

Inherit the Wool (A Yarn Retreat Mystery Book 6)

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Inherit the Wool After reconnecting with some old college friends on social media, part-time dessert chef and muffin maker Casey Feldstein has gotten herself roped into hosting a knitting retreat for the group. Tangled up in worries over how they'll judge her unconventional life and the rustic atmosphere at Vista Del Mar, she watches in dismay as the women arrive and their old personalities—and old grudges—come trickling to the surface. But Casey discovers these are the least of her problems when one of the women is found dead. With everyone a suspect—including an old crush of Casey's who's mysteriously been invited to join the retreat—Casey knows she'll have to start stitching together clues to uncover the culprit. And as long-held secrets start emerging, she begins to suspect that each of the women may have had a motive for murder. Casey wants to avoid needling her old friends with accusations, but she knows she'll have to ask some pointed questions if she's going to unravel the clues and catch a killer . . . Beyond the Page Books are published by Beyond the Page Publishing www.beyondthepagepub.com Copyright © 2018 by Betty Hechtman. Cover design and illustration by Dar Albert, Wicked Smart Designs. ISBN: 978-1-946069-84-9 All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this book. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented without the express written permission of both the copyright holder and the publisher. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content. The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

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Chapter One I looked out the window at the sunless morning with a knot in my stomach, hoping this call would help. The ringing stopped and a familiar voice answered. After barely a greeting Frank Shaw got right to the meat of the matter. "Oh, no, Feldstein, what is it this time? Don't tell me there is another dead body," Frank said. Before I could get a word in, he continued. "I'm telling you those people in the town that sounds like a candy bar are going to start putting two and two together and notice there have been an awful lot of deaths since you came to town." "No one is dead, at least no one that I know about," I said, finally getting a chance to speak. Frank was my ex-boss from my time doing temp work. He was a PI, and working for him was my favorite job, though it only lasted a few weeks. Since moving to Cadbury by the Sea, California, I'd

gotten involved in some murder investigations and Frank had been my go-to guy for advice. "If it's not a murder, then what is it?" he asked with a touch of impatience. "I'm a busy man." I could hear the squeak of his reclining office chair, which he tended to push to its limits, and it in turn complained. I could also hear the rustle of paper, which was no doubt wrapped around a submarine sandwich, as it was lunchtime in Chicago. Frank was closer to being the Pillsbury Doughboy than he was to James Bond, and I imagined him anxious to dig into his food. "It's about the retreat I'm putting on this weekend," I began. "It has to be perfect and I'm worried." "I can see your point. You've had a few snafus. More people checking into that hotel and conference center than checking out after your retreat. The way you describe that place it sounds a little sinister with all the fog and ocean crashing against the shore." "Vista Del Mar is rustic and atmospheric, not sinister. And as for what happened to some of the guests—and about not everybody leaving who came—it wasn't my fault, and at least I did find out what happened. But that's not going to happen this time. It can't. This time I know everybody coming to the retreat. They're friends from college." I explained that we had all recently reconnected on Facebook and then someone suggested we should all get together, and someone else had seen my website advertising my yarn retreats and suggested I put on a retreat just for our group. It had all come together before I had a chance to think it through or come up with a reason not to do it. "I get it, Feldstein," Frank said, interrupting. "What is it, a sorority?" "Me in a sorority?" I said with a laugh. "Actually, we were sort of a team," I said. I could tell by the noise that Frank had sat upright. "You mean like a team for a sport?" Frank said, sounding surprised. "I never thought of you as the sports sort." "It was in a gym class," I said. "A requirement and we all hated it." I started to fumble when I got to explaining what kind of team. "It was a rhythm-ball routine team." "Rhythm-ball routine? What's that?" There were more sounds of rustling papers and I was pretty sure Frank was working on the sandwich. "Sort of like dancing while tossing a ball around," I said, remembering the fiasco. "And then we had to perform it for the rest of our class, only made worse by the fact that we shared the gym with a boys' class. If we'd been going for comedy, we'd have gotten an A." "And those boys were doing the same thing?" Frank asked. "We're getting off the subject, but no, they did weight lifting. The school was doing a remodel of their gym so we had to share ours." I could hear Frank chortling and I wanted to change the subject. "The point is they are all settled in their lives, and I'm sure they're going to be all judgy of me." "Wow, Feldstein, I always thought of you as being someone who didn't care what people thought." "Well, I don't most of the time. But this time I do." "I'm surprised you called me about this. Isn't this the kind of thing you talk over with your girlfriends?" "I would, but one of them owns the restaurant I make desserts for. She's kind of my boss and I don't want it to sound like I'm upset with my life. She could take it wrong. And the other one is one of my retreat helpers." "And you don't want to blow your image. I get it." Frank cleared his throat. "Thanks to being a PI for a long time I've become a student of human nature. You think those friends of yours from college have such perfect lives. I doubt it. I bet they have dark secrets and messed-up pasts that you know nothing about. What's the big problem with your life anyway?" "I'm in my mid-thirties. I'm not married. If I hadn't inherited my aunt's house along with her yarn retreat business, I wouldn't be able to get by. Even so, it only works by cobbling together the income from making desserts for the Blue Door and baking muffins for the coffee spots in town, along with the yarn retreats." I stopped myself. "Oh, no, I sound so whiny." "My thoughts exactly, Feldstein. Get yourself together. I'm telling you, you'll find out that bunch isn't so perfect after all. Now, some of us have to get back to work. I have to go to the Drake for high tea and see who shows up with who." He seemed about to hang up when he said, "Did your group have a name?" "Sort of. We called ourselves the Baller-rinas," I said quickly. I heard him let out a real laugh. "If you and the girls decide to recreate that thing with the balls, send photos, or better yet, a video. I got to see that." I held in a chuckle at the idea of him doing a surveillance at the posh hotel's very formal high tea. Frank was pretty rough around the edges and I couldn't quite see him nibbling on finger sandwiches and sipping tea. "Casey Feldstein signing off," I said, giving a mock salute before clicking off the cordless. The call had made me feel only slightly better. Frank was probably right. My former teammates only seemed to be living perfect lives. Still, I regretted agreeing to put on the retreat reunion, as we were calling it. If only I hadn't been so all over the place, I might be

