

TWO-MINUTE MYSTERY
Can you solve the case?

THE CASE OF THE COLD ROOM

Quickly, I scanned the largest suite at Maison Rousseau: a room service cart stood by the end of the king-sized bed; two plates of beef Bourguignon sat on the small dining table by the window; a tray of partially eaten hors d'oeuvres rested on the ottoman by the burgundy Queen Anne chair.

On the floor, a gray-haired man with a red bulbous nose lay face up on the area rug near the room service cart. The flaps of his two-piece suit were splayed. Blood oozed from the side of his head. Wadded bloody tissues lay nearby.

Jo, my best friend and manager of my charming bed-and-breakfast, stood beside the bereaved wife, an arm around her shoulders. In a calm voice, she said, "Mimi, this is Mrs. Demme. Tell my boss what you told me, ma'am." Jo rarely panicked. She is a numbers person. She sees things in black and white.

I, on the other hand, am a chef by trade and have taste-tested my way through life—some might call it living by the seat of my pants—although now that I own my Bistro Rousseau and this inn, I've become more mindful of rules.

Mrs. Demme, a diminutive woman with flushed cheeks, gazed at me. Her lower lip quivered. She reminded me of my grandmother, down to the tissue that was peeking from beneath the sleeve of her sheer dress. "Hugh was sitting in his chair," she said in a jagged whisper, "and then suddenly he was on his feet. He said he was boiling up."

The temperature in the room couldn't have been sixty-eight. Even though I was dressed in my typical chinos and white blouse, I was shivering.

"He grabbed his throat, spun in a circle, and crashed to the rug. He—" She stammered. "He struck his head on the cart as he fell." She covered her mouth with her dainty hand. "I apologize about the blood."

"Forget the blood," I said. Vinegar or baking soda could remove that. "I'm sorry for your loss."

The widow blinked rapidly and bobbed her head, accepting my condolences. "Hugh is allergic to peanuts. I made sure I told room service."

Jo said, "Our staff is very conscientious about allergies, Mrs. Demme, and we don't use peanuts in any of our preparations. What did he eat?"

"That's just it," Mrs. Demme cried. "He didn't eat anything. I did the eating. The scrumptious onion tartlet." She pointed to the appetizer tray. "A bite of the delicious beef." She gestured to the table. A blot of lipstick stained one of the napkins. "We went wine tasting earlier."

Maison Rousseau and Bistro Rousseau, both of which I'd opened a few months ago, are located in Napa Valley, in a small, unincorporated enclave known to the locals as Nouvelle Vie, which means *new life*.

Not *new life* for the victim, I mused.

"Go on."

"Maybe my sweet Hugh ate peanuts at one of the wineries."

Typically wineries didn't serve any food and certainly not peanuts. Vintners wanted visitors to enjoy the full flavor of the wine. Peanuts have a very dominant

flavor. Plus, as airline companies now know, even peanut dust can affect the most sensitive person. Heck, kids can't take peanut butter sandwiches to school any more.

I tilted my head, regarding the bereaved widow and said, "Ma'am, did your husband have a cold?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm afraid, I don't believe you as to what happened here."

WHY NOT?

The room is a chilling sixty-eight degrees, yet Mrs. Demme is wearing a sheer dress. She altered the temperature of the room so she could set up the scene. She must have put peanut dust in the pocket of Mr. Demme's jacket. When he went for a tissue in the pocket to blow his nose, he set off an allergy that sent him into anaphylactic shock. Mrs. Demme, instead of using the sizeable napkins to blot the blood, must have used the tainted tissues to mop to muddy the evidence.