

Getting Old Is the Best Revenge

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Death by Double Bogey

Margaret Dery Sampson, sixty-four, always said the seventeenth hole would be the death of her, and she was right.

Let's not mince words. Margaret cheated at golf. After all, being wealthy (inherited, not earned) meant being entitled. It meant always getting what she wanted. And what she wanted was to break the women's record for the course. She had a feeling today would be the day.

Wrong.

She was with her usual perfectly coiffed and outfitted foursome—rich women who played every Friday at the exclusive West Palm Beach Waterside Country Club. It was a beautiful, perfect Florida day. The lawns glistened in the sunlight. The weather was not too muggy. Margaret was playing brilliantly. All was right in her world.

One of Margaret's techniques for enjoying the game was to golf only with women who played less skillfully than she did and were easily intimidated.

She knew her caddy saw through her, but she didn't care. He was the caddy everyone wanted, so she paid triple in order to get him at her convenience. He was worth it. The money bought his loyalty. When things went wrong, she blamed him.

So here was the dreaded seventeenth hole and all she needed was a bogey. Unfortunately, here too was a troublesome serpentine water hazard. She routinely selected her best balls for this hole, but that never helped. Invariably she'd hook the ball before it cleared the water, and it would land in the trees. Today was no different. With angry, imperious strides, she marched into the foliage, leaving behind her the timid catcalls of the gals. "Meggie's done it again!"

As her caddy began to follow, she waved him off.

Yes, Margaret thought, I'll get out of it! No way would she take a penalty.

To her dismay, she discovered her ball wedged hopelessly in a clump of decaying turf. Without hesitation, she kneeled to pick it up.

"Naughty, naughty," a strong baritone voice chastised.

Startled, Margaret turned her head to find a pair of snappy argyle socks at her eye level. She stood slowly, preparing her defense. When she saw who the other golfer was, her expression turned to happy surprise.

"Well, look who's here. I didn't know you belonged to our club."

Abruptly, he grabbed her, pulling her against him with one hand as he expertly shoved a hypodermic needle into a vein with the other. Moments later, Margaret stopped struggling and sank down onto the dark and mossy rough.

Her last, dying thought was that she should have used the three iron instead of a wood.

One parting shot was irresistible to the killer. "Sorry I ruined your day, Meggie, but you shouldn't toy with a man's game."



I'm Still Here

Never Trust Anyone *Under* Seventy-five! We

Take Care of Our Own." That's the motto of our brand-spanking-new Gladdy Gold Detective Agency. Because, if I've learned anything from the traumatic last two months, it's that once you are "old" you become invisible.

It opened my eyes to the fact that senior citizens had no representatives in the crime department. They were sitting ducks. No one cared. Who could they turn to when in trouble? Who was old enough to understand their problems? Me. If not me, who? If not now, when? *Tempus* was certainly *fugiting*. I was their only hope.

It all began when I realized someone was murdering the elderly widows of Lanai Gardens, Phase Two, Oakland Park Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale. Right in my own backyard. I did go to the police, and although Detective Morgan Langford was young and adorable, he treated me like I was faded wallpaper. He didn't believe me. There was no motive. The women were all over seventy-five, so naturally they must have died of old age. Besides, who'd want to kill old ladies? he asked me. The general attitude? We're all on the checkout line anyway.

Well. I showed him with the help of the girls: my sister Evvie and my friends Ida, Sophie, and Bella. I use the term "girls" loosely. They're so old, they think they invented Medicare.

I proved there was a killer. And guess what? I identified the killer. And guess what else? Along with the somewhat decrepit senior residents of all six phases of our condo complex, we actually captured said killer.

It woke us up. No more sitting around waiting for the day we leave this mortal coil and go wherever it is we go from here. We're not dead yet and there's lots more living to do. That's why I started our detective agency. Boy, did it get the juices running again. We can't wait to get up in the morning and see what new adventure awaits us. Hey, we're the new "Old."

My experience for calling myself a P.I.? I read mysteries. I've read hundreds of them. With Carl Hiaasen and Edna Buchanan as my Florida gurus, how can I fail? Though, hopefully, I won't run into any of Carl's creepy alligators.

We made the headlines in the *Broward Jewish Journal* and got on local TV, and now the phones won't stop ringing. If you missed us the first time around—well, I haven't got the strength right now to tell you the whole story. But if you happen to be in Fort Lauderdale, ask anybody to direct you to Lanai Gardens, and drop by for a Danish and a cup of coffee. I'll be glad to fill you in. That is, if I'm not napping.

By the by, I picked up a boyfriend along the way. The very sexy, very tall Jack Langford. Not bad for a gal who sees her eighties looming ahead. But oh, when the girls found out—what aggravation. . .

Well, enough gossip. So, say hello again to Gladdy Gold, now the oldest living private eye in Florida—or anywhere else, for that matter.

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Nothing Has Changed.

Everything Has Changed.

It's eight a.m. and my girls will be stirring. I walk outside my apartment and do my warm-ups. Evvie, perky and raring to go as usual, pops out of her apartment door across the courtyard, one floor down. I see her glance very quickly at my door and just as quickly avert her eyes, and I know what she's thinking. Is my new boyfriend, Jack Langford, in there? Falling in love has complicated my life. But not to worry, I will tell all. I won't leave out a single juicy detail.

I call out to her, "Morning, Ev. How goes?"

"Same old, same old," she calls back to me.

Thanks, Evvie, for not asking the question I know you're dying to ask.

Some sisters can look at one another and it's like staring in a mirror. Not the two of us. I've got Dad's looks, with straight brown (now gray), boring hair. I inherited his ways of thinking, too—logical and conservative and bookish—and his temperament—easygoing.

Evvie takes after our dramatic, excitable, emotional mother, as do her fiery red curls. She was always addressed as "my pretty one." Thanks a lot, Mom. I was pretty, too. So just because you were always mad at Dad, you ignored me?

I traveled down here from New York because Evvie's husband, Joe, was leaving her and she needed my support. I never intended to stay, being a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker. But I needed a change of pace. I'd allowed myself to wallow in the tragedy of my life much too long. I could not shake the horrific circumstances of my husband's death and I was sick of my own self-pity. Even my daughter, Emily, told me to go, though it was very hard leaving her and my grandchildren.

I was sure I'd miss New York, but I never looked back. Instead, I became a stuck-in-the-swamp retiree, taking care of a bunch of gals in their second childhood who insist they need me. They drive me crazy sometimes, but I do love them.

Speaking of the gals, here comes Ida, sprinting down the walkway behind me. She has this way of shooting out of her apartment like a rocket, her tight, skinny body ramrod-straight, her stiff gray bun bobbing.

"Is *he* here?" she snaps in that snippy tone of hers. No subtlety with Ida. She has no problem staring at my door as if she has X-ray eyes.

I always ignore the question. But that doesn't stop the asking.

Next, Bella, our dear, oldest member, with her wispy silvery hair always elegantly coiffed, barely squeezes open her door to make sure Evvie is already on the landing, then tiptoes out. Taking little mincing steps, she walks behind Evvie. Bella's my only ally. But she joins the Jewish Greek chorus anyway. Smiling at me sweetly, she calls in her little, wavering voice, "Where *is* he, that darling *mensch* of yours?"

Sophie is always last. In the old days, pre-private-eye business, she had to be bandbox perfect before she'd let one exquisitely shod tootsie step out her door. Now she's so afraid of being left out of any new development, she's less careful. There might be only one eyebrow penciled in, or one cheek rouged. Her hair, this month's color, Wild Strawberry Blonde, is flying every which way. But she will make it to exercise on time.

With hands on hips, Sophie takes her turn to confront me. "So where's Jack? Did he sleep over last night?"

Sleep over? I feel like I'm fifteen again and all my teenage friends are jealous because I have a boyfriend and they don't. I met Jack at the grand opening of a new mystery bookstore while waiting to have my car fixed. I took one look at him and tried not to drool. Wow! Tall and elegant, waves of salt and pepper in his gray hair. Eyes that you could sink into and never come back. And he admitted he'd lusted after me years ago when he saw me at a New Year's Eve party in Lanai Gardens. Instant fireworks!

When I got home I was too chicken to tell the girls that some good-looking guy had picked me up. A man who lived in Phase Six! I knew how they'd *kvetch* and I didn't want to hear it. Now that they know, boy, have they been laying on the guilt trip. Not that I don't have enough guilt of my own.

Yet, how can I be mad at them? Their men are gone. Just about all the men around here are gone. We lost three more last year, and three more lonely widows joined the rest of us.

On the other hand, what am I supposed to do? For the first time in many years, I find myself feeling something for a man. And yet, I'm still torn. How can I love again, even now?

"Nice day," I say pointedly.

"Let's get the show on the road," says Evvie, trying to move us along.

Sophie grumbles. "I still don't know why we have to exercise. All we'll do is die healthier."

"I like jogging," says Bella helpfully. "It's nice to hear heavy breathing again."