more settled now. I went over my past in my mind. I'd discovered after a semester of law school that it wasn't for me. I'd tried teaching and had worked as a permanent substitute at a private elementary school. But after a couple of years I was ready to move on. I'd been the dessert chef at a small bistro that unfortunately went out of business, though it had definitely helped me hone my skills at making sweets. The temp jobs had at least offered variety. I'd spritzed perfume on shoppers in a department store, handed out samples of chewing gum on downtown Chicago street corners. There had been stints at offices, but the only one I'd really liked was the time I spent working for Frank. It had only lasted a short time due to his lack of finances, but he'd said I had a real knack for getting information from people. I had ended up in Cadbury by the Sea thanks to my aunt. I was faced with moving back in with my parents, both doctors, when she'd made the offer of her guest house. The idea of a fresh start in a town where nobody knew me was impossible to pass up. She'd also been the one to help me line up the baking jobs. Sadly, she'd died—well, had been killed—shortly after I moved in. The only consolation I had was that I had found the murderer and brought them to justice. I'd always had a special relationship with Aunt Joan since we were both black sheep in the family. I suppose that was why she left her house and Yarn2Go to me. She'd been a master of yarn craft and I was a complete novice, but since I was pretty good at being a jack-of-all-trades, I didn't let that stop me. Actually, putting on the retreats had turned out to be the perfect sort of career for me. I was not the kind of person who could do the same thing day after day, week after week. Each retreat was different and had a beginning with the planning, a middle when it actually went on, and an end when everybody left. The projects were different and the people different. I liked that it was always a new challenge. Even my dessert making and muffin baking were not routine. I had some standbys, but I was also always trying something new. Even so, I wondered how long I would really stay in Cadbury. I looked around the living room of the house that was now mine. At first, I'd left things as my aunt'd had them, but now that I'd begun to feel like it was really my place, I'd decided to redo everything, starting with the living room. It was in total disarray. The furniture was pulled into the middle of the room and the walls were half painted. I'd decided on a soft moss green with white trim. I was just considering whether to tackle finishing the wall, when I heard a knock at my kitchen door. The sound woke Julius, who was napping on the couch in the center of the room. He stood, stretched and jumped down, running ahead of me to see who it was. The black cat had chosen me to be his human. I hadn't realized that was the way it worked, but then I'd never had a pet and knew nothing about cats. I foolishly thought I'd been the one to do the choosing when he'd shown up at my door and I'd let him in. I knew he had a past but not what it was, other than he must have belonged to somebody, and I was pretty sure they'd abandoned him. That was never going to happen to him again. He'd wormed his way into my heart, and wherever I went, he'd be coming, too. I saw Crystal Smith through the glass at the top half of the door. There was no mistaking her. I could see the purple and orange shirt showing through her open jacket. Her short black hair naturally fell into corkscrew curls that reminded me of tiny Slinkys. She went heavy on the makeup, particularly around her eyes, but she could carry it off. I'd tried to emulate it and ended up looking like a tired raccoon. Before I'd even opened the door, I knew that her earrings wouldn't match, nor her socks. Both deliberate, I might add. She was the queen of mix instead of match. "Hi," she said as I opened the door for her. She was pulling a plastic tote full of yarn and supplies. With the slightly wild look, it was hard to believe she was the mother of two teenage kids. She was a single parent now that her rock god ex, in a totally clichéd move, had replaced her with someone younger. I still couldn't get over the pretentiousness of his name, Rixx Smith. Crystal and the kids were living with her mother, who owned the local yarn shop. Crystal had learned all the different yarn crafts when she was a kid and they seemed like second nature to her now. I'd hired her to do the workshops for the retreats and in the process she'd become a friend. "I brought all the yarn and needles. Where do you want to stuff the tote bags?" she asked, indicating the bin. "The usual spot," I said as I joined her outside. I led the way across to the converted garage that my aunt had turned into a guest house. The flat white sky and chill in the air gave no hint to the time of year. The weather in Cadbury was almost always the same, mostly cloudy skies with a temperature that required a light jacket. I had to remind myself that it was a Thursday in March. I flipped on the lights as we went

