knocked on the first door, Elizabeth warned him, "Don't push it, Matt, or you could be the next victim."
A weak voice from inside called, "C-ome in."
Elizabeth swung open the door, and she and Matt entered a huge, airy room with mauve walls, a hardwood floor, and fresh-cut flowers everywhere. Filling an entire corner was a whirlpool, a steam room, and a long marble vanity covered with the spa's exclusive soaps, shampoos, and moisturizers. In an open closet hung a variety of spa-issued clothes; several aqua terry cloth robes, a jogging outfit, a pink and purple aerobics outfit, and bathing suits.
"Hi," gasped a woman on the other side of the room.
Under silk sheets and three blankets lay Suzy Skinner, her hair a mess and her face beaded with perspiration. She looked at them but didn't move.
"Let me guess: you're sick," said Matt.
"How did you know?" asked the woman.
"The tint of green on your face. What is it — flu or spa food?"
"A little of both, I think. Yesterday I jogged, took two aerobics classes, swam a mile, had a body peel, a loofa rub, and then a Swiss shower," she said. "So I was really run down, and then all I had for dinner were these little yellow slimey things."
"Sounds just like my day," said Elizabeth, shrugging. "They keep you rather booked."
She saw the bedside table covered with tissue, glasses of water, a washcloth, and within arm's reach, a plastic waste basket.
"In the interest of time, may I ask you a frank question?" asked Elizabeth. "Sure," muttered the sick woman.
"You didn't happen to just kill someone down in the kitchen, did you?"
"Me?" She shook her head. "No, I ... I haven't been out for a long time. I can't say exactly because I can't find my watch." A weak smile spread across her face. "Can you believe it? I'm paying thousands to be sick in someone else's bed. But I'm losing a ton of weight."
"I don't think I want to know the name of this diet," said Matt. "Sorry for bothering you." He pulled the door shut and looked at Elizabeth. "What do you think?"
"She could be faking it, but ..." Just then, they heard a retching noise from inside the room. "But then again maybe she's not. Actually, I don't think she's a prime suspect."
"I concur."
When they knocked on the next room, the door simply swung open, revealing a slim, handsome woman writing at a low desk. The room was as large as the first, but the walls were a deep red and the floor was covered with Japanese rice mats. Instead of big bunches of flowers, single orchids were carefully placed throughout the room. In the far corner a small waterfall tumbled into a miniature pond in which red koi were swimming about.
"Sorry. It wasn't latched," said Elizabeth. "One minute."
A glass of water in her left hand, the woman kept writing for another minute or two. Then she finished, put down her pen, and turned to them with a smile.
"Sorry, the nutritionist prescribed a fast to cleanse my system. Just this filtered water, that's it. And I've been having the most incredible visions. You wouldn't believe it. I'm writing them all down in my journal."
Her name was Maxine and she was a former ballerina who'd come for her physical and spiritual health. She claimed to have been in her room ever since dinner two hours ago.
"I might have heard a scream, but that's not surprising. After all, some of the guests aren't the nicest on so few calories," she whispered. "The woman next door isn't really sick. She has oil money, and you know those oil people. Always faking it. She told me she tried to buy this entire spa but the owners wouldn't sell. Can you imagine?"
"Interesting," said Elizabeth, not sure what to believe.
Maxine smiled and tilted her head from side to side. "But maybe what I heard was part of a dream ... or maybe it was an exercise class."
"We might need to talk to you again," said Matt. "You aren't planning on going anywhere, are you?"
"Not that I know of. But then again, I might have another vision and have
to leave. I rarely make concrete plans, you see.”

Elizabeth said, “We’d appreciate it if you could anchor yourself here until tomorrow.”

“I’ll try.”

Matt pulled the door shut and shook his head. He and Elizabeth didn’t seem to be making any progress, and they only had one room left to check.

In the hallway he said, “I don’t think that lady could tie her own shoes, let alone kill someone.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Some people have pretty strange visions.”

The last guest room in this wing was larger than the others, complete with a sunken salt water soaking pool. Huge vases of fresh flowers were scattered about, and off to one side a mostly naked lady lay completely covered with a deep-green paste.

