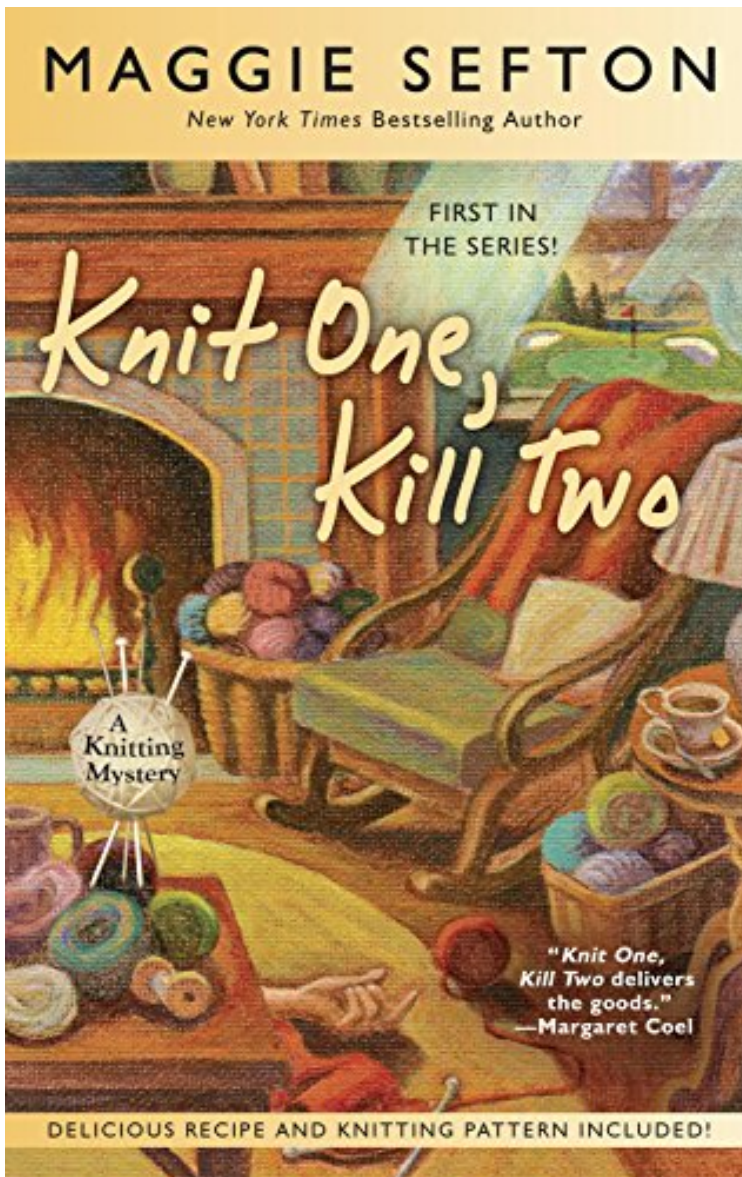


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First Scarf Lambspuns Whodunnit Shell Maggies Cinnamon Rolls THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP
Published by the Penguin Group Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York

10014, USA Penguin Group (Canada), 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M4V 3B2, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephens Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr. Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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Acknowledgments A thousand thanks to Shirley Ellsworth, the inspired owner of Lambspin of Colorado in Fort Collins, Colorado, the knitting shop I used as a model for this series and the place I first fell down the rabbit hole into this fascinating wonderland of color and texture. Shirley and her staff of gifted teachers and fiber artists never ran out of patience with my questions or encouragement for my beginning efforts. Thanks also to the Tuesday night knitting group for their rowdy and wonderful brainstorming of titles for this series of novels.