inside and automatically looked around at what was basically one large room with a high counter that set off a small kitchen area. It had become retreat central for me. I kept all the supplies in there and used the open space to make up the tote bags I gave out to my retreaters. I had left six of the blood-red bags with Yarn2Go emblazoned on them out on the counter. I heard Crystal let out a sigh when she let go of the bin and flopped in a chair. I knew what the sigh was about. It was the other reason she was here. I was grateful that Frank seemed to have forgotten about the hornet's nest I'd stirred up in the small town. Though, it was still largely a secret hornet's nest. The Delacorte sisters were the local royalty, rich, with tons of property all over town, including Vista Del Mar, the hotel and conference center where I put on the retreats. It seemed they were the end of the family line as neither had married or had any children, and their brother and his wife and child had died years before. There were rumors that their brother, Edmund, might've had a love child, but it had never gone beyond whispers. So even though the will he'd left stipulated that Vista Del Mar was to go to his children, the two sisters had gotten ownership of it. I'd discovered that Crystal's mother, Gwen Selwyn, was the love child of the deceased Delacorte brother. It was hard to tell the story and keep it all straight. I'd held on to the information for a while, not sure of what to do with it. Frank, by the way, had told me to mind my own business and keep out of it. But you can't unknow something once you know it and I'd finally told Gwen Selwyn her true identity. The news wasn't welcome to her and she'd chosen to ignore it. She didn't like the Delacortes and it totally demolished who she thought her father was. She didn't want the change it might bring to her life, either. She owned Cadbury Yarn, and though it was a struggle now that Crystal and her two kids were living with her, Gwen was okay with things the way they were. But then she began to weaken because she thought of Crystal's kids and felt they should get their due. It was only recently that she had finally told Crystal the whole story. I'd been present when she did it. With some reluctance they'd contacted a lawyer and looked into their options. That was when they hit the brick wall. Crystal rocked her head back and forth. "I wish this had never started," she said, looking at me. "It was better when I didn't know. You can't regret not getting something you don't know is supposed to be yours." I knew she was referring to Vista Del Mar. "What was it the lawyer said?" I asked. "He said we had waited too long to come forward and the Delacorte sisters would surely fight it. He seemed to think we might win in the end, but it would be a long and costly battle. They have deep pockets. We don't. End of story." She sighed again. "The only good thing is that we never told my kids and nobody in town knows." "Have you ever considered talking directly to Cora and Madeleine. They might be more agreeable than you think." Crystal looked at me and rolled her eyes. "Really? Their illegitimate niece and her family show up and want a cut of the family fortune. My mother would never do it anyway." "Well, when you put it that way, I can see your point." I took the opportunity to change the subject. This wasn't the first time we'd gone over the hopelessness of the situation, and every time we did, I felt worse about being the hornet nest's stirrer. I pointed to the bin of yarn. "I think your idea for the retreat is perfect." In the past I'd had two helpers, but since this retreat was so much smaller, I only needed one. I thought Crystal would mix well with the group and so had given her the job, plus I felt guilty about the mess I'd made. Since I was pretty sure none of the group knitted, Crystal had suggested teaching them how to knit and then designed an easy quick pattern for a scarf they'd be able to complete over the long weekend. She thanked me for the compliment and looked at the six bags on the counter. "I thought you just had five people coming." "It's six now. This last person is all very mysterious. The registration came in the mail with no return address. No name of the person was given and the payment came on a bank card." "That does sound mysterious. I hope it doesn't mean trouble," Crystal said. "Ditto on that." She showed me the three skeins of yarn each person would be getting and the large-size knitting needles. She had some pages stapled together with basic knitting instructions and the pattern for the scarf. After trying to fill one bag, I realized it wasn't going to work. "I should have realized they would be way too bulky for me to hand out when they arrive." Crystal shrugged and emptied everything back into the bin. "Why not just give everything out at the first workshop." We settled for just putting in the packet of her sheets along with the ones I always added that had a schedule, map of the property and some information about the birds and the beasts in the area. I had emailed the schedule and some information about Vista Del

