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# Killer Smile

Lisa Scottoline

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*A woman is like a tea bag. You never know how strong she is until she's in hot water.*

*—Eleanor Roosevelt*

# 1

"Rosato & Associates," Mary DiNunzio said into the receiver, then kicked herself for answering the phone. The caller was Premenstrual Tom, a man who wanted to sue the Philadelphia Police Department, the United States Congress, and a local cantaloupe. He'd been calling the office at all hours, and Mary felt sorry for him. He was obviously off his meds and had reached one of the few lawyers in the city who wouldn't sue fruit.

"This is Mr. Thomas Cott!" he shouted. "Who's this?"

"I'm Mary DiNunzio. We spoke yesterday—"

"Get me Ms. Benedetta Rosato!"

"Ms. Rosato is gone for the day, sir." Mary checked her watch. 10:16 P.M. Everyone had gone home hours ago, and until now, the offices had been blessedly quiet. "The office is closed."

"Then what are *you* doing there, Ms. Mary DiNunzio?"

*Good question, Mr. Thomas Cott.* Mary was working late again, reading until her brown eyes turned red and her contacts dried to the crispness of breakfast cereal. Documents blanketed the conference table like a legal snowstorm, and her compact figure had been curled into the swivel chair for so long she felt like a

meatball. "Mr. Cott, I'll take a message and tell Bennie—"

"I refuse to leave any more messages! Get Ms. Benedetta Rosato on the line! I demand to know why she won't represent me! She specializes in constitutional rights, it says so on the computer!"

"The computer?"

"In the library! The website, *your* website! It says it right there! That's false advertising! What about *my* constitutional rights? They don't matter? *I* don't matter?"

"Mr. Cott, no lawyer can take every case," Mary answered, then hesitated. Bennie had told the associates not to engage Premenstrual Tom, but if she could explain it to him, maybe he'd stop calling. "I think Bennie told you she didn't think your case could prevail in court. She's practiced constitutional law for a long time and has excellent judgment, so—"

"All those judges are in on it! All of them are crooked, every single one of them! City Hall is a pit of conspiracy and corruption! They're all in the mayor's pocket!"

"Mr. Cott, the judges in City Hall aren't crooked, and your case would be in federal court anyway—"

"You're not fooling me, either of you! Put Ms. Benedetta Rosato on the telephone right now! I know she's there! She must be, she's not at home!"

Mary blinked. "How do you know she's—"

"I went to her house! I knocked on her door, I waited for her to answer! The windows were dark!"

Mary stiffened. "How did you get her address?"

"It's in the phone book, I looked it up! What do you think I am, *incapable*? I may not have a fancy law degree, but I am not *incapable*, MS. MARY DiNUNZIO!"

Mary suddenly stopped feeling sorry for him. He was shouting louder now, almost screaming.

"I SAID, get MS. BENEDETTA ROSATO on this telephone RIGHT NOW! I KNOW she's right there with you!"

"Mr. Cott, if you'll just—"

"DON'T LIE TO ME! Don't you DARE LIE TO ME!"

"Mr. Cott, I'm not—"

"I'll come down there, you LYING WHORE! I'll come down there and SHOOT—"

Mary hung up, shaken. The conference room fell abruptly silent. The air felt charged. It took her a moment to process what had just happened. Okay, Premenstrual Tom had morphed into Psychotic Tom, and it wasn't funny anymore. Bennie was at an ACLU dinner, but it would be ending soon. She could be going home. Mary had to warn her. She reached for the phone to call the boss's cell.

*Rring, rrriiinng!* The phone rang underneath Mary's hand, jarring her. *Rrrriiinng!* She gritted her teeth and let it ring twice more so voicemail would pick up. She should never have engaged Premenstrual Tom. When would she learn? Her good-girl reflexes—Help Out, Be Nice, Tell the Truth—sucked in the practice of law.

Mary pushed the button for her direct phone line and called Bennie, but there was no answer. She left a

detailed message, then hung up, uneasy. She'd call her back in five minutes to make sure the boss had gotten the message.

Mary eased back in her swivel chair, wishing suddenly that she weren't alone in the office. She eyed the doorway to the conference room, surprised to find the threshold dark. Who turned out the lights in the reception area? Maybe the cleaning people, when they'd left.

*I'll come down there and shoot*

Mary eyed the phone, daring it to ring again. She didn't leave it off the hook because the drill was to record threatening messages for evidence, in case the office had to go for a restraining order, like with Premenstrual Fred. Mary wondered fleetingly if she could find a career that didn't attract garden-variety homicidal rage or bad television commercials.