And so we begin our daily fifteen-minute version of exercise. We head downstairs, walk around the apartment building once or twice, each at her own speed. It's not much, but, as my darling Francie used to say, something is better than nothing. It was she who encouraged us to exercise to keep healthy. She was my best friend. Francie died two months ago and I still cry for missing her.

Today, like every day, the girls and I walk. We talk. We rest. We walk and talk some more. And nowadays there are only two topics that hold the girls in thrall: Jack, and our new private-eye biz.

"You're not doing too badly for a start-up company," Jack told me. "It's looking good." He was kissing me long and hard at the time he said that, so all I could do was mumble my agreement. Gee, is this man sexy . . . but I digress.

Business. Last month we found a lost pocketbook for a hysterical senior in Wilton. We retraced her steps and found it where she left it, hanging with all the other purses in the handbag department at Kmart.

We solved the mystery of the elderly cousin from Sunrise who disappeared. Turns out the relatives had a fight and she spitefully didn't tell them she was going to the Bahamas for the weekend. Like that. And more of the same. It's really nice helping people, but I'm waiting for a case that gets the heart racing.

We have a business meeting every morning after exercise and swimming. Need I say, it's what the girls live for. So, naturally, they try to rush through the exercise part.

"Is it time to quit yet?" Ida asks, puffing away, her flip-flops flapping.

"Yeah, *oy*, am I exhausted." This from Sophie, who has hardly flexed a muscle.

"Me, too," Bella, the jogging *maven*, adds as she sways daintily along.

The girls begin their cool-down exercises. Sophie halfheartedly bends. She complains, "If God wanted us to touch our toes, he would have put them near our *pupiks*." Two bends, she's done.

Four sets of eyes look up at me hopefully.

"Swimming first," I remind them.

"Do we have to?" Pouting, Sophie repeats this every time.

But they disperse, hurrying back to their apartments to get into their bathing suits.

So here they are, my girls. My business associates. I already have nicknames for them—my private eye-ettes: my sister, Evvie Markowitz, a regular female Sherlock Holmes; Ida Franz, Miss Stubborn, great for in-your-face confrontation; Bella Fox, the Shadow, dressed always in pale beige or grays, hardly anyone ever notices her. Perfect for surveillance. And last, but certainly a major player, Sophie Meyerbeer, our Master of Disguise. She lives for color coordination.

I dread today's meeting. Jack said he was dropping by with a present for me.

That should make the fur fly.

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More Swimming

And here we are at the pool. And there they are,

the other early morning so-called swimming enthusiasts. Their lounge chairs parked in their usual spots on the grassy perimeter of the pool, guarding their tiny turfs jealously.

Plump Tessie Hoffman, the only real swimmer among us, is energetically doing her laps.

Enya Slovak, our concentration camp survivor, has her nose buried in the inevitable book.

The Canadian snowbirds are gathered together in their familiar clique. They are doing what they love most, lapping up the sun and reading their hometown newspapers and comparing the weather. Thirty degrees in Manitoba, fifteen in Montreal. They chuckle smugly.

We have new tenants, Casey Wright and Barbi Stevens. Bella shudders, still unable to believe anyone would want to live in an apartment where there'd been a murder, but the price was so low these gals found it irresistible. They've only recently moved in and it's nice to have young people around. They're cousins, originally from San Francisco. Barbi must be in her twenties, Casey in her thirties. They don't look the least bit alike. Casey is kind of chunky and wears her dark, curly hair very short. Barbi is a tall, skinny blonde, and very cute. Casey seems to live in blue jeans, but Barbi loves frilly sundresses. They told us that they had a small business of their own and handed us all cards. All the cards said was "GOSSIP? Call Casey & Barbi. We know everything!" along with a phone number to call for an appointment. One of these days I must ask them what their business is about.

Next up are our beloved eighty-year-old Bobbsey twins, Hyman and Lola Binder (aka Hy and Lo), bobbing up and down in the shallow water, holding on to one another like chubby teenagers in love.

Hy sees us and greets us with his usual inane comment. "Ta-da, enter the murder *mavens*. Caught any killers lately?"

Evvie glares at him. "You're just jealous."

Mary Mueller now joins us at the pool every morning. She's living alone since her husband, John, left her. It caused quite a stir, I can tell you, when he was "outed" (a new modern term we've learned). He had met a guy in a Miami gay bar and fallen in love. Boy, that was a first in Lanai Gardens. But Mary is holding up nicely, I'm glad to say.

Dropping our towels, we kick off our sandals and step carefully into the pool. The girls walk back and forth across the shallow end, splashing a lot. I do two laps and I'm done. And I'm out. Such is swimming exercise.

Pretty Barbi addresses Evvie. "So, what movie are you seeing this week? I can hardly wait for the review."

Evvie, the in-house critic for our weekly free newspaper, is on a mystery kick since we've gotten into the P.I. biz. Last week she did a hilarious review of *Hannibal*. Evvie wrote: "The monster who likes to eat people is back again. Maybe he should do a cookbook." She sounded deadly serious; I couldn't stop laughing. This week she'll be reviewing a French mystery. Who knows what she'll do with that.

"Wait and see," she chirps. "But I promise it'll be gory."

"Hey, girls, didja hear this one?" And Hy is at us like *schmaltz* on chopped liver. God help us, he's learned a new joke off his e-mail. It will be offensive as usual.

"So, Becky and Sam are having an affair in the old age home. Every night for three years, Becky sneaks into Sam's room and she takes off her clothes and climbs up on top of him. They lay there like two wooden boards for a couple of minutes, then she gets off and goes back to her room. And that's that. One night Becky doesn't show up. Not the next night either. Sam is upset. He finally tails her and, waddaya know, she's about to sneak into Moishe's room. Sam stops her in the hall. He's really hurt. 'So, what's Moishe got that I ain't got?' Becky smirks and says, 'Palsy!' "

Hy grins at us, thrilled with himself. Affronted as usual, the girls turn their backs on him and paddle away. I look down and concentrate on my crossword puzzle.

"What? What'd I do? What?"

"*Schlemiel!*" Ida hisses under her breath.

"Hey, did you read this?" Tessie asks. She's now drying off on her chaise, her nose deep in today's *Miami Herald*. She half reads, half condenses: "Mrs. Margaret Dery Sampson, sixty-four, of West Palm Beach, died early yesterday morning on the seventeenth hole at the Waterside Country Club where she was golfing with three friends. Mrs. Sampson, "Meg" as she was known to all who loved her, died suddenly of a massive heart attack."

The group reacts with shocked surprise. The heiress is well-known. Our group has followed her colorful rich-girl antics for years. She married into the famous Dery shipbuilding dynasty. It was one of Florida's most extravagant weddings.

Reading the society news around the pool is a daily ritual. I only half listen. I am stuck on 33across.

Tessie continues. "Mrs. Sampson, an active member of Florida society, was known for her charitable works. She was an avid sportswoman and a bridge enthusiast. Widowed three years ago, she is survived by her second husband, Richard Sampson."

"What a pity," says Evvie. "You'd think with all that exercising she'd be in perfect health."

"Never mind that. Think of all that money she didn't get to spend," Ida adds.

"But she left a nice, rich widower," says Sophie. She picks up a tube of sunblock off the ledge of the pool and slathers her face and shoulders. "Maybe he'd like to meet a nice, poor widow. Like me."

Ida takes the sunblock from her as Sophie turns to let Ida do her back. "Dream on."

Sophie twists around. "What? I'm not good enough for him?" She pushes Ida's hand away. "You're making me into a greaseball."

Ida slaps the tube back into her hand. "Do it yourself. As if a rich guy like that would even look at a nobody like you."

Sophie hands the tube to Evvie. "And you know what? If he's old and ugly I wouldn't want him anyway."

Evvie applies cream to Sophie's back. "What's old, anyway? Look at us."

This gets my attention. "Bernard Baruch, the famous statesman, said, 'Old is always fifteen years older than you are.'"

"Hello?" It is a wobbly little voice, and the Canadians, who still have all their hearing, are the first to glance up.

"Over here." The voice manages to rise a decibel or two.

Now everyone responds. An elderly wisp of a woman stands at the pool gate, seeming almost too fragile to hold on to her metal walker. Her back is hunched slightly, and she looks as if a strong wind would carry her away. She's dressed completely in black, including the kerchief on her head. She must be sweltering in that outfit. "I'm looking for Gladdy Gold."

All eyes automatically turn to me as I put down my puzzle and walk toward her. "I'm Gladdy."

Needless to say, the girls climb out of the pool and line up behind me, my little ducklings all in a row.

"Your neighbors told me where I could find you."

"They would," Ida mutters into my back. "Ask them when we go to the toilet. All our neighbors know that, too. *Yentas!*"

I ignore Ida. "What can I do for you?"

"I am looking for a detective," the woman says, and then adds worriedly, "if the price is right."

In a flash, Hy is at our side, dragging one of the plastic pool chairs. "Here, missus, have a seat," he offers, helping the woman into the chair. He positions himself right next to her. An instant later, here comes Lola, gluing herself onto her husband as she leans in.