Mar to the group but had no idea if they'd paid any attention. As she got ready to leave, she gave me a hug. "I'm sorry for being difficult. I'm sure you thought you were doing a good thing when you told my mother who she is. I just keep thinking of Cory and how much he loves Vista Del Mar." Cory was her son, who had already worked part-time at Vista Del Mar and seemed to have inherited an affinity to the place from his great-grandfather. "Maybe something will happen and it will all work out," I said. Crystal rolled her eyes again. "When pigs fly." She knew that was one of my favorite sayings about impossible situations and we both laughed. With Crystal gone, I went back into the main house. *Main house* sounded so grand, but it was really more like a cottage with two bedrooms and one bath. I had given up on the idea of doing any work on the living room with the retreat due to start in a few hours. It was just a diversion anyway, so I wouldn't have to think about facing my college group again. I heard someone at the kitchen door again. When I walked into the room, there appeared to be no one at the door until I opened it and a man popped out of the bushes. "Casey, all this sneaking around is exciting, but do we really have to drive all the way to Santa Cruz just to see a movie when there is a perfectly good theater with three screens in downtown Cadbury?" he said, slipping inside. Dane Mangano was in his police uniform, and all the equipment on his belt banged into me as he reached to hug me and then moved on to a kiss. Dane and I were almost in a relationship. He was all for moving ahead on our obvious attraction to each other. I was the one holding back. I told myself that it was because I didn't want to start something in case I decided to repeat my history and ended up moving on. But bottom line, his directness scared me. I'd finally agreed to go out with him on the condition that nobody in town knew about it. We had gone out once in public view and we'd been the immediate subject of teasing speculation. Dane didn't seem to mind. I couldn't handle it. "If anybody asks, I'm here because you thought there was a prowler," he said, pulling me closer to him. He had a good-natured grin on his face and I knew this was all fun to him. "All your stuff is poking me," I said, matching his grin, looking around as if someone was going to see us. "Really? You think somebody is going to pop out of the bushes." The grin had turned into a laugh and then he looked at me. "We could pick this up later," he said, reluctantly letting me go. "I could shut all the curtains at my place." I knew he was teasing, maybe with a little hope attached. I'd avoided being alone with him at his place. Not that he wouldn't be a gentleman. It was more me that I was worried about. To put it mildly, Dane was hot. All his jogging and karate had left him toned and overflowing with a good-spirited sort of energy. It seemed that around me anyway, his eyes were usually dancing with a smile. "I know, one step at a time. At least can I hold your hand at the movies?" he joked. I reminded him about my retreat and that I probably wouldn't see much of him over the weekend. "It's supposed to be a reunion retreat, so I'm going to have to be there most of the time." "It is just a bunch of girls, right?" he said. "Bunch of women," I corrected. "And yes, just women this time." *As far as I knew anyway.* "This is supposed to be my lunch break." He glanced around the kitchen for signs of food. He of all people knew that while I was adept at making desserts and muffins, when it came to cooking regular food I was pretty much a washout. It was all frozen entrees, envelopes of instant oatmeal and peanut butter sandwiches. My big step had been that I'd started making brewed coffee. I couldn't take the instant stuff anymore. I offered to put on a pot and bring out the peanut butter. "That's okay," he said, going to my refrigerator. "I'll make my own lunch." Dane was very self-sufficient. It had come from growing up fatherless with an alcoholic mother and a younger sister he had to look after. While acting like a badass at school, he'd come home and taken care of everything. Before I could offer to help, he was making scrambled eggs. I did manage the coffee. We were sitting down at my kitchen table when the door opened. On instinct Dane jumped up, but then he relaxed when he saw the tall hulking figure was Sammy—also known as Dr. Sammy Glickner, urologist, and the Amazing Dr. Sammy, the magician. He was also my ex-boyfriend who insisted that he hadn't followed me from Chicago and that he was only staying in Cadbury because he had a chance to be a doctor by day and a magician by night. Sammy's eyes went over the whole scene and I knew he was trying to figure out what the situation was. His face fell when he saw the eggs on the table. "You're having breakfast together?" he said. "It's kind of late for breakfast," I said. "Dane thought he saw a prowler outside and he came in to check." "And cook eggs?" Sammy said. I made some excuse about my cooking ability and said Dane was trying to

rescue the food. Julius had come into the kitchen and was sitting down watching it all while eyeing the refrigerator, probably hoping someone would give him some stink fish. No matter what Sammy said, I knew he had hopes we'd somehow get back together, and I hated to make him feel bad, so I tried to get his mind off seeing Dane there by asking him what was up. "I wanted to drop this off," Sammy said, handing me a box. I opened it and took out a romper that was covered with shiny spangles. "It's for the show on Sunday. We really should practice since it's a new illusion." It took a moment to compute what he was talking about. I'd gotten so caught up in the arrangements for the retreat that I'd forgotten all about Sammy's gig at one of the posh Pebble Beach resorts. Along with all my other professions, I'd become a magician's assistant. It was all because I'd stepped in at the last minute for Sammy when his assistant baled. The illusion had inadvertently turned into more of a comedy routine. Instead of it being a disaster, the audience loved it and thought it was planned. Two things happened afterward—Sammy realized how to make his act unique and he begged me to stay on because we played off each other so well. "But I have a retreat this weekend," I said. "Case, I can't do it without you," he said, using his nickname for me. As if Casey wasn't short enough, and all he did was take off the last syllable. His expression had crumpled and he had that puppy-dog look in his dark eyes that always got to me. Dane seemed about to say something, when his radio crackled and I heard something about a problem with some kids theater-hopping at the local movie house. He got up to leave and seemed at a loss for how to say goodbye. He finally settled on a squeeze of my shoulder and muttering that he'd see me later. Sammy seemed relieved when he was gone. "If you can't do it, I'll have to cancel," he said with some panic in his voice. I suggested he get a replacement and his eyes grew more soulful. "No one can replace you." It was both a compliment and a burden. I couldn't let him down. "I'll figure out a way to do it, but I don't have any time to practice it before the show." The big finale of his performance was making me levitate. I knew the basics and I hoped that would be enough. He'd been hired for an anniversary party and the gig was another shot at a step up from the small-time stuff he'd been doing. He hoped it would open the door for bigger things to follow. Sammy's face brightened and he gave me a hug before turning to go. "Case, you're the only one who gets me." I glanced at the spangled romper and shook my head. Me in that was going to make comedy easy.

