

Preview of:

Horoscope: Murder in Mercury Retrograde

KELLY WAS SITTING AT the desk in her office on the first floor of her brownstone, thinking about the two women she had interviewed to take the place of her assistant, Sarah, when the doorbell rang. It was Sunday, and Kelly knew she had no appointments with clients coming to see her so she could do their astrological charts. She heard the doorbell ring again and then an insistent knock. She looked out her office window and saw, standing on the stoop at the front door, a young woman in her early twenties. She had dark hair midway to her shoulders and was wearing earmuffs, an expensively tailored brown woolen coat, a brown scarf gathered around her neck and chin to protect her from the frigid January wind, and a very troubled expression on her pretty face.

Thinking she might be a friend of Jeff or Julie, her children, who were away at college, Kelly got up from her chair and walked toward the front door.

“Who is it?” she asked loudly enough to be heard over another knock.

“Amber Moretti,” an emotional voice called through the door.

“My father, Lionel Moretti, came to see you about his company, Moretti Fashion.”

“Yes,” Kelly said. “But today is Sunday, and—”

“My father is dead, Dr. York!” the voice shouted. “Murdered!”

Kelly stood there for a moment and then opened the door. The freezing wind that blew into the house was less of a shock to her system than what the young woman had just told her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “Come in. I had no idea. I just saw him yesterday.”

Amber Moretti walked into the long, narrow entrance hall. Her face was red from the cold, her eyes red from crying.

“He died this morning. The medics who came in the ambulance said he had a heart attack, but if he did, it didn’t happen naturally. He was only fifty-eight, and he was healthy. He was obsessed with his health. He never drank, he never smoked, he never ate anything bad, and there was no heart disease in his family. Last week he went to have his heart checked, and the cardiologist said it was like a thirty-year-old’s. It may have looked like a heart attack, but I know he was murdered. And I know who killed him: Chelsea Nelson, the president of his company. He was having an affair with her.”

All at once she started crying.

“Let’s go into the living room and sit down,” Kelly said. Gently, she put her arm around the young woman’s shoulder and led her down the hall, toward the rear of the brownstone.

Amber wiped her eyes with her gloved hand as Kelly showed her into the gracefully furnished living room and gestured to a chair at the dining table near the French doors that looked out at the garden.

“Would you like some tea? Or hot chocolate?” Kelly asked.

“No, thank you.” Although it was warm inside the room and

she was still wearing her coat, earmuffs, scarf, and gloves, Amber shivered. She glanced at Kelly and then looked down at her lap. After a while, she looked up at Kelly again. She took off her earmuffs and gloves before speaking. “I apologize, Dr. York. It hits me in waves, the reality that my father is really dead.”

“I understand.” Kelly’s clear, dark blue eyes looked at Amber with the compassion and sensitivity of a woman who really did understand.

Amber dried her eyes again, this time with the back of her hand, before continuing. “My father said you told him not to sell part of his company . . . that he should retain full ownership himself.”

Kelly felt Amber’s anguish and didn’t want to contradict her, but what Amber had just said didn’t coincide with the facts. She wondered how much she should tell Amber about her talk with her father. Lionel Moretti hadn’t seen Kelly as a psychotherapist—indeed, although she had a PhD in psychology, she didn’t practice as a therapist—so she had no obligation for confidentiality, but she wasn’t in the habit of discussing her astrological consultations with people other than her clients.

Another look at the sorrowful young woman decided the matter.

“Your father told me he was entertaining an offer from someone who wants to buy forty percent of Moretti Fashion, and he asked what the astrological aspects indicated he should do. I explained to him that Mercury is retrograde now—it went retrograde four days ago, on January twenty-second, and will stay retrograde until February twelfth. During that time, it’s not a good idea to make any major decisions. But I didn’t tell him not to sell part of the company. All I told him was that, obviously, selling part of a privately held business, especially one as successful as

Moretti Fashion, is a major decision, and I suggested that he wait until after February twelfth to decide.”

Amber looked at Kelly a moment more and then started crying again.

“I know how you’re feeling, losing your father so suddenly,” Kelly said. “My parents died in an accident when I was nine, and I—”

Amber cut her off. “Didn’t you see in his chart that he was going to die? That someone was going to kill him?”

Kelly’s heart went out to the young woman across the table from her. She wanted to comfort her, but she didn’t see that she had any comfort to offer.

“Didn’t you see it in his chart?” Amber demanded, half accusingly, half pleadingly.

Her desperation made Kelly feel even more like comforting her and more acutely aware that she didn’t have the means to do so.

“I didn’t do his chart,” she said. “Your father was a friend of my ex-husband, Jack York. He mentioned he wanted to consult an astrologer and Jack recommended me. The day your father saw me, he was in a rush. He stopped in for just a few minutes between appointments. When I told him Mercury is retrograde and it’s not a good time for important decisions, he told me that was all he needed for now, and he’d have me prepare his chart later. He was supposed to call me with his birth information, but he hadn’t called yet.”

“Was Chelsea with him when he saw you?”

“Yes.”

“Did she say anything when you told him to wait?”