And special thanks to Kristi for her last-minute artwork. Thanks also to my agent, Jessica Faust, for her unceasing encouragement and support to write this knitting mystery. And special thanks to my wonderful editor, Samantha Mandor, for helping to bring Kelly and all her friends to life on the page. Special thanks to my four daughters, my mom, and all my dear friends who've always believed in me and supported my writing dreams. And thanks to my ninety-two-year-old aunt, Ann, whose quilt of memories hangs on my bedroom wall. And a special pat on the head to my dog, Carl, who's the model for Kelly's golf-ball chasing pet Rottweiler. I must admit that fictional Carl is much better behaved than real-life Carl, with or without golf balls. One Kelly Flynn nosed her car onto the gravel driveway and pulled to a stop in front of the familiar little house perched beside a golf course. Everything looked the same. Aunt Helen's beige stucco, red tile-roofed cottage looked as cozy and inviting as always. Golfers were scattered about the lush greens, doggedly working to improve their games. In the background the Colorado Rocky Mountains, still snow-capped in late spring, loomed over the entire scene. It was all picture-postcard pretty, just like Kelly remembered, except for one thing. Aunt Helen was dead, murdered a week ago in her picturesque cottage. A burglary gone bad the police called it. Kelly's gut still twisted at the thought. Aunt Helen would have fought back. Kelly knew she would. Even though she was thin as a stick and a foot shorter than Kelly, she was wiry and tough. And she had spirit. Spunk. She'd never go down without a fight. Not Aunt Helen. No way. Kelly felt tears rise to her eyes again as she remembered her aunt's favorite admonition: Never give up, Kelly-girl. If you want something bad enough, don't you ever give up. The tears escaped, running down Kelly's cheeks, and she swiped them away with the back of her hand. She'd never even had the chance to say good-bye. At least with her dad, Kelly'd been able to tell him how much she loved him. Cancer might be an ugly way to die, but it was slower. Murder was a thief in the night, creeping in to steal away valuable loved ones. And this thief stole the only mother Kelly had ever known. A cold, wet nose shoved against Kelly's neck, and she turned to pat the shiny black Rottweiler head resting beside her shoulder. Carl always sensed her moods. Don't worry, boy, I haven't forgotten you. You're looking at that grass, right? She pointed to the manicured golf course, stretching from her aunt's property all the way to the river that meandered diagonally through the scenic college town north of Denver. Kelly let herself gaze. It had been six months since she'd returned to Fort Connor, where she spent her early childhood. Every time she returned, she wondered how she'd ever make herself leave again. The sky was bluer here, the air was cleaner, and the sun was brighter by a mile. A mile high to be exact, as Aunt Helen used to say. What a gorgeous day. If her aunt was still alive, she and Kelly

would take one of their favorite hikes along a trail in the nearby Poudre Canyon. How could it be so beautiful with Helen gone? Carl whined to get her attention, clearly eager to explore. Okay, boy, but you cant run on the course. The greenskeeper wouldnt appreciate your lifting a leg on every tee. Carl rolled his soft brown eyes to her in pleading mode. Nope. Youll just have to make do with the yard. Kelly opened the car door and slid out, grabbing a leash as she did. Carls ears perked up at the magic jingle, and he gave an excited yelp. That meant outside and play. Snapping the leash to his red collar, Kelly headed toward the small backyard. Tall cottonwood trees surrounded the property, shading both house and yard. Flower boxes were already planted, even though Kelly knew the frost date in northern Colorado was a yearly gamble.

Somehow, Helen always won out. Her green thumb or gardeners luck could overcome even Colorados capricious weather. Kelly made a mental note to water the plants that evening. She wasnt about to let Helens plants die with her. She swung the back gate open and ushered Carl inside. It isnt the golf course, boy, but its bigger than your yard for sure, she said, referring to her postage stamp- size townhouse yard on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. Carl didnt waste time. He took off the moment his leash was unsnapped, nose to the ground. The sound of another car coming down the gravel driveway caught Kellys attention, and she turned to see a red minivan drive up to the larger stucco and red tile- roofed house across the drive. A woman exited the van and entered the sprawling mirror-image of Helens cottage. Both houses and the assorted outbuildings nearby occupied a pie-shaped wedge of land that clung to the corner of a busy intersection. Kelly