Everyone around the pool shifts slightly to the left. My unofficial staff. Unwanted. Uncalled-for. The other inhabitants of Phase Two, determined to get into the act whenever they can. Tessie, ever so casually, moves her chaise a little closer. Mary puts down her crocheting. Barbi and Casey openly stare. Even the Canadians have folded their newspapers. All gape and listen intently.

The little woman puffs out her chest and grips the arms of the chair. She shouts, "I'm eighty-two years old and I don't need this *agita* in my life! My old man, maybe he's cheating on me! And I want to know who the *puttana* is!"

Ahhh . . . I hear a collective sigh of recognition behind me. A problem they can all relate to after years of watching Oprah, Sally, Geraldo, and the rest.

"Hah!" says Hy with great delight. "The old man is dipping his wick somewheres else!"

The woman stares up at him. "What did this fool say?"

"Hy! Butt out," I say.

He shrugs, feigning hurt. "I'm trying to lend a hand here."

"Maybe he's lonely," Lola contributes.

"Maybe he's not with a *woman*," says Mary darkly. She's still pretty traumatized over John.

I have to nip this group intrusion in the bud. Now.

"Shall we go to my office?" I say to the woman in black. Helping her out of the patio chair, I reposition her behind her walker and firmly move her out the pool gate.

As we leave, my girls scamper to keep up. I hear another sigh in the background. This one of disappointment. Followed by a buzz of complaints from the neighbors left behind and pointedly being left out.

Tessie whines, "Didn't I ruin my best bathing costume chasing after our murderer? Where's the gratitude?"

"Wait a while," says Hy complacently. "She'll figure out she can't do without us."

"Right," adds Mary. "She owes us. Big time."

I tell you, it's not easy being a star.



The Case of the Little Old

Lady from Plantation

We are in my dining room, which I suppose I

can now officially call my conference room. My minuscule kitchen, because it has a phone, is the office. Such are our business quarters.

The girls were so excited I could hardly contain them. This may be our first case with some zip to it. The lady in black, who has introduced herself as Mrs. Angelina Siciliano from Plantation, also seemed about to burst a blood vessel.

Obviously whatever's been bothering her has been building up for quite a while. I sent the girls home to get out of their wet bathing suits. And I excused myself to put on dry clothes and left Mrs. Siciliano drinking chamomile tea. It would calm her down. I hoped.

The girls were back in a flash. I've never seen them change clothes so fast. Bella, always fastidious, is in one of her usual beige tailored pantsuits with tan sneakers. Evvie, always the optimist, wears a favorite pair of bright aqua capri pants with a matching Hawaiian-style shirt. Ida, she of the morose personality, wears a darkcolored plain sundress—always with sensible flat shoes. Sophie, ah Sophie, that queen of color coordination, is swathed totally in lavender. Lavender polyester slacks, lavender blouse, lavender sandals, and, the crowning touch (pun intended), a lavender ribbon in her hair.

I opted for comfortable and am wearing my usual light cotton pants, T-shirt, and white sneakers.

The girls swarm around Mrs. Siciliano, chattering in her ears.

I delegate. "Evvie, please take notes. Sophie, get the cups and plates. Ida, bring another chair to the table. Bella, stop hovering. Thanks."

We are all finally seated and sipping tea. I face our visitor and introduce the girls to her.

She looks puzzled. "You're all detectives?"

"Yes," the girls say in unison.

"They're my associates," I tell her.

"Just find out who my husband is humping!"

First, they are scandalized by Mrs. Siciliano's frankness, but they get over that fast. Then they all jump in.

Ida: "How do you know he's doing it?"

Sophie: "Do you have proof?"

Bella: "Did you catch him in the sack?"

Evvie to Bella (shocked): "Bella! Shame on you."

"How can I catch him? Look at me. In this

walker?" The woman glares indignantly at Bella. "If my five brothers were still alive, they'd find him with that *puttana* and string him up by the *coglioni*!"

Bella throws Evvie a dirty look. "And you think I talk dirty!"

Evvie says, "What's it mean?"

Bella shrugs. "Who knows, but it sounds terrible."

Mrs. Siciliano slaps her teacup down. Hard. "You want proof, I'll give you proof. My husband, Elio, he plays poker with the men from St. Anthony's Benevolent Society every night after dinner. Forty years he comes home when the clock strikes ten. Now, one night he's twenty minutes late. Then forty. Once, even an hour."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Sophie comments. "Maybe he has to clean up the cigarette butts or something."

"Sure. He always has an excuse. Dom's car broke down. He had to drive him. Dom is a mechanic. His car don't dare break down. Vinny had a headache. He had to drive him, too. Fifty years I know Vinny. He never had a headache in his life. Sal's aunt Costanza died. He was too broke up to drive. Sal *hated* his aunt Costanza. Now I question everything. Is he really playing bocce on Saturday? Is he really sitting home with the ball game on TV when I go to mass?"

I interject as delicately as I can, "Has your husband a habit of, well, seeing other women?"

Angelina smacks her old, black cracked leather pocketbook hard on the table. "Never! He wouldn't dare!"

"Then why do you think he's doing it now?"

I hear the scrape of their chairs as the girls lean in closer, fascinated by this most unusual personality.

"I'll tell you why. Because every time he's late he comes home smelling from Johnson's talcum powder, that's how I know!"

Sophie scrunches up her forehead, which tells me she's puzzled. "Maybe he's diapering a baby somewhere?"

Angelina glares at her. "That's like perfume! A woman has her own smell. I use a little vanilla extract, myself. My cousin Josephine, before she got rich, she put a dab of virgin olive oil behind her ear. But this one! *She* uses talc! That's how I know!"

I pour her another cup of tea, but Angelina remains agitated. "If I only was seventy again, I'd go catch them myself."

I'm still trying to calm her. God forbid she has a stroke in my apartment. "A little history, please. How long have you and Mr. Siciliano been married?"

"Fifty years. We have six children," she adds proudly.

"How old is Mr. Siciliano?"

"Eighty-five."

Evvie is in awe. "And he still *shtups*?"

"*Shtups*?" Angelina grimaces, confused.

"Yeah, like you said—humps," Sophie translates.

I ask one more question. "If we do find out that Mr. Siciliano is having an affair, what do you intend to do about it?"

The old woman raises herself up from her chair and hangs on to the table for support. "What do you think?! *Mia famiglia* is from Sicily. You heard of Sicily? When I catch that *bastardo*, he's *kaput!*"

Angelina sits down again and sips her tea, apparently feeling much better now that she got it all off her chest. "Now let's talk about a senior discount."

6



The Meeting Is Called

to Order

I'm still not sure we should take this case," I say to the girls as they swarm about my kitchen. A few minutes ago, it was the office; now it's the cafeteria. They're busy organizing their contributions to a communal lunch.

We put Mrs. Siciliano in a taxi an hour ago and we're still debating as the five of us squeeze in and out of that tiny space preparing and carrying food.

Evvie's smart. She's staying out of the crush by standing in the hallway, looking in. "But she gave you her word that she won't knock him off."

Ida huffs as she walks past, carrying her casserole dish into the dining room. "And you believe her? She may be eighty-two, but I wouldn't like to meet her in a dark alley. She scares the hell out of me. And that black outfit! She dresses like he's dead already." "Oy," cries Bella as if she is in agony.

"What now? What's taking you so long?" demands Sophie impatiently. Bella has been in and out of the kitchen a dozen times, and still no food.

She stands in front of the stove pathetically looking at the boiling water. "You wanna know how often I eat hard-boiled eggs?" she asks poignantly. "Every time I make soft-boiled."

From the hallway Evvie shakes her head. "I told you a million times. You can't leave a stove when you're old."

"Get out of my way," Ida snaps, pushing past Evvie on her way back into the kitchen for another plate.

"Let's eat," says Sophie, now placing napkins on the table, adding her two cents. "I'm starving!"

"All right already," I say. "Grab your food, and everybody out of the kitchen." I shake my head at the disaster they've left me. The counter is littered with paper bags, plastic wrap, and odd remnants of food; the sink is a mess from all the chopping and slicing and peeling.

We're going to have to get a real office soon, or I'll go wacko.

Finally all the lunch contributions are on the dining room table. Since everyone brought over what they had left in their refrigerators, we are having smorgasbord.

Evvie passes me her chopped liver. "I say take the case. It was an empty threat."

Sophie serves her cottage cheese and vegetable salad. "I say it was a full threat. We catch him doing it, he's a yunich."

Evvie corrects her. "That's eunuch."

Sophie makes a downward-slashing gesture. "Yeah. Bye-bye, balls."

Bella serves her now hard-boiled eggs. "She looks like she goes to church a lot, so she has to forgive him."

Ida sneers into her strawberry Jell-O mold. "Yeah, sure, first she'll do a couple of Hail Marys, following which she'll put a knife in his heart. Then she'll cut off his *schmuck*."

"Right," Bella chimes in. "And then Jesus will forgive her for icing him."

I must pause to mention that ever since we started the business, the only things the girls read or watch on TV are mysteries, so they've picked up a lot of jargon.

