

# SOMEONE IS AFTER LULU DUPREE

**JOSI S. KILPACK**

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# CHAPTER 1

I put the empty Snapple bottle on the desk with more force than necessary, and the thump startles me. *Careful, LuLu*, I tell myself. It's important I set the right tone for this meeting—both metaphorically *and* literally.

“Sorry.” I lift the bottle to replace it more gently. The softer sound invites a better energy, I think.

Mr. Hernández—the attorney I hope will take my case—does not react. He stares at the Snapple a moment and then looks up at me with the same flat expression he's had on his face since I entered his office less than a minute ago. The black polo shirt he's wearing complements both his stoic presentation and the stark emptiness of his office, which has exactly one desk, two chairs, and one of those extra-wide filing cabinets—black, which matches his shirt, though I'm guessing that is a coincidence rather than planned coordination.

“I need to get this tested,” I say when he doesn't say anything. “And I'm assuming you know people who can do that on the *low-down*.” I make a pressing motion with my hand to emphasize the need for discretion.

His expression does not change. “Do you mean the down-low?”

I nod. I mix things up sometimes, but the meaning is usually still intact.

“Tested for what?” he asks.

“Poison.”

His dark eyebrows lift slightly above the clear rims of his glasses. “Poison?”

“All kinds, though I suspect they would have used one of the undetectable kinds.”

His eyebrows go back down. “You want me to test this empty bottle of Diet Peach Snapple for undetectable poison?”

“I mean undetectable after a person is dead, of course. Undetectable in the body.” I wave my hand from my shoulders to my waist to further demonstrate. “Half-life and all that. The lid was still on when I pulled it out of the recycling, so the inside is undisturbed.” I bend down to tap the outside of the plastic with my fingernail. I miss the glass bottles and the metal lids that popped when you opened them, but if there is anything I have learned, it’s to accept change and get on with my life. “You can see the droplets of liquid, which should make for excellent testability.”

Mr. Hernández straightens, and his chair squeaks in a way that makes my brain stutter. I send pink thoughts to my frontal lobe to reset everything back to the proper columns and lines in my head and tune into my senses to keep me present—the coolness of his office, the cushiony softness of the chair beneath me, the sound of the rather loud AC unit down the hall.

“Maybe you can start from the beginning,” Mr. Hernández suggests.

“Excellent idea,” I say with a nod, keeping my eyes on the bottle so as not to get distracted by anything else, like the

water stain on the ceiling behind his head or the fact that he has a mint-green mouse for his computer. Despite our very limited acquaintance, he doesn't seem like a mint-green-mouse kind of guy. "On June fourth," I continue, "exactly one week ago, I retrieved this Diet Peach Snapple from the fridge at approximately 1:20 p.m. It was a Tuesday."

"Is that important—that it was a Tuesday?"

I shrug, feeling the bows of my sundress straps brush my ears when I do. The fourth best thing about living in Arizona is wearing lightweight dresses almost all the time. Today's dress, the pink linen, has straps that tie at the top of each shoulder. It's as cute as it is comfortable. "Anything could be important when we're talking about attempted murder."

He seems to consider this, then makes a *do-continue* gesture before leaning forward and clasping both of his hands on the desktop between us.

I continue. "I retrieved the bottle from the fridge and twisted off the cap while looking at the clock—I needed to leave the house by 1:30, which is why I'm pretty sure it was 1:20 when all of this happened—but the cap did not seem to be sealed. You know how when you open the cap on a plastic bottle there's a clicking sound?" I look at him expectantly, wanting to make sure he's following. He still looks slightly bored, which makes no sense because I am an excellent storyteller, and this particular story is very interesting.

"Yes," he says after a few seconds.

*Truth.* I would know if he were lying about this. Plus it would be weird if he didn't know what I was talking about.

"Well, on June fourth, it did not click even though the lid was on tight. I put the cap on the counter and was raising the bottle to my mouth when I realized that it did not smell right.

There was something . . . I don't know, *off* about it. Sort of nutty or cherry or something.”

“It is a peach-flavored drink.”

“Peach-*infused*,” I clarify. “I drink a lot of Diet Peach Snapple, and this one didn't smell right. Anyway, I was in a hurry because I was taking Mrs. Larado to Rachel's Knoll, and I only had a few minutes to get on the road.”

“Who is Mrs. Larado?”

“My Tuesday afternoon client.”

“What does that mean? What kind of client?”

“I do home care for seniors,” I explain. “I have two appointments a day, Monday through Thursday. Mrs. Larado is my Tuesday afternoon, and that day was an extended appointment because, like I said, Rachel's Knoll. She likes to visit the Peace Pole there once a month or so.”

“Got it,” he says with a nod. Clearly he'd been in Sedona long enough to not ask what a Peace Pole was or why an elderly woman would want to visit it once a month. Outsiders often find this sort of thing strange. I find it invigorating.