She told herself to get over it. Premenstrual Tom had been blowing off steam, and there was a security desk in the lobby of the building. The guard wouldn't let anybody upstairs without calling her first, especially after business hours, and nowadays you couldn't get past the desk without a driver's license and a mortgage note.

She got back to work, tucking a dark blonde tendril into its loose French twist, and picking up the document she'd been reading. It was a letter dated December 17, 1941, from the provost marshal general's office, a federal agency that no longer existed. Its type was grainy because it was a Xerox copy of a photocopy of a carbon copy, and on another night, Mary would have gotten a charge out of its vintage. Everybody in the office called

her case the History Channel, but she loved the History Channel. Mary loved mostly everything on cable except The Actor's Studio, which she wouldn't watch at gunpoint. But she didn't want to think about gunpoint right now.

Mary scribbled USELESS on a Post-it, stuck it on the letter, and set it in the USELESS stack in front of her. She ignored how tall the USELESS stack was getting because it would be USELESS. Documents surrounded her and sat packed in boxes along the side wall of the conference room. Somewhere in these papers was the file for a man named Amadeo Brandolini. Amadeo had emigrated from Italy to Philadelphia, where he'd married, had a son, and built up a small fishing business. When World War II broke out, he was arrested by the FBI and imprisoned along with ten thousand other Italian-Americans, under an act better known for authorizing the internment of the Japanese. Amadeo lost everything and eventually committed suicide in the camp. His son's estate had hired Mary to sue for reparations, and she couldn't help but mourn him. Very few shows on the History Channel had happy endings, which was why everybody watched Fox.

*Rring!* The phone rang, and Mary jumped. It had to be Premenstrual Tom calling back, because she had told Bennie to call her on her cell and she didn't *have* anybody else to call her, which was why she was working late. Perhaps these things were related, but Mary was in no mood for introspection. She tensed all over. *Rrriiinng! Rrriiinng!*

Finally the ringing stopped. The conference room fell

silent again. Mary waited for the silence to seem more like friendly-silence and less like scary-silence, but that wasn't happening. The reception area was still dark. She tried to relax but couldn't. She glanced over her shoulder even though she was thirty-two stories up. It was dark outside, and in the onyx mirror of the windows, she saw the sparkling new conference room, a messy table dotted with Styrofoam coffee cups, and a Drama Queen with a law degree.

*I'll come down there and shoot*

Mary turned back, picked up the phone, and pressed in Bennie's cell number. Again there was no answer, so she left another warning, slightly more hysterical. She hung up and checked her watch again. 10:36. It was late. She didn't want to sit here while he called back again. She couldn't concentrate anyway. Time to go. She got out of the chair, stuffed her briefcase with documents, grabbed her purse, and left the conference room.

Leather chairs and a matching couch loomed in the darkened reception area, and Mary scooted past the terrifying furniture for the elevator, which didn't come fast enough. Once inside, she breathed a little easier, and when the elevator reached the lobby, she stepped off and glanced around, her pulse slowing to normal. The fake-marble lobby was bright and empty, except for a fake-granite security desk manned by a guard too sleepy for her comfort level. Bobby Troncello, an amateur boxer Mary knew from the neighborhood, undoubtedly dozing over the sports page.

"Wake up, Bobby," she said, making a beeline for

the desk. She set her briefcase on its glistening surface and peeked over the edge. "We got trouble."

"What do you mean?" Bobby looked up, edging the maroon cap he hated over his thick eyebrows. His brown eyes were glassy-wet, his nose wide and dotted with large pores, and his mouth a slash that was usually swollen from the gym. The *Daily News* lay open on his desk, tabloid-size, its pages cut in a soft zigzag fringe, and a can of Coke warmed beside an oily white wrapper from a cheesesteak dinner. Only the end of the long hoagie roll remained, with a brownish knob like an elbow.

"I just got a phone call from a very angry man named Tom Cott. I don't know what he looks like, but he threatened to come here tonight and shoot me."

"Uh-oh." Bobby's forehead knit unhappily.

"You're supposed to tell me not to worry."

"Don't worry, Mare. Bennie already told us to watch out for this Cott guy. Nobody gets upstairs, you know that. He comes in my lobby, I'll take care of him myself. I wouldn't let anybody hurt my homegirl."

Mary smiled, almost reassured. "He went to Bennie's house tonight. He said he looked her up in the phone book. I called her and left a message warning her, but I'm worried."

"About *Rosato*? I'd worry about *him*." Bobby laughed, rising to stretch arms that strained against the seams of his maroon blazer. His lapels parted as he reached up, releasing a heady combination of Drakkar Noir and fried onions. "If that knucklehead tussles with her, she'll kick his ass from here to Broad Street."