Chapter Two It was my habit to do a last-minute check on the accommodations for my retreaters before they arrived. It wasn't really necessary for this retreat because it was so small, but I went across to Vista Del Mar anyway. My house was on the edge of Cadbury by the Sea and the area was a lot wilder in appearance than the main part of town. There were no sidewalks or streetlights, and instead of front lawns most people let the dirt fill in with native plants. Vista Del Mar was literally across the street from my place, but once I walked through the stone pillars that marked the entrance to the Vista Del Mar driveway, it was like a different world. Vista Del Mar took the idea of *left to grow wild* to a whole new level. Whatever grew there had decided to on its own. I glanced along the side of the driveway at the lanky Monterey pines surrounded by brush and had more second thoughts about the upcoming retreat. I hoped I'd made it clear to my group they weren't coming to a posh resort with a manicured lawn and perfectly trimmed bushes. I saw that one of the trees had fallen and I knew it would be left to return to nature on its own. I'd heard the same was true of any wildlife that met their demise there. Because of that I always avoided examining the underbrush too carefully. The sky was a flat white, which was pretty typical, and by now I was used to traveling without a shadow. I passed my favorite large Monterey cypress tree. The constant breeze had shaped it so that the foliage grew horizontally. It was silly but the tree always made me think of someone running away with their hair trailing behind. I followed the driveway to the area I considered the heart of Vista Del Mar. The Lodge was in the center and was a social hall and the place where people checked in. It had been there since the days when Vista Del Mar was a camp, and like the other buildings was built in the Arts and Crafts style, which meant dark wood, lots of windows and local stone. The chapel was tucked in a corner against the sand dunes. The Sea Foam dining hall was just down the way. Trees blocked the view, but I knew that Hummingbird Hall was on the other side of them at the top of a slope. It served as an event area and auditorium. The guest rooms were in weathered, moody-looking buildings that were spread over the one hundred or so acres that made up the grounds. Sand dunes ran along the