I contribute my onion bagels and cream cheese. "I think we owe it to the husband to confront him if we catch him in the act. It might save his life."

Bella giggles. "Or at least his *coglioni*."

I suggest we get down to our business meeting. Sophie immediately waves her hand wildly in the air. "I thought of a name for us."

Ida moans. "We already agreed on a name. And not one word about T-shirts."

Sophie ignores her. "What about 'Glad's Girls'?"

"Forget it," says Evvie.

Ida moans. "Why does she always have to name everything?"

Sophie folds her arms across her chest. "'Cause I always named things ever since I was a little girl. I named all my dollies and my turtles and my toys and my socks and my sneakers. . . . There was Susie and Selma and Shirley and Sidonia, my dollies. And Tony and Tootsie, my turtles, and—"

Ida presses her hand across Sophie's mouth. "Stop already."

Sophie defiantly bubbles through Ida's hand. "And goo-goo . . ."

"Enough!" I say. Sometimes I feel like a traffic cop. Or a kindergarten teacher.

Bella raises her hand. "Since I'm on the advertising committee, I wish to make a suggestion. We put Gladdy's picture on bus stop benches. She's prettier than those ugly old bail bondsmen."

"But with what name?" Sophie insists. "I don't like the one we have."

"What's wrong with 'Gladdy Gold and Associates Detective Agency'?" I say, peeved.

Sophie yawns melodramatically. "Borrring . . ."

Evvie, secretary and treasurer, pipes up. "And where are we supposed to get that kind of money for billboards?"

"Also," says Bella, reading from her notes—she has obviously come prepared for this meeting—"I think we need to be armed and dangerous. We need a salt shaker and a jerk."

We look at her, dumbfounded.

Ida glares icily at her. "Don't you mean pepper spray?"

"Didn't I say that? I thought I said that. I know I said that."

"And what the heck is a jerk?" Evvie asks.

"You know," Bella says, gesturing, "that funnylooking thing that looks like a rock in a black sock. Cops hit guys with 'em all the time. In the movies . . ." she finishes lamely.

Evvie says with disgust, "I think she means a sap."

"Knock, knock," a male voice calls from the screen door.

Bella rushes across the room to unlatch it. "Come on in, Jack, and join the festivities."

Jack Langford enters. My heart goes flippityflop at the sight of him; I can't help it. Who says men in their seventies can't look sexy? He looks delicious to me. The girls, on the other hand, do not melt under his charm. They stiffen and you can feel the icicles forming.

He is holding a cardboard box and five small bunches of posies. He winks at me as he puts the box down on the table and starts handing the flowers out to the girls.

"Bribery will get you nowhere," Ida mutters under her breath. Jack, of course, hears her and smiles.

Fasten your seat belts. Here we go.

7



The Fly in the Ointment

Bella is all aflutter when Jack comes around.

She's the only one of the girls happy to have a man on the premises again. For years she was friends with his lovely wife, Faye, and always saw Jack as a decent husband. She quickly clears a space for him at the table and brings in another place setting. "Sit, Jack. Have a bite," she offers.

Watch the body language. Ida, our resident man-hater, backs out of the dining area and as far into the living room as she can without actually falling out the window. A bitter marriage long ago supposedly made her this sour, but I have a feeling there's more to it than that.

Sophie fidgets and moves around aimlessly. She no longer knows how to behave in front of a man. She knows she's too old to flirt, but how else do you behave with "them"?

Evvie stays close to me, unconsciously, as if protecting me from this threatening outsider in her life. The status quo is in danger. She doesn't want anything to change, and he is Change with a capital C.

I just stay away from the line of fire. Jack is a big boy. He can take care of himself.

"Just a cup of coffee, thanks." He smiles at Bella.

I can read his mind. He wants to come over and hug me, but he knows it will make me uncomfortable, so he shrugs.

"Thank you for the flowers," I say pointedly, glaring at the girls.

There is an immediate chorus of "yeah, thanks" from the rest. Ida's is so low you can't hear it, even though you can see her lips moving. Complaints get high volume; gratitude earns a mumble.

"So, what's new?" Jack asks.

I sit back and wait for the Greek chorus to begin.

Bella is first. "We have a new client. Mrs. Siciliano. From Plantation."

"Yeah," Sophie chimes in. "She wants us to catch her husband sleeping in somebody else's bed."

"Yeah, like Goldilocks." Bella giggles.

"Right," Ida adds with satisfaction, "so she can kill him." She looks at Jack and says, ever so sweetly, "Most men are such liars and cheaters, don't you think?"

"Well, that might be a little strong," he replies, trying to keep a straight face.

Evvie looks directly at me. "We're going on a stakeout tonight, so don't make other plans." That's her idea of being subtle.

Sophie is dancing around the table. "So, what's in the box? I can't stand the suspenders," says she who mauls the English language.

"It's for your office." Jack opens the carton as the girls gather around.

"What is it?" Sophie asks.

"An answering machine, so you won't miss any calls."

"Uh-oh, Jackie, you're in big trouble," Bella offers. "Gladdy hates progress."

"Hold it," I say. "It's not the progress. It's the loss of humanity. The day we substituted computer voices for real operators was the end of civilization as we knew it. And simplicity. One page in a typewriter was easier than having to be an engineer to learn a computer."

Bella ignores my soapbox speech. "She hates all new gadgets. You better just take it back right now."

"Yeah," adds Evvie. "Look at her phone. She still has a rotary."

Jack turns to me questioningly.

I sigh. "Next thing I'll 'need' to get two lines, and then we'll need a cell phone. And then maybe a fax machine and then maybe a photocopier. Not to mention a computer. A whole lot of new things to have to take care of."

Sophie agrees. "And learn. I've learned enough already for one lifetime."

Evvie jumps in. "Stuff just complicates your life."

"Besides," I say, indicating this impossibly small space, "where would I put it all?"

"But if you're running a business, you need business equipment," Jack argues.

"I guess," I say without enthusiasm.

"I promise I'll set it up for you so it will be very easy to use." He reaches down into the box and takes out another small package. He opens it and hands the contents out. "Business cards. Nice, huh?"

I examine them. They read:

Gladdy Gold and Associates

Senior Sleuths to the Senior Citizen

"Very nice," I say, not to be polite, but because they are. "Give me the invoices and I'll pay you back."

"It's a gift . . ."

I get testy. But I stop my mouth before I say another negative word. What? Am I crazy? Here's a man who says he loves me and I haven't the sense to say thank you when he gives me a gift? I smile and say, "Thanks, Jack, I really appreciate it."

His face lights up. I'm beginning to remember what having a man in one's life means. He reaches over and takes my hand.

There is a deafening silence in the room. Bella tries to fill it with some noise. "So, what's new, Jack?" she asks. "How is your adorable son?"

"Morrie's just fine," he answers.

Morrie is Morgan Langford, the policeman who became very involved in our lives before I met Jack.

"I'll bet he's very busy with all those assaults and batteries," Sophie comments.

Jack tells her, "Guess so. Crime is a twentyfour/seven kind of business."

I look at Jack, who is looking at me, and the girls are looking at us staring at one another. Finally Evvie takes the hint. "Come on, girls. Let's leave the lovebirds alone."

One by one they wrap what's left of their lunch contributions and file out without a word. Naturally, I feel guilty and call after them. "Take a nap. We're going to be out late tonight."

They mumble their OKs but don't look back.

I close the door and turn to Jack. With a slight edge of sarcasm, I say, "Alone at last."

He comes over to me and pulls me into his arms and kisses me soundly. It feels wonderful.

"I should apologize for them—"

He stops me with another kiss. "Nonsense. I think they're cute. Mean, but cute. They're protecting their territory."

I shake my head in wonder. "Don't you just love coming over here?"

"It's a shade better than a root canal."

I start clearing the table.

"Ida gives new meaning to 'if looks could kill,'" he adds. "I can almost feel the bagel cutter piercing my heart. Hey, gorgeous, before I forget. Guess who wants to have dinner with us on Friday night?"

"George Clooney, I hope."

"No such luck. Will you settle for Morrie? He actually has a night off."

I fake a sigh. "Too bad. But why would your son want to spend a 'date night' with two old fuddy-duddies?"

"He's between girlfriends."

Jack helps me carry everything into the kitchen. "What hit this place?" he asks.