remembered when both streets were country roads cutting through fields of sugar beets and sheep farms. Now, a big box discount store swallowed the opposite corner and townhouses clustered across the street. At least her aunt and uncle had sold their farmland to the city for a golf course and kept only the cottage and its yard. If she squinted her eyes hard enough, Kelly could block out the golfers and picture her uncle heading to the barn years ago when he was still alive. Kelly, is that you? a womans voice called. Kelly shut the gate,

knowing Carl would be occupied for hours identifying scents. She turned and recognized Mimi Shafer walking across the driveway. Mimi owned the knitting and needlework shop that now occupied what was once Aunt Helens and Uncle Jims farmhouse. Her aunt had been ecstatic about the arrangement, since she was an expert knitter and quilter, but Kelly had always felt vaguely resentful. She remembered when the house was filled with Aunt Helen and Uncle Jims memories. But Uncle Jims long illness changed all that. Now, Kelly felt nothing but gratitude. Mimi had been Aunt Helens closest friend and had never left Kellys side during yesterdays service. She gave names to faces and helped Kelly stand and sit through a liturgy that was no longer familiar. Kelly straightened her white blouse and navy skirt. Not as tailored as her usual CPA firm attire, but sober enough for a lawyer meeting. She couldnt wait until she could change into a casual top and slacks, maybe even shorts if it stayed warm. Ever since she got back, shed been dressed up and meeting people. Just like the office. But Colorado meant sunshine and mountains and freedom to Kelly. And that meant shorts, a T-shirt, and sneakers. She brushed her chin-length dark-brown hair behind her ear and checked the barrette in back. Kellyd rushed through her shower and dressing in order to fit in a morning

run along the trail that ran beside the motel. Shed barely checked the mirror. After yesterdays tears, she needed to clear her head. Running always helped her think. She waved to Mimi. I just thought Id let Carl use Helens backyard today while I go to all those . . . you know, meetings. Lawyer, banker, and all that. Thats a great idea. Im sure hes tired of being cooped up in the motel room, Mimi said with a bright smile. Her sun-streaked brown hair feathered softly around her face. Fiftyish, slender, and pretty, she wore a powder-blue straight dress that accentuated her trim figure. But what really drew Kellys attention was the open-weave vest she wore on top; the loosely fixed knots held the yarns together. Varying shades of blue traveled all the way to green and back again. The effect was stunning. Do you have time for a cup of tea or coffee? Mimi

asked, obviously hoping for a yes. Kelly hesitated, running through her mental daytimer. That and the Greenwich Meridian time clock in her head kept Kelly on task. She depended on that clock. Back in the firm, everyone kept track of their time in tenths of an hoursix-minute intervalsbillable hours. Consequently, Kelly was seldom late. I have a few minutes. My appointment with the lawyer isnt until ten. Oh, darn, I was hoping wed have more time, Mimi said, her smile momentarily missing. Ive been dying to show you the shop, but I guess itll just have to wait until later today. Why dont we step over to the caf? She gestured toward the pathway leading around the farmhouse. Kelly completely forgot that a bistro-style caf had opened in the former kitchen and dining room of the farmhouse since her last visit. As they followed the flower beds and flagstone path, Kelly was astonished to see the caf also spilled out into the shady backyard. Surrounded by high stucco walls, the entire patio was private, secluded from the outside. The whole setting was delightful and charming, Kelly had to admit. Mimi chose a table and sat down, motioning to a nearby

waitress as Kelly settled into a wrought-iron chair. This is really quite nice. I like what they've done here,