edge of the property. A street wound around the sandy border. Beyond was the white sand beach and the ocean. I still marveled that the water really was sea foam green. I glanced around me and sighed. Personally I loved the untamed beauty of the grounds, but I wasn't so sure my group would feel the same. When I pulled open the door to the Lodge, it was deathly quiet. But then, it was that time between people checking out and leaving and the new arrivals checking in. I was surprised that there wasn't even a clerk behind the massive wooden registration counter. Most weekends there were a number of group events planned. Bird watchers loved the place, and so did yoga and meditation groups. I'd seen writers' conferences and business retreats there as well. Oddly, on this particular long weekend the only retreat scheduled was mine. It didn't mean that the place would be empty, just that instead of groups it would be filled with individuals and families. The interior felt cavernous due to the open construction of the ceiling and the size of the main room. I glanced around for some signs of life. There was a crackling fire going in the massive stone fireplace next to the deserted seating area, which was made up of some soft leather couches and mission-style chairs. The lamps were turned on and their amber-colored glass shades gave the space at least some feeling of coziness. I momentarily paused when I glanced at the row of vintage phone booths near the counter. I did tell my group about Vista Del Mar being unplugged, didn't I? With no one behind the counter I couldn't check on my people's rooms. In the meantime, the smell of fresh coffee drew me into the Cora and Madeleine Delacorte Café. It was a recent and very welcomed addition to Vista Del Mar and was the closest thing there was to room service, as long as you acted as your own waiter. Stan, the new hire, was behind the counter leaning over his laptop. He was a writer along with being a barista. He looked up when I came in. "I know you want a cappuccino, short on the milk," he said with a friendly smile. "Where is everybody?" I asked, gesturing toward the main room. "Well, I'm here," a woman's voice said. I had mistakenly thought the tables were all empty, but now I saw that Madeleine Delacorte was sitting in a corner by the window. Stan said he'd bring me my drink and I went to her table. I thought about my earlier conversation with Crystal. It was so strange to think that the woman in front of me had no idea she was Crystal's great-aunt. For a moment I wondered if I should say something, but a voice in the back of my mind that sounded remarkably like my ex-boss Frank's told me to stay out of it. Madeleine was definitely the more likeable of the two Delacorte sisters and we'd actually become friends. At seventy-something, she had rebelled against the restrictive way she'd been brought up and lived for years. While her sister, Cora, kept to wearing Chanel suits and too much eye shadow, Madeleine had discovered denim and was in love with jeans. She had started hanging out at my retreats and somehow credited me with the change in her life. And by the same token, I'm sure her sister Cora blamed me. "What do you think?" Madeleine said, sticking out her leg and showing off her dark-washed skinny jeans. "These are the best, so comfortable." She wore a black tunic on top and ankle boots and carried off the look perfectly. She had changed her hairstyle from an over-sprayed helmet look to a swifty blunt cut that made her appear cute. The current color of a soft brown and her light touch with makeup shaved years off her age. "When does everybody get here?" she asked in an excited voice. I froze, realizing that when I'd told her about the retreat she had assumed it would be like the others that she'd tagged along on. Stan dropped off my foam-topped drink as I considered how to handle it. How could I tell her this time she wasn't welcome? It was simple—I couldn't. As the owners of Vista Del Mar, the sisters had given me the same wonderful deal on accommodations my aunt had gotten. It was the difference between me making a profit and being out of business, and I was most grateful. I didn't want to do anything that might make them rethink the arrangement. "They'll be here soon," I said. "But you understand this isn't going to be like the other retreats I've put on. These are all people I knew in college." She was undeterred. "I know. But that makes it even better. I never had a bunch of girlfriends when I was growing up. I want to see what it's like." "They're not exactly my girlfriends," I said. "I knew them in college, though I kind of lost touch with them since. But I guess it will give you the idea of what you missed." I took a sip of my cappuccino. Stan had gotten the perfect mix of espresso and steamed milk. I looked toward the counter, ready to give him a thumbs-up, as two women walked into the café. They were pulling roller bags and seemed a little lost. My first thought was that they were my people, but then reality set in and I realized it was too early. "I want to check in but there's

nobody there," one of them said. She wore a floppy khaki brimmed hat, khaki cargo pants and rope sandals. "Ditto for me," the other woman said. She seemed a little younger and her headgear was a beige baseball cap with nothing written on it. She wore loose-fitting clothes that made me think she was either deeply into comfort or recently had lost weight. "That's terrible," Madeleine said, getting up from her table. She got me to come with her and we approached the pair. Madeleine held out her hand and introduced herself as one of the owners. Then she turned to me. "We can't leave people hanging like this. Do something, Casey." "Like what? Should I go look for Kevin St. John?" I asked. While Madeleine and Cora were the owners of Vista Del Mar, they left most of the running of it to the manager, Kevin St. John. "You must know how to check people in," Madeleine said to me. "Take care of them and I'll search for Mr. St. John." We were standing in the doorway by then, and before I could object, she'd taken off across the main room toward the exit like a woman on a mission. "This isn't my usual job," I said, looking at the massive wooden counter. "I just have to find a way to get to the other side of it." I assured them it would just take a minute. The counter completely closed off the business area, and the only way to get behind it was by going through a door to the side, which of course turned out to be locked. I looked at the shiny dark wood counter and there was no other recourse. So I took a deep breath, boosted myself onto the smooth top and slid over it, landing on my feet with a thud. I'd never been behind the counter before and it felt very strange and maybe a little fun viewing the interior of the Lodge from this new perspective. I quickly looked around to try to figure out what was what. Vista Del Mar still had actual keys for the rooms and each one was kept in a pigeonhole marked by the building and room number. There was a computer monitor on the counter but the screen was dark. I started playing with the mouse, hoping to get the screen to light up, and I waved to the women to come toward me. The computer screen came on, but it asked for a password to continue. I gave the two women a reassuring smile as I fiddled with the keyboard, but then I let out a mental eureka—some genius had decided to keep it simple, and my first try at typing in password 1234 had worked. "Okay, I can check you in," I said brightly. "Are you traveling together?" Both women shook their heads and said "no." After that it became a contest of who could be more courteous by letting the other woman go first. Finally I pointed at the woman in the baseball cap. "Let's start with you." She stepped forward, still offering the other woman the opportunity to go first. I admired their manners. If only the whole world was that considerate. "My name is Barbara Henderson," she said. I hit a roadblock on the computer as I tried to call up the reservations and made small talk with her while I tried to figure it out. Barbara seemed friendly enough, and I was relieved that she wasn't impatient. It was her first visit to Vista Del Mar and she said she was hoping to get away from it all. "You've come to the right place," I said when I finally called up her reservation. I took one of the keys from the pigeonholes behind me and handed it to her. I caught a glimpse of a mark on her wrist as she took the key. She saw me looking at it and smiled. "It's a birthmark. I keep thinking I ought to get a tat to cover it. Maybe a sunflower," she offered. "Like this," the other woman said, showing off a tiny flower tattoo on her wrist. "I wish I'd thought of a sunflower instead of a rose." She turned to me. "My name is Rebecca Noodleman," she said. "I appreciate your efforts, but it's obvious you're just stepping in. I came here before for a retreat and everything was handled very efficiently. I hope this isn't a sign of how the weekend is going to be." I apologized to both of them and said I was sure once we got over this glitch everything would be fine. The door opened with a *whoosh* and Kevin St. John came in. He glanced toward the registration area and his expression went from placid to horrified as his gaze fell on me. "Ms. Feldstein, what are you doing?" he sputtered. The moon-faced manager was overdressed in a dark suit that made him look more like an undertaker than the host of a rustic resort. He was not a big fan of mine, to put it mildly, so seeing me in his domain was extra upsetting. I considered mentioning that Madeleine had been the one to insist I step in, but since she wasn't with him I had no backup. Under the circumstances it seemed like the best thing to do was to get out of there quickly. "They're all yours," I said, climbing back over the huge wooden counter. Just then a frazzled-looking young woman came in, holding her cell phone. Her eyes widened with horror as she took in the situation. Kevin shushed her with a stare while he went to deal with the new arrivals. As he stood with the two women, he glanced back at me, and I gathered he was apologizing and trying to smooth things over. He handed them a map and