"But he said he'd shoot me, or us. I think." Mary couldn't remember much Premenstrual Tom had said after *shoot*, and his calling her a whore bothered her more than it should have, especially when it was part of a death threat in general. "What if he has a gun? What if he goes to Bennie's house with a gun?"

"So what? Rosato carries concealed." Bobby snorted. "She'd bust a cap in him before he could find his pants pocket."

*Strangely, I feel worse.* "Is this your best stuff, Bobby?"

"Don't worry, everything's fine. You been workin' too hard, night after night. Lemme get you a cab." Bobby grabbed Mary's briefcase, walked around the security desk, and looped an aromatic arm around her shoulder. "By the way, what did you decide about my friend Jimmy? You gonna let me hook you up?"

Mary hid her dismay. Bobby had been trying to fix her up with his fellow boxers, a continuous loop of Joeys, Billys, and a stray Pooch. Lately, everybody was playing matchmaker, as if they'd all decided Mary wasn't allowed to be a Young Widow anymore. She hadn't known there was an official cutoff.

"I told you about Jimmy. We went to Bishop Neumann together, he's a real nice guy. Works his dad's plumbing business, got a nice car. Season tickets to the Eagles. *Club level*, Mare."

"Thanks, but I don't think so."

"You sure?" Bobby led her to the polished brass door, opened it for her, and gentled her outside onto the sidewalk. The night air felt crisp, and there was almost

no traffic at this hour. Rosato & Associates had moved to nicer offices uptown since they started doing class action work, and the ritzy new location made it easier to get cabs. Bobby hailed one almost instantly. "Come on, Mare, whyn't you give Jimmy a shot?"

Mary smiled. "Give him a shot? You're a poet."

"You gotta get back in the saddle, girl." Bobby opened the cab door with a wink.

*Yowza.* "Another time, thanks." Mary tucked herself inside the backseat of the cab, waved good-bye to Bobby, and gave her address to the cabbie, a bald, older man. He merely nodded in response, strangely taciturn for a Philadelphia cabdriver, and for a minute she thought he didn't speak English, but his ID card read John Tucker. They lurched off, rattling through the dark, empty streets of the city, and the cab took on an oddly hollow feel in the interior. Or maybe it was just too clean inside. The black carpet reeked of strawberry spray, the vinyl seat shone with Armor All, and the seat belt actually worked. It was all too topsy-turvy for Philly, and Mary felt disoriented.

"You keep your cab very clean," she said pleasantly, but he didn't answer. Maybe he hadn't heard.

"This cab is so neat!" she said, louder, but he still didn't say anything, so she let it go and slipped lower in the seat, glancing out the window as they barreled up Walnut past a darkened Burberry's and Kiehl's. A few businesspeople walked down the street, the men with ties loosened, the women with purses swinging. A raggedy homeless man shouted from the corner of Eighteenth and Walnut, reminding Mary of

Premenstrual Tom. She reached in her purse, retrieved her cell, and pressed redial for Bennie. Again the boss didn't answer, and she left another message. She flipped the phone closed and watched the rearview mirror for the cabbie's reaction. He said nothing, but his gaze shifted hard-eyed to the right. They traveled in silence to her neighborhood, and he swung the cab more roughly than necessary onto her street. Mary felt unaccountably as if she'd wronged him, so when they pulled up in front of her house, she handed him a ten-dollar bill on a six-dollar fare.

"Keep the change," she said, but he only nodded again. She opened the door, gathered her belongings, and had barely climbed out of the cab before the cabbie hit the gas and sped off, leaving her alone at the curb.

*I'll come down there and shoot*

The voice echoed in Mary's head, and then it struck her: Premenstrual Tom could have looked up where she lived. He knew her name; she was in the phone book, too. The realization startled her, then she wondered why she hadn't thought of it before. He could be here, on her street. Watching her. Right now. With a gun.

Her gaze swept the street, a skinny alley lined with small brick trinities. Its one streetlight, at the far end of the street, wasn't bright enough to reassure her. Some of her neighbors had mounted lights beside their front doors, but they cast little illumination except on their own front stoops. The sidewalks were vacant. Everybody was inside. A few city trees planted at curbside rustled in the breeze, and Mary sized them up with suspicion. Their trunks looked too thin for someone to

hide behind, but Premenstrual Tom could be skinny. If he wasn't retaining water.

*I'll come down there and shoot*

Mary felt a panicky urge to get in her house. Her front light was off, and she hurried up the front stoop in the dark, shoving a hand into her purse for her keys. She could hear the sounds of an argument coming from two doors down; the Mendozas, who never fought. Odd; everything seemed strange tonight. Was it a full moon or what? She was fumbling with her key ring when the phone began ringing inside her house. She slid in her key, twisted the lock, and hurried inside, running through her darkened living room for the phone. "Hello," she answered, and it was Bennie, laughing.