Kelly surprised herself by saying. Noticing the many tables filled with customers lingering over late breakfasts and brunch, she asked, How's it doing? Financially, I mean. I know how hard it is for small restaurants to make it. As a beginning accountant years ago, Kelly had had several restaurants to worry about. Shoe box clients she used to call them, because they always kept their accounts in shoe boxes for some reason. Actually, quite well, according to Pete, said Mimi. He's the young man who had the idea of turning this whole area into a restaurant. Somehow, he managed to convince the management company that owns it to invest in used equipment, and he volunteered all the labor. He put his heart and soul into this place. She shook her head. Let's hope all that hard work hasn't been wasted . . . for both of us. Intrigued by the cryptic remark, Kelly was about to respond when the waitress appeared. She had shoulder-length reddish-brown hair that curved around a pretty face. Hi, Mimi, she said with a bright smile, then turned a warm gaze to Kelly. Kelly, this is Jennifer Stroud, Mimi introduced. She was also a friend of Helen's. Kelly, I just wanted to say how shocked we were at Helen's death. She was a wonderful lady. I used to see her over at the shop almost every day, and she was always so sweet and loving. We'll all miss her a lot. The comments caught Kelly unprepared, and she felt her eyes grow suddenly moist. She glanced down at her napkin. Thank you. You're very kind. Jennifer reached out and patted Kelly's arm. Hey, that's okay. Let me bring you something. I know Mimi's order already. Earl Grey, cream. How about you? Coffee, black and strong, Kelly said with a smile, which helped chase away the tears. Down with decaf, right? Jennifer winked as she flipped the notepad closed. Be right back. I think she was at the funeral yesterday, but I really can't remember too much, Kelly said as she watched Jennifer skirt between tables, glad for the chance to compose herself. Oh, yes, she was there with the other knitting shop regulars. Regulars? Kelly asked, Who are they? We've got lots of knitting and needlework groups that meet regularly at the shop during the week. Some are organized, some just happen, like Jennifer's group. They're a bunch of women, many of whom are around your age, who meet after work a couple of times a week or more. Of course, anybody who shows up is welcome to sit in with any group. That's how Helen met Jennifer and the others. Kelly could easily picture that. Helen was always knitting, and loved nothing better than to share her passion. It was a shame Kelly had proven to be such an unwilling student. Now, she was sorry she'd always feigned impatience whenever her aunt had tried to coax her into learning to knit. I know Aunt Helen enjoyed that, Kelly mused. She loved meeting new people. And living across from the shop, she could make new friends almost every day. Every week when I'd call her, she'd always tell me something funny she'd heard, usually from some friend. Kelly would miss those phone calls. Helen had lots of friends, as you saw yesterday at the service. Everyone loved her, and we want to help you in whatever way we can, Kelly. Several people have offered to help go through the house when you're ready. Kelly groaned inwardly. That unpleasant chore had almost slipped her mind. Whenever it had appeared, she'd shoved it away. At least having people with her would make the task easier and less painful. I confess I've deliberately not thought about that chore, she admitted. I guess I'm avoiding going into the house after, well, you know. I understand, Kelly. Thanks so much. I really appreciate your help. I remember how hard it was going through my dad's things, and I'd been prepared for his death. Mimi reached out and patted Kelly's arm. Well, you're not alone this time, Kelly. We're here to help you. Jennifer's cheerful bustle and the inviting tray of coffee and tea arrived just when Kelly felt her eyes grow moist again. After the funeral yesterday she thought she'd cried herself dry. Apparently there was a well inside her that ran deeper than she knew. There was no one left anymore. Her dad, three years ago. Now, Aunt Helen. Her entire family was gone. Here you go, Jennifer announced as she set the tea and coffee in place. Pete even threw in one of those wicked cinnamon rolls on the house. Ohhh, that's cruel, Mimi groaned. He knows I can't have the sugar. Kelly eyed the tempting coil of golden, flaky, sweet dough slathered with a sugary cream-cheese icing that drizzled down the sides. She'd forgotten Fort Connors community weakness for these oversized breakfast buns. The bakery that specialized in making them kept the calorie count a secret. It's still warm, tempted Jennifer with a grin. Her normal willpower was either sound asleep or stunned into silence at the sight of the huge pastry. So, with no nagging voice in her head, Kelly picked up the fork. What the heck. I'll need it for all those meetings. Lawyers are depressing. Absolutely, Jennifer concurred, clearly enjoying Kelly's quick capitulation. Besides, you're tall and slender. It'll never show. On me, it'd be on my hips in five minutes. Oh, right, Kelly retorted with a grin. Why don't you share it with me? Jennifer rolled her eyes. Don't tempt me. I was born with a sweet tooth. Seriously, I can't finish this monster all by myself. She sliced the bun in half and pushed one half to the side of her plate. Jennifer glanced at the pastry. We're not supposed to eat with customers. Kelly sensed weakness. She took a big bite, closed her eyes, and let out a dramatic,