"Just the girls organizing lunch. And talking at the same time."
"They really got to you today, didn't they? I mean, more than usual, with my being here." Jack pitches right in and starts to load the dishwasher. "By the way," he says, "Ms. Don't Like Progress, how come you have a dishwasher? How come we don't have to wash every little dish by hand?"
I swat him with a towel. "It came with the apartment, as you very well know, since you have the same model."
"The girls make me feel like I'm a naughty teenager and they're my disapproving parents. And they watch me to make sure I behave." I hand him the rest of the dishes.
"It's too late. They already assume you're not behaving."
"Not Ida. She's in denial."
"Then let's get married and I'll make an honest woman of you."
"Jack. You promised."
"I haven't asked you in one whole week."
"It won't solve the problem."
"Then let's just live together."
I pretend to look horrified. "What, live in sin?"
"Move to my place. Since it's the same model, you'll feel instantly comfortable."
"And deal with the jealous widows of Phase Six?"
"Let's move to Chicago. Or better yet, Alaska."
"I can't. They need me."
"I need you, too."
"They need me more." This is a game we play over and over. Like my dear best friend, Francie, and I used to do, I think sadly. God, how I miss her. Oh, how she would approve of Jack.
The kitchen is now spotless. "You're good around a house," I say.
"So keep me. I'm available."
"Don't start again."
I hang the dish towel up to dry. He hugs me again. "So, waddaya wanna do, Marty?" he whispers in my ear, replaying the famous line from the old movie.
"I don't know. Wadda you wanna do?" I play back.
"I want to make love to you, as if you didn't know."
"They're watching out their windows. If we don't go out, they'll know. Oh, God, listen to me. I'm blathering."
"If we do go out, they'll figure we went to my place. And they'll still *know*. Besides, they don't *know*, since you are too terrified of them to actually *do* anything. Therefore they don't really know anything."
"Yeah, but they *think* they know."
Jack shakes his head in disbelief. "They're starting to make *me* dizzy, too."
By now we are both laughing.
"So far you're only lusting in your heart. And I'm taking a lot of cold showers. What are you doing?" he asks me as I walk toward the kitchen window.
"Nothing . . ."
He grins. "I can't believe it. You're at the window so they'll see you're still in an upright position."
I actually blush.
"Look," he says, "the only sensible thing is to just get the dirty deed over with. Then you'll have a right to feel guilty."
"I know I'm being ridiculous."
He is behind me now, nuzzling my neck. It feels wonderful.
"They'll see you," I whisper.
"Good."
"All right already. Let's make a date and just do it."
I feel his body shaking excitedly as he continues to kiss the back of my neck. "Pick a place," he says. "Any place."
"But not around here."
"Try to keep it within a hundred miles, OK? Take your time. Don't rush. Take five minutes, even ten."
"Let's get out of here." I turn, pull him around in front of me, and push him toward the front door. "Just make sure you get me back in time for the stakeout."
When we walk out onto the landing and start for the elevator, I can feel the eyes watching us.



Josephine Dano Martinson, sixty-one, practi

cally lived at the Boca Springs Health Spa. And why shouldn't she? She certainly could afford it. She exercised with her trainer three times a week. Received a massage daily. Enjoyed weekly facials at the salon. The treatments pummeled her into youthfulness. She felt like she could live forever.

Alas, Josephine was wrong. Today was the last day of her life.

It was the end of her daily regimen and she was finally in her own private steam room, cold cucumbers relaxing her tired eyes, hot billows of steam cleansing her pores. She mentally reviewed the details of tonight's dinner party. The crème de la crème of Boca Raton society would be there to contribute to her favorite charity, the Boca Raton Opera. Of course they had to be entertained and coddled before their tight purses would open, so she was holding a "Las Vegas Night." Gambling with sexy croupiers in low-cut outfits for the men. A chance to show off new gowns for the women. And lots of gossip, of course. How she loved entertaining. And how she loved showing off her gorgeous husband. Of course she had hired the high-priced Los Ochos Cubanos band so that her Bobby could parade his fancy Latin steps. And make other women drool with envy. Wonderful . . .

"More steam, madam?" Her reverie was interrupted by a softly whispering voice.

"Turn it up, honey. You know I like it hot."

She could hear the hissing of the bricks as he poured more water on them. He? Was that a man's voice? In a women's spa? Instinctively she covered herself as best she could with her towel, sat up, and pulled off the cucumber slices.

At first she couldn't believe her eyes, then she grinned. "Hi, what the hell are you doing here, sweetie?"

He smiled back at her.

"Last time I saw you, we were both naked. Come for an encore?" She let the towel drop enticingly.

He replied by turning the steam up higher. It was getting unbearably hot. Then Josephine noticed he was dressed in a janitor's uniform, and that he wore gloves on his hands. Something was not right.

He walked out of the steam room and closed the door. She got up quickly, wincing from the heat of the tile floor, and grabbed the door handle. Incredibly, he was holding it shut from the outside!

"Hey, this isn't funny!" She dropped her hands from the burning handle. "Open the damn door!"

There was no response. She beat at the door with her fists, shouting for help. The heat was unbearable. Her feet were burning. She could hardly breathe. Terrified, she stared at him through the misted window, her eyes pleading. "Why?" she mouthed.

He smiled and sang to her. "Toyland, Toyland, little girl and boy land . . ."

She saw no mercy in his eyes. She knew she was done for. Her last, dying thought was Somebody had better call the caterers .

..

When Josephine finally crumpled to the scorching floor, the man opened the door. Her body tumbled out of the steam room. He bent down and felt her pulse, then walked out into the hallway, still whistling the same tune.

9



Stakeout

Picture this. It's eleven o'clock, way past my

bedtime. I'm jammed inside my cramped Chevy wagon with my so-called associates, all of whom are trying to drive me crazy.

We're parked on an unlit, empty, gloomy street in Plantation, an area we never go to, in front of something called Salvatore's Bar and Grill. What do we old broads think we're doing, anyway? We're on our first stakeout! And I cannot believe how these girls are behaving.

Their idea of a stakeout: sharing the already cramped space with five ample bodies and a basket full of snacks, drinks, knitting supplies, cards, and blankets. In case they get hungry, thirsty, bored, or cold. I keep nodding off, but not them. They're all for this adventure.

Thanks to the revenge-driven Angelina Siciliano, we're here stalking Elio Siciliano, an eighty-five-year-old potential philanderer. We are waiting for the alleged cheating husband to come out of the bar and head for some sordid late-night rendezvous.

Evvie is seated next to me in the front, of course. No one would dare try to take that sister privilege away from her.

The three others are miserable in the back, what with the supplies packed over, around, and under their legs. They keep shifting positions, annoying one another, in an attempt to get comfortable.

I told them they didn't all need to come tonight. Why did I waste my breath? As if they would take a chance on missing something. And I warned them that the car light would be off, so how could they knit or play cards?

That didn't stop them. They brought flashlights. Worried that the light might call attention to us? No problem. Sophie covered hers with a purple sock.

Bella is sitting between Sophie and Ida, who are using her lap as a table so they can play their favorite two-person card game, Spite and Malice. A game that calls for dirty tricks and the language of a longshoreman.

Evvie has taped the Sicilianos' home address next to the snapshot Angelina gave us of her husband up on the dashboard. She says that's how cops do it. However, Angelina gave us a fifty-year-old wedding photo. I must admit young Elio looks dashing with his black handlebar mustache and full head of hair. I especially like the twinkle in his eye as he gazes down on his pretty new wife. But it isn't much help to me.

Evvie's already scoped out where Elio's car is parked, based on the license plate number Angelina also provided.

With her oven-mitt-covered flashlight in hand, she is attempting to write her latest movie review for the Lanai Gardens' *Free Press* to pass the time. I am merely sitting there, simmering, as I hear crackling noises behind me, indicating food being unwrapped and knowing what a mess I'll find in my car tomorrow.

"How's this for a title?" she asks me. "Good Girl Goes Très Bad. Review of *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not*."

"Pretty good," I say. Ever since our first case, the Kmart handbag rescue, Evvie has been dragging us to mystery movies only. The girls sit there scared witless, clutching one another, squeezing their eyes shut at the gory bits, yet secretly getting a charge out of all the excitement. Except that Bella now has nightmares and Ida never stops bitching about how much she hates those movies. Nothing deters Evvie. She sees it as necessary research for our new business.

Evvie continues to read her review aloud. "Another French movie, and you know how much this reviewer loves French movies . . ."

"Yeah," Ida pipes up from the backseat, "cause they're so dirty."

"It's you, Ida dear, who has the dirty mind. The French are sophisticated." She goes back to reading. "Anyway, 'remember that adorable Audrey Tautou from *Amélie*? She's in this movie, too, but watch out, no *petits pois* this time. Now there's blood on her *chapeau* . . ."

"Are you sure you want *petits pois*?" I ask. "I think that means green peas."

Suddenly there is a commotion in the backseat.

"You block my ten and I'll smack you," Ida shouts at Sophie.

Sophie slams down the cards in Bella's lap, shouting as she does.

"Take that! And that! And that!"

"Oof," says Bella in reaction to Sophie's enthusiasm.

"Bitch!" says Ida.

"Nah, nah," says Sophie.

"I'll get you for that!" And Ida slams down her cards even harder on poor Bella's lap, ruining Sophie's run.

"Oof," says Bella again, her stomach really taking a beating. "Excuse me," she announces, "I have to go."

"I told you not to drink all that seltzer," Ida says.

"Well, you punching me didn't help."

"Can't you hold it in?" Sophie insists.

"No . . ."

"Now what do we do?" Ida asks.

Evvie turns to them. "Well, cops usually carry an empty bottle with them."

"A lot of good that would do us," Ida comments.

"I have to go. Now!" Bella is wiggling from side to side.