“Ah!” hollered Matt, jumping back. “What happened to you?”

The heavy woman, Penny Tolstoy, laughed and explained that it was just a special blend of seaweeds. She’d been painted with the concoction an hour ago, she claimed, and was due any minute for a rinse, a reapplication, and a roast inside a bag of aluminum foil.

“Thalassotherapy,” said Elizabeth, noting the half-dry paste on the woman’s body. “I was going to try that. How does it compare to the Dead Sea mud pack?”

“They’re both great,” said Penny. “You see, I was going to have my jaw wired shut to cut down on my eating, but I came here instead. Every night I have either this or a mud pack, and it keeps me from leaving my room and looking for food. I’ve only had 373 calories today!”

Matt nudged Elizabeth and said, “This isn’t a fat farm. It’s a funny farm. And I’m getting out of here as soon as I can.”

“Do you think I can get a refund?” she whispered.

When questioned, Penny Tolstoy said she’d been in her room for the last two hours. She hadn’t heard any screams from downstairs, but she had heard someone run into one of the rooms down the hall.

When they finished talking with her, Matt and Elizabeth started back down to the kitchen. They were both more than discouraged. Only the question was clear: who among these suspects could have stolen the spa recipes and killed one of the guests?

“We can’t rule out Penny Tolstoy even though she is all gooped up,” said Elizabeth. “To lose weight she might be desperate enough to kill.”

“Good point,” agreed Matt.

There was only one way, he thought, to prove or disprove Tolstoy’s alibi: find the attendant who applied the seaweed. The owners would know who was on duty tonight.

Matt snapped his fingers. “I know what the problem is.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, I can’t think when I’m hungry. Let’s go back to the scene of the crime.”

“Much to my relief, Matt, I can tell you’re not going to last here.”

While Beverly and her partner, Joy, and a handful of guests waited for the police just outside the kitchen, Matt and Elizabeth traced what must have been the criminal’s path. They started in Beverly’s office, noting how the file cabinet had been pried open with a tire iron. Careful not to disturb anything, they scanned papers, searched for clues, then proceeded into the kitchen itself.

The body of the gray-haired woman lay sprawled out on the floor, fruits and vegetables and the cherry cheesecake in a heap nearby.

“What a way to go,” said Elizabeth.

“Really. Some people never take showers without locking the door, but me ... well, I’m never going to stick my head in the refrigerator without locking up the whole house.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Can’t you be serious?”

“I am, I am.”

Then he spotted the first vestige of a clue. His eyes searched farther, his mind reached deeper. Thinking back over what each of the suspects had said, it all began to make sense.

Elizabeth saw the glint in his blue eyes. After all these years, she recognized what it meant. “Okay, out with it. You know who killed this woman, don’t you?”

He smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I do. But first I have to eat something. I’m dying of hunger.”

WHO KILLED CLAUDIA CULPEPPER?

NOTE: Puzzle illustration different than cover.
THE SOLUTION:

"Look at the knots," said Misty. "What can you tell from it?"

"Exactly. He passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Read down the list of suspects. Quickly sketch out the possible motives of each suspect."

"Right." I pointed to the map. "Ellis meant to lead you to the map."

"You want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Secondly, she eliminated the woman connected with the sawed boxes."

"Exactly. Ellis meant to lead you to the sawed boxes."

"You want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirdly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Fourthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Fifthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Sixthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Seventhly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Eighthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Ninthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Tenthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Eleventhly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twelfthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirteenthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Fourteenthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Fifteenthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Sixteenthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Seventeenthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Eighteenthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Nineteenthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twentiethly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-firstly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-secondly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-thirdly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-fourthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-fifthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-sixthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-seventhly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-eighthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Twenty-ninthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-firstly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-secondly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-thirdly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-fourthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-fifthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-sixthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-seventhly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-eighthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Thirty-ninthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Fortiethly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"Fifty-firstly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"One hundredthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"One thousandthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."

"One millionthly, the woman passed near the woman in the kitchen."

"She passed a moment in confusion. "But where does it lead?"

"Right. I want to know the last person to see her."

"Yes."