Mmmmmmmmm!Thats it. Priorities. Jennifer laughed and grabbed her portion. Which are? Mimi teased. Jennifer paused after swallowing. Right now, sugar. Its gonna be a busy day. Kelly polished off her share and reached for the coffee, which was surprisingly rich and dark. She drank in the blissful enjoyment of the strong brew. Yum, this is really good for the plain stuff. My compliments. Thats Eduardos doing. Hes our cook and insists on making the coffee every morning. I think he throws in espresso or chicory or shoelaces or who knows what. But itll wake you up, for sure. Bless him, and tell him Ill be back. The timer went off inside her head, and Kelly drained the cup. Speaking of that, I have to go. Lawyers get all pinched around the edges if youre late. She scooted back her chair and brushed telltale sugar flakes off her skirt. Oh, Mimi, I almost forgot. Could you fill a bowl with water for Carl, please? I fed him this morning, but I forgot to grab his water dish. No problem. Ill give him some food come dinnertime, too, so dont rush. And make sure you stop in the shop when you return. I cant wait to show you everything weve done. You havent been in since we opened four years ago. Mimi exuded pride. Youll be surprised, I think. I look forward to it.

Thanks, Mimi, Kelly said as she backed away from the table. Glancing at Jennifer as she headed for the pathway, Kelly waved. Nice meeting you, Jennifer. Oh, youll see me later at the shop. With the others. Good luck with the lawyer. Kelly hastened to her car. Shed dutifully let Mimi show off her shop, for Aunt Helens sake, if nothing else. Kelly couldnt knit her way out of a paper bag. So all that knitting stuff would be lost on her. Her aunt had tried several times to instruct Kelly when she was growing up and even as an adult, but it never seemed to take. Kelly would fumble the needles and drop the yarn whatever it took to appear completely incompetent. There were so many more fun things to do outside on the farm, she just couldnt sit still long enough to learn. Besides, all those different kinds of stitches looked complicated to Kelly. Knitting here, purling there. All that yarn, needles busily working away, stitch after stitch, row after row. Looked like a lot of work to Kelly. She just didnt have that kind of patience. The only patience shed ever had was for numbers. Numbers stayed put on paper. They didnt fall off the end of the needles. Oh yes, Kelly thought, as she backed her car out of the parking space, numbers were far less confusing than knitting. Lawrence Chambers tapped his gold-rimmed pen against the leather desk pad as he scanned the documents before him. Kelly used the opportunity to study the lawyer, who was the same age as her aunt. His gray hair shone silver as a stray morning sunbeam crossed the desk. Chambers had been Aunt Helens trusted lawyer and close friend for a lifetime. Thanks to Helens foresight, you should have no problem handling any expense involved with the estate, he spoke up. Youre co-signer on both bank accounts, checking and savings, as well as the safe-deposit box. It was a smart move, considering youre her only heir. Aunt Helen told me four years ago what her wishes were. Ive always tried to oblige her in whatever way I could. Chambers glanced up from the papers in his hand and smiled across the large walnut desk. Kelly noticed his faded blue eyes were kind. Helen appreciated everything you did for her. She told me so many times. Kelly glanced away. She was like a mom to me, Mr. Chambers. You know that. Besides, when my dad died three years ago, I promised him Id take care of her. She was his only living relative. Guilt twinged inside. Shed never broken a promise to her dad in her whole life. Chambers set down the papers, watching Kelly, then gestured to the wall. Thats hers, you know. Kelly studied the framed quilted scene that had caught her eye earlier. Deep, rich browns and greens portrayed a small house nestled in the mountains, surrounded by tall evergreens. I thought that might be her work. Its so vibrant. Presentation de l'diteur Kelly Flynn never picked up a pair of knitting needles she liked until she strolled into House of Lambspin. Now, in the first in a brand-new series, she learns how to knit one, purl two, and untangle the mystery behind her aunt's murder.