I look up and down the dark street. "Nothing's open around here except the bar," I tell her. "You'll have to go in there."

"No way," says Bella, scrunching lower in her seat.

"Take your mind off it," Sophie offers. "Have a bite of halvah."

Bella wiggles in the seat.

"I gotta go," she insists. "But I'm not walking into that place alone."

"I'll take her over there," says Sophie. "But what do I say if somebody asks me what we're doing around here?"

That stops us for a moment.

"Just act senile," says Ida. "That's what they think we are anyway."

"Good plan," says Evvie.

Sophie and Bella slowly get out of the car, looking around the empty streets fearfully. There isn't a soul to be seen anywhere. Evvie whispers out the window, "I'm going to lock the door after you."

"Just don't blow our cover," says Ida.

"I told you we needed a jerk," Bella whimpers as they head for the bar.

We wait, eyes glued on the bar door, *shpilkes*.

I turn the radio on to take our minds off what might be going on inside the bar. I get a news station. All ears perk up as we hear: "As reported earlier today, Josephine Dano Martinson, sixtyone, died tragically at the Boca Springs Health Spa where she was a member of long standing. She was found dead of heart failure, lying near her own private steam room."

We look at one another, surprised.

The announcer continues. "Mrs. Martinson, one of Florida's twenty-five wealthiest women, died on the day she was to host a

fund-raiser for the Boca Raton Opera. She is survived by her second husband, Robert Martinson."

"Two dead rich women in less than a week," I say.

"Coincidence?" asks Evvie.

"Probably," I comment. "Maybe."

Ida says, "Too bad Sophie is missing this. Here's another rich widower she won't be able to get her hands on."

Suddenly the bar door bursts open and Sophie bolts out, practically dragging Bella with her. They are moving fast. I quickly unlock the car doors. Sophie shoves Bella into the backseat, knocking her on top of Ida, then jumps in after her. "Shut the lights, fast!"

"What?" spits Ida, as she caroms Bella back at Sophie. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. The card game's over. They're coming out."

"Did you get to go?" Evvie asks Bella worriedly.

"Yeah, but I was in such a rush I got my support hose all twisted."

All our eyes are now facing the bar entrance as a group of tough-looking older guys pile out. They say their macho good-byes, playfully punching one another as they head for their cars.

"Quick," Ida says, smacking Evvie on the back. "Which one is Siciliano?"

"I can't tell yet," she says.

"That's what I keep telling you, they all look alike in the dark," Ida says maliciously.

"Don't look for the guy," I say. "Just watch his car."

"That's so smart," says Bella admiringly, as she gets her twisted hose straightened out.

Moments later Elio Siciliano climbs into his big black Chrysler. I try to get a good look at him, but all I see is a large, bulky guy with a semibald head of gray hair and bowed legs.

He starts up his motor, and I start mine.

The girls in the back lean over the front seats to stare out the windshield. They are fairly panting with excitement.

"Uh-oh," I say.

"What?" a chorus of four voices yelps.

"What if he's a fast driver and I can't keep up with him?" I've been doubting the sanity of this whole endeavor all evening.

"Never mind that," says Bella. "What if he catches us and has a machine gun?"

Luckily, Mr. Siciliano drives at a moderate speed. Eight blocks later he arrives at a modest light gray stucco cottage. I check the address. It's his. After he parks in his garage, I head for home. The stakeout is over.

Operation Elio is a bust.

So that's it. We wasted a whole evening and I have nothing to show for it but a car littered with garbage.

We arrive back at Lanai Gardens around midnight. The girls, still on a high, are already rewriting history, chatting about what they'll report around the pool tomorrow. Not me. I just want to crawl into bed with a pillow over my head and think about the possibility of moving to Alaska.

10



Attack of the Flying Aunts

I am awakened at four a.m. My pillow is damp; my sheets are in a tangle. I can't believe it. It's the Flying Aunts dream again.

Why can't I have one of those easy ones, like the losing-your-car-keys dream or the forgetting-where-you-live dream?

I hate this one. It's my mother and her three sisters, harpies, zooming kamikaze-like down at my poor father, screeching at him while he's strapped in an electric chair at the kitchen table. Like always, he's clutching the *New York Post* in one hand. But in his other hand? I always have to wait and see.

Evvie and I are also in this dream. As usual, I'm a shy eight and she's an adorable six. Tonight she tosses her curly red hair about and hits me with a giant jar of Gerber's baby spinach. Believe me, she's hit me with worse. A seltzer bottle last time. *Fakackta* dream. Oy. And her singing! *Jack and Jill went up the hill and Jack fell down . . .* The Flying Aunts love it. They *kvell* how she's better than Judy Garland. And cuter, too. They never *kvell* over me.

Then, just before the screeching aunts can put the plug in the socket and electrocute Dad, he throws me the thing he clutches in his other hand. It's always a book. It's always a different book. Tonight it is an illustrated *Cinderella*. "Read," he says. "Read!"

The dream always ends with my mother's complaint: "He never remembers to take out the garbage."

I get up, make coffee, and ask myself, so what was that about, my childhood? Why now? Hey, that was sixty-seven years ago and now it's relevant? Give me a break. I need this like I need another hole in a bagel.

Mom was always talkative. And oh, so busy, and so was Evvie. Two curly redheads in perpetual motion, unlike the plain, straight-brown-haired, quiet, boring ones.

They went to the beauty parlor together and to Klein's department store on Union Square for every Saturday sale, while Dad's idea of excitement was to take me to the Plumbers and Steamfitters Union Hall down near the Battery.

All the guys hung out there. I was their mascot. They smoked cigars, chewed gum, and ate pistachios. They shot pool at the moth-eaten table in the back room. They listened to the Yankees games or the fights at Madison Square Garden on the big Philco radio. I thrived on secondhand smoke. I loved that place.

There was a small makeshift library where the guys left books to trade, mostly tattered maleaction-adventure paperbacks. But for me, they raided their kids' bookshelves, handing their gifts to me shyly; their kids never read them anyway. *Black Beauty*. *The Wind in the Willows*. *The Red Pony*. I absorbed them all.

Dad was very careful to put the adult books on the highest shelf, where I couldn't reach them. The first book he ever bought for me was *The Wizard of Oz*. I always thought that was fitting. For me that was the beginning of my love of books, the most important thing in my young life.

My aunts picking on my dad, the girls picking on Jack when he came to visit. Is that what brought this dream on?

Cinderella. Me? Maybe Dad was telling me to keep sweeping the ashes until Prince Charming arrives so I can live happily ever after? Well? Yes and no on that one.

Jack and Jill fell down the hill? Jack fell and fell and fell . . . Yeah, that's glaringly clear, too. He did fall, my first darling Jack, my husband, didn't he? Fell because of a bullet.

I sigh. I don't want to let my thoughts go there. Enough. Time to get up and work at my crossword puzzle until the sun comes up.

11



A Three-Letter Word

Someone else was up early. *May Levine,*

seventy-two, content with living alone on the ground floor of Building J, Phase Five, always boasted that she'd made the right choice. She had easy access in and out of her apartment. No steps to climb. No waiting for the clunky elevator.

But this morning she would regret that choice.

She briskly massaged her face with Pond's cold cream. Her daughter in New Jersey should only listen to her. Doris, the big-shot tennis player, had skin like a crocodile, while her mother's face looked twenty years younger than the rest of her body. May's mother always told her, "May, save your face or your tushas—one or the other always goes." Easy decision. Nobody had seen her tush in years.

Time to get dressed. She dropped her nightie and her old lime green chenille bathrobe onto the bed. She'd had it for forty years and it was still in good condition. You didn't grow up in New York on Delancey Street without learning how to save money. She stood for a moment looking at her naked body in the closet-door mirror. What a mess! Varicose veins everywhere, sagging stomach and tush, boobies that hung straight down. From osteoporosis, she'd lost about two inches in height already. Life wasn't fair. She'd been a beauty when she was young. Why did we have to get so ugly when we got old? She sighed. She whirled about, round and round, remembering the pretty young May she used to be.

Suddenly she froze. She thought she'd heard a noise. And then she saw something behind her reflected in the mirror. There was a man looking in her window! He had a mask on. Oh, God, she was going to be killed! Then she realized that his hand was pumping up and down along something pale and flabby.

May screamed. "Peeping Tom! Peeping Tom!"

It's noon and Evvie, who is always prompt, waits for me downstairs next to my car. I approach her with a nearly bursting bag of books. She, too, has a full bag. "What took you so long? I'm melting from the heat."

"Sorry," I say as I open my trunk and pile all of our accumulated reading materials inside.

A familiar gravelly voice calls out, "Yoo-hoo."

We turn to see Sol Spankowitz, from Phase Three, and his best and only friend, Irving Weiss, standing in the shade outside Irving's apartment, three doors down from where my car is parked.

Near them is Irving's wife, Millie, now in her third year of Alzheimer's, propped up in her wheelchair. Yolie—really Yolanda—the adorable young woman who is caring for Millie, croons Spanish lullabies softly in her ear, hoping to reach her somehow. Millie is

going through a bad patch these days.