Kelly’s first instinct was to say that Chelsea Nelson had said nothing. Then she thought about the beautiful woman, who had

been introduced as the president of the company, sitting with Lionel Moretti, her boss, who had designed the women's and men's clothing lines that had made Moretti Fashion one of the most famous fashion houses in the world. Kelly remembered Lionel: he'd been handsome and vital, with thick, graying blond hair, lively hazel eyes, and a ready smile. She pictured the woman sitting next to him. She'd had long red hair and pale, smooth white skin, looking as lovely and striking at forty as she had twenty years before when Kelly had seen her on the covers of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Elle*.

Chelsea Nelson's sable coat and multicolored Moretti cashmere scarf, with the initial *M* embroidered near the fringe, had been folded on her lap, and she had listened attentively as Kelly explained that Mercury is the planet that governs communication, and that was why when Mercury is retrograde—literally going backward—there are bound to be glitches in communication; business agreements negotiated or signed during that time are likely to have problems. For that reason, it would be wise for Lionel to postpone crucial decisions about the company. Kelly remembered that after she'd said this, Chelsea Nelson had turned to Lionel, parted her perfectly shaped red lips, and given her opinion in a calm, even voice.

"Yes, she did," Kelly said. "She told your father that he knew she thought he should sell a share of the company but that just in case Mercury retrograde really meant something, he might as well wait three weeks and see how he felt after February twelfth."

"Of course she wanted him to sell part of the company!" Amber said, upset. "It would mean a lot of money for her. All she ever wants is money! That's the reason she was having an affair with him! She got him to put it in her contract that if he sold the company, or even a piece of it, she'd get millions. Then she found

this Russian investor who made the offer! I don't know how she did it, but she killed him. She wasn't going to wait three weeks. She didn't want to take the chance that he'd decide not to do it!"

Amber took a moment to get her anger under control. "My father was weak to be taken in by Chelsea, but he was a wonderful man, and he loved my stepmother. If he lived, he would've realized that. He didn't deserve to die just because he was foolish."

"Have you told the police what you think?" Kelly asked.

"Yes, but I don't think they believed me. That's why I need your help."

Kelly felt her body tense. "I don't understand. How can I help you?"

"You can help me prove Chelsea murdered him like you helped the FBI find that serial killer."

Kelly shook her head. "That was different. That was because—"

"I know about how you got involved in finding the serial killer. I saw stories about it in the paper and on TV and on the Internet. I know a man was threatening you, too. That he tried to kill you. But you helped the FBI find a murderer they never would've found without you. You're an astrologer and a psychologist, and you used what you know to find the killer. I want you to use what you know to help me prove that Chelsea killed my father."

Kelly looked at the grieving young woman. Amber's brown eyes were wet from crying, and she shivered again. Kelly felt for her, but the last thing she wanted to do was get involved again in finding a murderer—if in Lionel Moretti's case there even was a murderer.

"I'm going to call someone I know in the police department. I'll talk to him about it."

Amber stood up. "I don't care what it costs for you to help

me. I have a trust fund. I can pay you any amount you want. Just tell me.”

Kelly rose, too. “It’s not a question of money. Just let me speak to the police detective. I’ll call you after I reach him.”

Amber looked plaintively at her. “No matter what he says, will you at least think about helping me?”

The desperation in the young woman’s eyes was so deep that Kelly felt she had no choice. “Yes, I will think about it.”

Amber held Kelly’s gaze long enough to make sure that Kelly really meant what she’d said, that she would think about it. Then quietly, and with a gratitude that moved Kelly, she said, “Thank you.”

Amber put on her earmuffs and gloves and walked into the hall. Kelly followed behind her. Just before reaching the front door, Amber turned to her, took a card from her coat pocket, and handed it to her.

“Here’s my contact information. Call me day or night. Thank you again.”

Kelly opened the door and watched Amber walk out into the cold, like a somnambulant. She seemed oblivious to the freezing temperature, oblivious to everything but her father’s death and her conviction that Chelsea Nelson had murdered him.

Kelly closed the door and looked at the card with Amber’s name and phone number on it, along with the words “Pro Bono Family Law.” Kelly was surprised that Amber was a lawyer; she didn’t look old enough. And she was impressed that Amber was a pro bono family lawyer; instead of practicing law for a lucrative income, Amber was donating her services to families and children that couldn’t afford a lawyer.

Suddenly Kelly saw Amber in a different light—not as a rich young woman who fell into the category of hating her father’s

mistress, but as a young woman with a strong purpose in life. Kelly didn't know Amber's birth and rising signs, or where any of her other planets were located, but clearly she cared about children and families. Amber had grown up with wealth, but she was spending her days in courtrooms with poor parents and children plagued by problems that could affect their lives forever, and she served as their lawyer with the hope that she could help make their lives better in the future than they had been in the past.

Finding out that Amber Moretti was a lawyer told Kelly something else, too. It told her that what Amber had said about Chelsea Nelson's contract with Moretti Fashion was coming from someone with the legal training to understand contracts.

Besides wanting to comfort this young woman, Kelly felt she needed to take her seriously.

Holding Amber's card, she walked into her office and called a number she remembered from two and a half months before, when she'd called it more than once in a panic, afraid for her life. Now she called it with a different urgency, the urgency to help a young woman in emotional pain.

An officer answered and told her she'd reached the 20th Precinct. Kelly asked for Detective Stevens. While she waited for him to come on the line, she made up her mind: if there was any way she could help Amber Moretti, she would. Maybe Lionel Moretti really had been murdered.