After getting nowhere with the police yesterday, I had debated whether it would be better to go to a private investigator or an attorney, but then Fiona reminded me about her nephew. Since attorneys surely know the best private investigators, it feels like a two-stones-one-bird sort of thing, and I do not have time to waste birds. I also do not take it lightly when Fiona makes a helpful suggestion.

“So, I had planned to take the Snapple with me, but because the cap hadn't clicked and it smelled funny, I poured it into my bamboo palm instead, replaced the lid, threw the bottle in the recycling, and grabbed a different Snapple that clicked the way it should and smelled the way it should. I didn't think much about it until a couple of days later when

the leaves of the palm started to turn brown. By Sunday, it was more brown than green.”

“Why didn’t you pour the Snapple down the sink?” Mr. Hernández asks.

“We live in the second driest state in the country. I don’t waste water.” Second to Nevada, which receives even less rainfall than Arizona—a surprising fact, but a fact nonetheless.

“It wasn’t water,” Mr. Hernández says. “It was a diet drink full of engineered chemicals. I’m not the least bit surprised it killed your plant.”

*Truth.* This ping of truthfulness is not as exciting as it might seem. When a person shares their own opinion, it only means they believe their belief. Still, it’s better than when they share an opinion they *don’t* believe in. That is all sorts of confusing.

I lean forward. “Then you agree it was poisoned?”

He lets out a huff of a breath. “Let me try this again—do you often pour chemically engineered diet drinks into your plants?”

“Yes.”

He blinks and cocks his head slightly. “Really?”

“I mean, maybe not *often*, and I’m not sure I would define Diet Peach Snapple as chemically engineered—they use natural ingredients—but if I don’t drink something, I pour it into a plant. Bamboo palms are known for hardiness; they can handle FDA-approved diet drinks. Like I said, I don’t waste water.”

“It’s not—” He seems to stop himself. “Never mind. Okay, so we’ve established that it is usual practice for you to pour diet drinks into your planters, fair enough. And until now, it has never resulted in the demise of your plants?”

“Exactly.”

“Which has led you to believe that the Diet Peach Snapple

had been tampered with for the intention of trying to poison you.”

“Well, the death of the bamboo palm in addition to the lack of lid-cracking, the funny smell, *and* the attempt to burn down my house.”

“The attempt to burn down your house?” he repeats with no change in his expression. What would it take to get an animated reaction, I wonder?

“I woke up Sunday night and couldn’t fall back asleep. I went into the kitchen to make toast, which is when I saw—and smelled—the candle right there in the middle of the stove.”

“You don’t usually find candles on the stove at night?”

“Never,” I say with an emphatic shake of my head. “It wasn’t one of *my* candles—I make my own—and I would never light a candle during the summer. It was the Walmart brand. Someone put it there.”

“And how do you figure a candle to be an attempt to burn down an entire house?”

“Well, all the gas burners were turned on.”

Mr. Hernández straightens, and his eyebrows go up. “The gas burners were on?”

Oops.

I had left that out when I first talked to the police too. Since the accident several years ago, my brain sometimes skips over details, especially when I’m excited.

“All four knobs had been turned to high, though I didn’t notice that particular detail until the next morning. That’s when I *knew* that candle was nefarious.”

“Didn’t you smell the gas when you made toast?”

“I turn the gas off in the summers to reduce the unnecessary heat from pilot lights. But, yes, *if* my gas had been on,



that candle could have blown up my house instead of just making everything smell like fake mulberry and fake plum.”

I reach into my purse and withdraw the offending candle sealed in a gallon-sized Ziploc bag I'd blown into like a balloon. I place the ballooned-Ziploc on the desk. “Can you also have this tested for prints?”

Mr. Hernández's momentary interest disappears, and he settles back into his chair, making it squeak again, which shudders through my thoughts like shaking an Etch A Sketch.

What were we talking about?

This mixing up of my thoughts happens less now than it had in the beginning—thank goodness. The shifting is often triggered by sharp, unexpected noises or shocking information—like yesterday morning when I realized the implication of all the burners having been turned on. When this happens, visualizing a ball of pink light works like a magnet in my brain, sticking my thoughts back where they belong. Focusing on my external senses also helps, so I squeeze the arms of my chair and wiggle my toes while thinking over the last several seconds to remember where we are in the conversation.

“So, you think that someone has tried to kill you twice,” Mr. Hernández says. “Once with poisoned Diet Peach Snapple and once with a mulberry-plum-scented candle from Walmart?”

My thoughts come together, and I am back in the game! “Yes.”

“And it's someone who knows you well enough to know that you drink Diet Peach Snapple but not well enough to know that you turn off the gas to your house in the summertime.”