Sol wiggles his fingers playfully at Evvie. Evvie, who can't stand him, doesn't wiggle back.

Irving is small and thin, sweet and gentle. Sol is bulky and coarse and as sensitive as a slab of meat from his old butcher shop. The guys have been pals since they moved down here twenty years ago. Sol's wife, Clara, died three years ago.

The guys have the horse racing form open while they plot their daily bets.

We walk over to greet Millie, who no longer recognizes us. It breaks our hearts to see what has happened to our dear friend.

Sol winks. "Hello, you dreamboat," he says to Evvie, trying to sound suave. He flirts, but he does it poorly.

"Yeah, right, and why are you wearing two different color socks?" says Evvie, who can always find new ways to put him down.

Sol changes the subject quickly. "So, what're the five luscious lady P.I.'s up to these days?"

"None of your business," Evvie says unkindly.

"How is she doing?" I ask Irving. I always ask and always get the same answer.

"OK," he says. Irving is a man of very few words. And we know Millie is not OK; she never will be again. We know how much it takes out of him, always worrying about her, but he will never complain. Bless his heart.

We each give Millie a kiss, say *buenos días* to Yolie, and go back to the car.

Evvie punches my arm, laughing. "Don't you love the way Sol dresses?"

"Uh-huh, the pink flamingo shirt really works well with the blue shorts with little crawling alligators."

"And the mismatched socks look divine with the black wing-tip shoes." Then Evvie relents. "I do feel sorry for him. He seems so lonely under all that bad taste."

Now the girls arrive with their books and dump them into my trunk, as well. We have to wait a few moments for Sophie to finish the last few pages of one of her novels. Then, done, she sighs, closes the book, and tosses it in the trunk with the others. "That was so satisfying," she says.

Bella looks at her, puzzled. "Since when do you read the last page? You always read that first. So you know how it's going to end."

Ida sneers at her. "I never heard of anyone who reads the last page of a book first. Only you."

"What's so hard to understand? What if I die before the book ends? Then I'll never know what happened."

Ida throws up her hands, showing her disgust. "I give up. You're hopeless."

The books delivered, they take off for their mah-jongg game. Evvie leaves, as well, to polish her movie review. None of them ever wants to go to the library with me. And that's just fine. I enjoy this time on my own.

I am about to get into the car when Hy Binder sidles up and pokes his face next to mine.

"Hey, didja hear this one?" He never pauses to take a breath, so there's no stopping him. "How can a guy tell if his wife is dead?"

"I really don't need to know, Hy," I say.

"The sex is the same but the dishes pile up!" He guffaws.

Lola, standing off to one side, carrying her dry cleaning, calls out to him. "Tell her already."

"Yeah, didja hear? Peeping Tom in Phase Five!"

At the expression of surprise on my face, Hy grins. "Gotcha!"

My book bags are dragging my shoulders down as I lug them to the entrance of the Lauderdale Lakes library, one of my favorite places. It is a small brick building in a residential section. This branch is very bright and inviting. It is my weekly job to return all our finished books and to choose new ones.

In the good old days, three months ago, pre-P.I. biz, I was the only mystery reader. The girls adored romance novels, modern novels, and anything about Hollywood stars. But now it's only mysteries, except for Ida, of course, who always has to be different. The girls feel these are their textbooks on crime. Besides, they like being scared.

Roly-poly Conchetta Aguilar became my good friend years ago, after discovering that I had been a librarian, too. Her assistant, young Barney Schwartz, loves to hear the gossip and stories I tell about those wacky characters I live with. His favorite was always crazy Greta Kronk, who raided our Dumpsters at night and wrote odd poems and made sketches of everyone. Poor Greta, who no longer is with us.

The library is quiet right now, and we sit at one of the tables peacefully enjoying Conchetta's wonderful strong Cuban coffee as we gossip. "So, what's the latest word?" Barney asks, eager to relish a new story.

"You want a word? I'll give you a word. How about—sex!"

That was a surprise. For me, too. I didn't know I was going to say that.

"In your senior world? At your age?" tut-tuts the cheerful, thirtyish Conchetta. "Aha. The girls must still be spying on you."

"More than ever. Jack thinks it's amusing and I can't stop blushing."

"You're blushing right now," Barney says impishly.

And my cheeks feel warm enough for me to know I am. "Not only are the girls glued to *Sex and the City* reruns, they try out the smutty language on one another."

"I can just imagine." Conchetta grins as she refills my cup.

"Then there's our new case. An elderly Italian couple from Plantation. She's eighty-two and he's eighty-five and she thinks we're going to catch her husband in bed with some floozy."

"Delicious," says Barney, "considering that my folks are much younger and they haven't looked at one another in years. And neither one cares."

"I can relate to Gladdy. My mom and aunts are drooling over the actor Chayanne, after they saw that sexy dance movie about Cuba," says Conchetta. "I tell them Chayanne's a Puerto Rican, but they don't believe me. He played a Cuban so he must be one. Hollywood wouldn't lie."

"And to continue my sordid list," I say, "what about Hy Binder's nonstop dirty jokes? I wish everybody would just grow up."

"Must be something in the water at Lanai Gardens," Conchetta suggests slyly.

"Or maybe our local Publix supermarket is putting aphrodisiacs into everyone's hamburger patties," suggests Barney.

"And wait 'til you read Evvie's latest movie review, which comes out tomorrow."

"Wouldn't miss it," says Barney. "She can put an unusual spin on anything. Pauline Kael would have loved her."

"She dragged us all to see a terrifying French movie about sexual obsession."

"Now I really can't wait to read it," Barney says with a leer.

"But here's the topper. Just as I was about to drive off, I learned we have a Peeping Tom on the premises. What the hell is going on?"

We are still laughing when the front door opens to admit a vanload of talkative seniors from a nearby retirement home, carrying books to return and eager to get more.

Conchetta and Barney go back to work while I pick out new titles for my gang.

I have Carl Hiaasen's *Skinny Dip* in my hand when I suddenly get an idea. I drop it in my book bag and head for the newspapers section in an adjoining room.

On a hunch I look up the obituaries of those two rich women who died. Thinking about the twenty-five-wealthiest-women list losing two members less than a week apart gets me wondering.

I have the library table covered with newspapers, and I'm searching for articles about the dead heiresses, when Conchetta walks over and clucks at me. She takes my arm, pulling me out of my chair and over to a small machine. "You're going to join the twenty-first century whether you like it or not."

"Yeah. Kicking and screaming. You're as bad as Jack."

"It's been a while since you retired from library work. Let me introduce you to microfiche."

And within moments I am happily knobturning, scanning article after article about the two women. Finally I lean back, sated. "Now, was that so hard to take?"

"OK. OK, I loved it, but don't you dare tell Jack I said that."

"Scout's honor. What did you learn?"

"More coincidences. Both widowed from very wealthy husbands a few years ago and both remarried fairly soon after. Also, these society gals are in the papers and magazines whatever they do. Charities. Vacations. Parties. Family statistics—births, deaths, et cetera. When they sneeze it makes the news."

"But?"

"There's hardly anything written about their latest husbands. No big write-ups about the nuptials. No fancy wedding photos. Mr. Sampson was in plumbing. Mr. Martinson was in the entertainment business. Was. But are they still? *Nada*. Isn't that odd? As if there were a news blackout covering the second-time-around hubbies."

"And what do you make of all that?"

"Nothing yet."

I look at my watch. "Gotta go or, God forbid, I'll be late for the early-bird special at Nona's."

Conchetta walks with me to the checkout counter and stamps my books. "You might need a textbook," she says as she reaches under the counter. "I picked this out for you a few minutes ago."

She surreptitiously hands me a copy of the *Kama Sutra*.

12



The Men in My Life

I'm about to leave my apartment on my way to meet Jack and Morrie for our Friday night dinner date, when the phone rings. One of the girls? A possible client? I could let it ring. I now have an answering machine, thanks to Jack's persuasiveness. "It's so simple an idiot could work it" was what he said to convince me. I didn't know whether to smack him or kiss him. I did a little of both.

I grab the phone before the machine picks up. Old habits die hard.

It's our client calling. "Hi, Mrs. Siciliano."

"Any news?"

"Not yet. I told you I'd get in touch with you as soon as something developed."

"Don't you think I know that?" Mrs. Siciliano humphs.

I think to myself, This Angelina is one tough cookie. Of course I don't use her first name when I talk to her. She's not much into familiarity.

"I just called to tell you you're off duty for a while. My cousin died, and me and Elio are leaving for the wake and the funeral. We'll be gone a coupla days. So if you stake him out, you're staking for nothing."

"Thanks for letting me know. I'm sorry about your loss—" I start to say.

But she's already hung up.

Morrie has been entertaining us with stories from the recently built police station on Oakland Park Boulevard as he, Jack, and I

share sushi in a charming Japanese restaurant in Margate.