"You don't listen, DiNunzio. I *told* you guys not to talk to him."

"I thought I could help. I just got in. Where are you?" Mary had never been so relieved to hear that it was her boss on the phone. Actually she had *never* been relieved to hear that her boss was on the phone, but that didn't mean she wanted her dead.

"I'm at home, safe and sound."

"Is Premenstrual Tom there?"

"Of course not. Thanks for worrying about me, though. Remind me at evaluation time." Bennie laughed again, and Mary guessed she'd enjoyed the ACLU dinner, evidently celebrating her First Amendment right to chocolate martinis.

"Bennie, I think you should be taking this more seriously."

"Relax, child. There's nothing to worry about with him. He's all talk."

"How do you know he's all talk? You don't know that."

"I know that."

"A hundred percent?" Mary didn't add that she was a little worried for herself, too. Or that Premenstrual Tom had called her a name that hurt her feelings when he threatened to kill her. "He's such a creep!"

"Absolutely, he is. It's a given that he's a creep, but that doesn't end the inquiry."

Almost convinced, Mary flopped down on her couch, flicked on the glazed lamp on the end table, and kicked off her pumps. The shoes went skidding across the nubby Berber, and the left one landed heel-up near the front door. She glanced idly in its direction, then frowned. A skinny strip of light shone from the threshold underneath her front door. Had she not closed the front door behind her?

"Trust me, child," Bennie was saying. "I defended murder cases forever. There's the creeps you worry about and the creeps you don't. I'll tell you which is which."

Mary watched her door. Was it open? Where were her house keys? Her hand was empty, she didn't have them. She must have left them in the front door!

"The creeps you worry about are the ones who *don't* threaten you first. Believe me, *they're* the dangerous ones. They're the ones who don't broadcast it, or give any warning at all."

Mary's front door edged open. She went rigid. Was it

a breeze? Or was someone out there? *Opening her front door?*

"The dangerous ones, the truly murderous ones, lie in wait. And then, when the moment's right, they *strike.*"

"Yikes!" Mary blurted out, dropping the phone and bolting for the door. She darted across the room, wrenched her keys from the lock, and slammed the door shut with both hands. *Good. Yes. Phew.* She laughed with giddy relief. She twisted the deadbolt knob to lock the door and inserted the brass chain for the slide lock. Then she turned to go back to the phone, which was when she saw it.

A shadow of a man, flitting past the shutters that covered her front window.

Mary froze. Then he was gone. She listened. She didn't hear the sound of footsteps, but then again, the walls of her house were too thick. Maybe she should open the door and see?

*OF COURSE NOT! ARE YOU NUTS?* She hurried back to the phone and couldn't hide her panic.

"Bennie," she said, out of breath. "The weirdest thing just happened! A man just ran past my front window!"

"What did he look like?"

"Like a shadow!"

"Stay calm. Was there anybody out there when you came in?"

"No."

"And you said you just got in."

"Right."

Bennie chuckled. "Then there's nobody out there now."

"But I saw him!"

"A shadow. A shadow's not a man, DiNunzio."

"What if it was Premenstrual Tom? He looked up where you live, he could have looked up where I live. He's not *incapable.*"

"Oh, he gave you the 'incapable' speech, too." Bennie laughed. "You're getting carried away. It's nighttime, there are shadows. You're a little spooked is all."

*A little?*

"Now, are you okay or do I have to come over there?"

*No!* "Yes!"

"Good, go to bed. I'll deal with our new best friend in the morning. Leave it to me, and thanks again for the call. Good night, kiddo."

"Good night," Mary said, but she hung up worried. Had she seen a man at the window? Had he opened the door? Had she been imagining it? Was it Premenstrual Tom? She rose uncertainly and padded barefoot to the window. The shutters were unhooked in the center, and she peeked out of the tiny opening between them. She could see only a cross section of her street; a sliver of red brick from the house opposite hers, a strip of flat asphalt roofline, and a slice of the black sky. Clouds rendered even heaven opaque, hiding the stars and keeping the moon a secret.

Mary stayed at the window, wondering. It seemed unlikely that Premenstrual Tom could be out there, but it wasn't impossible. There were dangerous people in

this city; she knew because one of them had taken her husband's life. They had been married only two years, and Mike had been killed while he was riding his bicycle on the West River Drive, intentionally struck by a car. That his murderer had eventually been caught gave Mary no comfort. She was a lawyer still trying to understand the meaning of justice. She understood completely the meaning of loss.

She hooked the shutter closed, turned away from the front window, and switched off the light.

Plunging herself into a familiar blackness.