seemed to be giving them directions to the building their rooms were in. He finished with a few bows of his head and probably some more apologies before coming over to us. "I'm sorry," the clerk said. She was new and I hadn't gotten her name. "But I had to check my phone. You can't get a signal unless you walk way down the street," she said in an indignant tone. She looked at the manager for his reaction and seemed surprised when he was hardly sympathetic. She let out a sigh. "It's not my fault someone decided to take this place back to the Dark Ages and make it unplugged." She turned to me. "You're Casey Something, right?" I nodded and she continued. "There was a message for you. One of the people coming to your retreat can't make it." "Did you get a name?" I asked and the girl got defensive. "Technically, we're not supposed to take messages for you since you're not a guest," she said and looked to Kevin St. John for his approval, as if it would make up for what she'd just done. "So I told her she ought to send you an email or call you directly. But I'm pretty sure her name is like Clair or Blair. She started to tell me why. Something about her hair or a fair and she had a meeting or something. Maybe it'll be in the email." She stopped for a moment. "But maybe not. I'm not sure she said she would send one. I just remember she said she was in a hurry." I'm not sure which of us Kevin St. John glared at more. It was obvious why he was unhappy with her, and by now I'd gotten that her name was Janet. But it was not so obvious what he had against me. I doubted the glare had to do with my invading the sacred territory behind the counter. Someone else might have actually said *thank you for trying to help out*. To cut right to the chase, he simply didn't like me. It irritated him no end that the Delacorte sisters were giving me such a deal on the rooms and meeting space, and what he really wanted was for me to give up the whole retreat business and just go away. He kept his personal life under wraps and so far all I'd been able to find out about him was that he was probably single, was a native Cadburian, and had been brought up by his grandmother, who died under suspicious circumstances. "If there's nothing else, Ms. Feldstein," Kevin St. John said, indicating the door. I heard him drop his voice as he began to lecture Janet. I wondered if she'd still be there when I returned.

Chapter Three The one positive about my time behind the counter was that in looking for the reservations of the two women I'd been able to check on my group and saw that everything was in order. When I went back home, I realized I'd left the dishes on the table and cleared them off. Julius did figure eights around my ankles and then went and sat down in front of the refrigerator. His message couldn't have been clearer. I'd ignored his demand before, but this time he was standing his ground. He wanted some stink fish. Of all the cat foods in the world, he had to zero in on the smelliest of them all. I'd never looked too closely at the ingredients—I didn't want to get that close to the can. I swear you could smell it even when the can hadn't been opened. I had given up being tough about giving in to his demands and most of the time simply gave him a tiny dab. The only problem with that plan was that it meant I was constantly having to deal with the smell. I kept the open can wrapped in several layers of plastic wrap in a plastic bag within another plastic bag. Even so, as soon as I grabbed the plastic bag I got a faint whiff of it. I automatically closed my nose for the duration as I went through all the unwrapping and put a tiny blob of it in his bowl and wrapped it all up again. "I'm going to be tied up a lot until Sunday," I said as the black cat hovered over his bowl, daintily licking the pink blob. "I have to spend a lot of time with this group." I looked down at him. "So you are going to have to be a good cat and stay out of trouble." At the word *trouble* he looked up at me with his arresting yellow eyes and blinked a few times. When Julius had first come to live with me, I'd tried to make him an indoor cat. Even now I laughed at my folly. In the end he'd won and I left a window open enough for him to squeeze in and out, and he came and went as he pleased. "You can't come on the Vista Del Mar grounds looking for me. You know what happened before," I said in a stern voice. Kevin St. John didn't like Julius. He had been hostile to the cat from the first time I'd seen Julius wandering on the grounds. The manager had almost run over him then and later blamed him when there was an accident with some yarn. Julius rubbed against my ankles a few times before going back to his food. Did that mean he understood? I pulled out a couple of rolls of butter cookie dough I always kept in the refrigerator. I liked to bring some baked goods to the workshops. While the oven preheated, I sliced the rolls and spread the disks of dough on metal sheets. They were baked and cooling on racks in no time. It was almost showtime and I went to check my appearance. The rust-colored