I consider this a moment and smile widely as a triumphant wave of energy washes through me. “That is an excellent point! I just knew coming to you was the right decision, and I promise

to let Fiona know you are not washed-up and lazy like she said. So, when do you think you can have these items tested?"

It's only when I stop talking and notice that Mr. Hernández's expression has gone even flatter that I realize I probably shouldn't have included Fiona's opinion of him.

Oops again.

In my defense, I'm sure she would say as much to his face. She probably has, which is why he doesn't stop by to see her very often.

"How do you know Aunt Fee again?" Mr. Hernández asks.

"You call her Aunt Fee?" I say, smiling at a sweet nickname for a woman who is not very sweet. "That's adorable."

He says nothing and simply holds my eyes, which prompts me to answer his question.

"She's my Monday morning appointment every week. That's how I got your information."

"She said I was washed-up and lazy?"

I wave my hand through the air to help move our energy past that little faux pas; sometimes I talk too much. "Oh, you know how she is." I nod toward the items I've put on the desk between us. "When can you get these items tested?"

He pauses, maybe debating whether to keep digging into Fiona's insult or move forward. I am relieved when he looks at the candle. "Testing for poison and running prints is more of a police detective thing."

*Truth.*

He is sitting up straighter in his chair than he was before, however. I'm pretty sure he's interested in my case.

"I agree. But I talked to them yesterday, and they did not take me seriously."

"You don't say."

Sarcasm is neither a truth nor a lie, nor is it very professional,

but I ignore it. “I expected better from local law enforcement, too, but I had the distinct impression that the police detective had been laughing at me in his head.”

I’d gone to my weekly appointment with Fiona yesterday feeling unsettled from that disappointing interview with the police. She called me out on it when I put dish soap in the mop bucket instead of floor cleaner. I ended up telling her all about it while dumping out the dish soap-water, rinsing the bucket, and preparing the correct mop bucket before mopping her floors. She monitors everything I do to make sure I don’t miss anything. Loneliness makes people difficult sometimes.

Fiona had then reminded me about her nephew who had moved to Sedona a few months earlier after being run out of the DA’s office in Phoenix—Jaime Hernández; his first name is pronounced *Hy-may*. She’d mentioned him to me before, but not with much warmth or recommendation.

The picture I had pulled up on my phone a minute later had apparently been an old one. In that photo, Mr. Hernández had short hair and had been wearing a suit and tie. In real life, his hair is almost to his shoulders, and he’s wearing denim shorts and Birkenstocks. His teeth had also been terribly white in that photo. Not that they aren’t white now, but they are just the right shade of white, as opposed to that super-bright white in the photo that made me think of elementary school glue. Which makes me think of his teeth being pasted together. I tap my teeth together, imagining them sticking.

I break into that unwelcome thought loop by imagining a flamingo standing on one leg at the top of the Stratosphere. Silly flamingos have proven to be very effective in preventing my thoughts from scampering off into the reeds. I have a dozen of these little brain-hacks I use depending on the situation.

With the help of the precarious flamingo and some pink

light, I sharpen my focus on my reason for this appointment. I need Mr. Hernández's help.

I am aware that sometimes I come across as aloof or weird. Most of the time what people think of me doesn't matter. Sometimes, however, I need people to see more than a ditzy, middle-aged, blonde woman in a cute sundress. I look at Mr. Hernández straight on and feel my energy slow from the frantic pace it's been at since I arrived.

"I really need some help, Mr. Hernández. My daughter is supposed to come out next week for the summer, but I can't have her here if someone's trying to kill me. I can pay whatever your hourly rate is—I'm not asking for a favor—but I need to know you're committed to helping me figure this out."

Mr. Hernández sizes me up from across the desk for a few more seconds, seeming in deep contemplation though his expression hasn't changed. Then he takes a breath that feels decisive and sits forward, returning his elbows to the desk and tenting his fingers. "I charge \$350 an hour with a half hour billable minimum and will require a \$10,000 retainer to get started, the balance of which I will show through monthly invoices. I also require a credit card on file should we go over the \$10,000. If these terms don't work for you, then you have my best wishes."

I smile with relief and immediately begin fumbling in my purse which could double as a small suitcase if I ever went anywhere overnight. I named this purse Lisa after a particular episode of *Mad About You* when the sisters accidentally trade purses for the day. Brilliant television.

"I have \$3,000 in cash and can write a check for the other \$7,000." I pull out the envelope of cash I'd withdrawn on my way here and set it on the desk before pulling out my credit card.

He smiles for the first time, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "It will be a pleasure to do business with you, Mrs. Dupree."

"Ms.," I correct him. "Divorced. Please call me LuLu."

"Alright. Is LuLu short for something? I'll need your full legal name for the file." He starts tapping on the keyboard of his computer; the satisfying sort of clicks my brain likes.

"It's short for Catherine," I say as I open my checkbook. "Should I write the check to your law firm or you personally?"