turtleneck and black jeans seemed a little too casual. I found an old suede blazer and slipped it on, thinking it added a professional air. It wasn't as comfortable as the loose-fitting fleece jacket I usually wore and I realized I'd probably be cold in it, but this time I was more concerned with the look than my comfort. I always added a handmade item from my aunt's stash as a finishing touch. I picked out a knitted scarf in shades of brown and rust made out of a nubby silk yarn. I checked my reflection and gave myself an okay, all the while chiding myself for being concerned with what the Baller-rinas might think of me. I packed the cookies in a tin, grabbed my oversized red tote bag stuff with the smaller bags for the group, and headed for the door as I convinced myself to stop fussing about the upcoming retreat. There was nothing I could do about it now anyway. And with the news that Blair wasn't coming, there would be one less person to worry about pleasing. The sun was still in hiding and a cool breeze carried the scent of the ocean mixed with the pine trees and the wood smoke from all the fireplaces as I walked back down the Vista Del Mar driveway. I veered off before I got to the Lodge and took the path that led to our meeting room. I glanced at the golden grass on either side of the walkway, amazed at how dry it looked. With all the cloudy skies here on the tip of the Monterey Peninsula, the area didn't get a lot of rain. I passed the Sand and Sea building, where my friends would be staying. It was covered in dark brown weathered shingles. The entrance was hardly grand, just a small stoop with an overhang held up by a column made of stones. I tried to think of a positive spin on the building to offer to my friends. It was historic and an original building from the time this place was a camp. It had actually served as a dormitory for the camp counselors. I could mention the Arts and Crafts style and that it was designed by a famous woman architect. The one thing I couldn't say was that the accommodations were luxurious or even close. The meeting room took up part of a one-story building called Cypress and was positioned in an open area between the structures that housed the guest rooms. I'd used it many times before, and when I stepped inside the only thing that seemed a little off was that the fireplace was dark and no coffee and tea service was set up on the counter. I left the tin of cookies where the refreshments would be and took a last glance around the room. The tables and chairs seemed fine. Crystal would bring everything else. Then it was out the door and on to greet the arrivals. I took the other path back and ended up on the side of the Lodge building that had a large deck that looked toward the sand dunes. I'd passed some new arrivals pulling their suitcases up the path and we exchanged friendly hellos. I still had a smile from the exchanges with the guests as I cut through the Lodge. When I opened the door on the other side I was surprised to see that the airport shuttle had already arrived and was unloading. Most of the group had arranged to fly together, going from Chicago to Los Angeles and changing to a smaller plane that flew into the Monterey airport. Only Blair had planned to come in separately, but that was irrelevant now. As I looked over the arrivals, I wondered if the mystery guest was among them. Along with no name, there'd been no flight details.

In a new Yarn Retreat Mystery from national bestselling author Betty Hechtman, Casey Feldstein is determined to tie up loose ends to solve another murder . . .

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After reconnecting with some old college friends on social media, part-time dessert chef and muffin maker Casey Feldstein has gotten herself roped into hosting a knitting retreat for the group. Tangled up in worries over how they’ll judge her unconventional life and the rustic atmosphere at Vista Del Mar, she watches in

dismay as the women arrive and their old personalities and old grudges come trickling to the surface. But Casey discovers these are the least of her problems when one of the women is found dead.

With everyone a suspect including an old crush of Casey's who's mysteriously been invited to join the retreat Casey knows she'll have to start stitching together clues to uncover the culprit. And as long-held secrets start emerging, she begins to suspect that each of the women may have had a motive for murder. Casey wants to avoid needling her old friends with accusations, but she knows she'll have to ask some pointed questions if she's going to unravel the clues and catch a killer . . .

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About the Author:

Betty Hechtman is the national bestselling author of the Crochet Mysteries and the Yarn Retreat Mysteries. She grew up on the South Side of Chicago and has a degree in Fine Art. Since college, she has studied everything from improv comedy to magic, and has had an assortment of professions, including volunteer farm worker, nanny at a summer resort, waitress at a coffee house, and telephone operator. She lives with her family and stash of yarn in Southern California. You can learn more about Betty and find excerpts from all her books at BettyHechtman.com. She blogs on Fridays at Killerhobbies.blogspot.com, and you can join her on Facebook at [BettyHechtmanAuthor](https://www.facebook.com/BettyHechtmanAuthor) and on Twitter at [@BettyHechtman](https://twitter.com/BettyHechtman).

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