"So we drag him into the station—the guy's just robbed his own neighborhood bank, where everybody knows him, and all he wants to talk about is redecorating our building. 'Who picked out this pissant wall color? A blind guy?' he demands to know, this Martha Stewart of stupid thieves. Maybe he'd like us to decorate the walls with the hundred-dollar bills we found stashed all over his body?"

I look from father to son. Morrie is sitting across from me. Now I know what Jack looked like when he was in his thirties. When he married Faye and had this lovely son. Lucky Morrie—if he continues to take after his dad, he'll be just as attractive a man at Jack's age.

Jack is laughing at this wry account. Over the years Morrie must have shared a lot of war stories with him.

"Hey, Dad," he says, "tell her about the time you captured that crazy dooper who locked his pals in a basement for a week when he was high because he thought they were aliens from outer space."

Jack starts to fidget. I see him making hand motions at Morrie under the table, but Morrie isn't picking up on them.

Morrie continues. "When Dad caught up with that nutcase, he ran to hide in a shower, turned it on full blast, and the only way Dad could cuff him was to get in the shower with him."

He swats his father playfully. "And what about that extortionist you had to chase driving up Fifth Avenue opposite the one-way traffic?"

"Morrie, eat your miso soup, it's getting cold," Jack says, obviously trying to stop him.

"Hold on," I say. "What's this? You were a cop?"

"Of course he was," says the proud son. "One of the best detectives the NYPD ever had."

"I thought you told me you had a desk job in Administration."

"I did, for my last ten years," Jack says, embarrassed.

"You said all you did was take information."

"Yes, that, too."

Morrie chimes in, "Yeah, in a lot of sweaty interrogation rooms."

"Jack, why didn't you tell me you were a detective?"

"Well," he says uncomfortably, "you had just become a successful private eye, and I didn't want to steal your thunder."

"I can't believe you lied to me."

"Not a lie, a slight exaggeration. It's not easy telling people you're a cop. Do you have any idea what they do when they find out? There's always one joker who's going to ask, 'How many people did you beat up today?'"

Morrie joins in. "Or 'Does it give you a thrill to carry a gun?' That's what all the gals want to know."

"It makes you gun-shy," Jack says, "and excuse the pun."

I give Jack a look that says we're going to talk more about this "slight exaggeration" later. He smiles and shrugs.

Morrie easily leans over the table and gives me a friendly peck on the forehead. "I've been very self-involved here. Your turn.

What's the Gladdy Gold Detective Agency been up to?"

"Oh, nothing much." I dip my dragon roll into the soy sauce, dropping half the rice off my chopsticks as I do.

"Don't be modest. I saw you on TV. You're a celebrity now. Cases must be flooding in."

"Well, the girls and I are on a stakeout. Cheating hubby, you know how that is."

"Stakeouts are a drag. All that sitting and waiting."

"Yeah," I say, one tough comrade to another. "How do you handle the boredom?"

"I do a lot of thinking. Try not to crave the coffee I want but don't dare drink. Go over notes of the case. Think about all the things I'm doing wrong in my love life."

We all smile at that.

"I, on the other hand, can do no thinking. I'm stuck listening to the girls shriek at one another as they play cards in the dark. As they rustle sandwich bags and continuously eat. As they *kvetch* about everything."

Jack says, "Having company makes it less boring."

"Boring, they're not. They're adorable, but you don't want to spend too much time locked in very tight places with them."

Our main courses have arrived. My tofu sukiyaki smells delicious.

As we dig in, I ask Morrie, "What's happening with those two cases, the wealthy society ladies in West Palm Beach and Boca? You hear anything new about them? I know it's not in your jurisdiction . . ."

He looks puzzled. "You mean the woman who died on the golf course?"

"And," I add, "the one who died of heart failure in the steam room at the spa."

Suddenly, I am winging it. Up to this minute I hadn't given a thought to mentioning these events. But as I listen to their crime stories, my library research resonates in me. "All that money? Sure sounds like a motive to me."

"You're reaching," Jack says mildly.

"Don't you think their precincts investigated?" This from Morrie.

"And I'll bet both husbands had perfect alibis."

"From what I've heard—they did. But they didn't need alibis."

"I think it was murder." Even as I say the word, something icy creeps into my heart.

They both stare at me.

"I mean, in all the books and all the movies, the husband is always the prime suspect."

I can't stop my mouth. It just won't listen to my head. "Sure, death by sports and leisure. Maybe the next one will be a 'heart attack' in a hot-air balloon."

Two sets of chopsticks are put down. Two sets of eyes show astonishment.

Why can't I stop myself? I babble on.

"You don't like the husbands? Maybe there's a serial killer who is after very rich women. Someone who had a very deprived childhood." In my embarrassment, I'm trying for a light tone. But I sound like an idiot.

At Morrie's raised eyebrow, I continue my imitation of a lemming jumping off a cliff. "Maybe some other very rich ladies want to get on the twenty-five-wealthiest roll and they're knocking off these women so they'll move up on the list."

Morrie says, "What don't you understand about 'natural causes'?"

"You'll change your tune when the next heiress bites the dust. Pardon me for mixing my metaphors."

The two of them now talk over my head, pretending to ignore me.

Morrie asks Jack, "What would you do about such insubordination if she were in *your* precinct?"

"I'd probably demote her to Traffic," he answers. "And tell her to stop reading so many books and watching so many movies."

"Stop talking about me as if I weren't here." I need to get off the hot seat. "Enough about me. So, Jack, tell me. How did a nice Jewish boy like you decide to become a cop?" I pour myself some jasmine tea. I need the distraction. I could kick myself for getting on to this subject.

Jack's obviously told this story many times. "As the old ads used to say, I was a ninety-pound weakling and I was getting smacked around a lot. We grew up in a tough neighborhood in Brooklyn where there were three sets of immigrants—Jews, Italians, and Irish. And since Jews always seem to be the 'chosen' people, I was chosen to get beaten up by whichever gang was roaming the streets that day.

"So I joined a gym, buffed up, and met some guys who were cops. Italians, Irish, *and* Jews. They taught me how to fight back. They became my mentors and I followed in their footsteps. I had found my career."

"And, naturally, I followed in my dad's footsteps," adds Morrie.

"Now if you'd marry me, we'd have three detectives in the family."

I shouldn't say it but I do. "Jack, just don't tell me you were in Homicide."

He looks at me for a long moment and says in a flat tone, "Then I won't tell you."

The two men stare at me curiously.

Why did I bring it up? Why? I lower my eyes and clutch my fingers around my chopsticks. I never talk about that. Never.

13



Dancing Books

I squint at the clock in the very early light. Six a.m. Dream wake-up time again. Don't these dreams of mine ever give me a break and come at a decent hour?

I'm supposed to analyze you, Mr. Dream? Wait. First I've got to deal with Mr. Coffee.

This one usually makes me smile. Get this: Imagine an MGM extravaganza. In Technicolor, with the Glenn Miller band playing "Moonlight Serenade." A glamorous Busby Berkeley Hollywood set all in white and gold. With a double staircase and glittering chandeliers. Here they come, the Dancing Books. Perched atop sexy legs, like the old Chesterfield TV ads, tap-dancing their way down to center stage, then into the audience where I sit enraptured, front row center. Each book kisses me gently on my forehead as it imparts its story to my mind and heart. *Little Women*. *Marjorie Morningstar*. *Catch-22*. *Madame Bovary*. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *Bonjour Tristesse*. *The Catcher in the Rye*. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. *East of Eden*.

On and on they come.

I keep saying thank you, thank you, for loving me. I keep smiling until *The Reluctant Hero in Modern Fiction* jumps off the stage and hits me in the head.

And as usual, that's when I wake up.

Thanks, Jack. You always ruin this happy dream. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, my darling. I must explain that I'm referring to the first Jack, Jack Milton Gold, the love of my life, the man I married when I was twenty. He of the glorious light brown curly hair and hazel eyes and infectious smile and love of everything and everybody.

I met him in college five years after the end of World War II. Those were the happy days, that era of my most intense reading. I went to college and discovered I wasn't an alien from another planet after all. There were actually others like me.

He was getting his master's in literature; I, my B.A. in library science. We met in Chaucer, fell in love in Shakespeare, and decided to get married halfway through the Romantic poets.

Could anyone have been happier? Living in New York in the fifties, the home of everything artistic and exciting. We had our very own, very small three-room apartment near the Hudson River. Jack taught at Columbia University. I was a happy housewife, learning to cook and trying to study at the same time. Fanny Farmer in one hand, the Dewey decimal system in the other.

And then our beautiful baby, Emily, arrived.

I was blessed.

And then I was cursed.

The Reluctant Hero in Modern Fiction. That was the title of the textbook Jack wrote and used in his classes. And it always hit me in the head at the end of every Dancing Books dream.

Once, during one of our all-night study/lovemaking sessions, I asked him to tell me about his war. I remember him saying that, yes, war had been hell, but afterwards, if you survived, life went on with or without your participation. "You have two choices," he told me. "You can wallow in what you can't change or you can fall in love with the miracle of every single day."

Jack Gold was my hero. He chose to fall in love with me and with life.

When the fairy tales I read as a child told me I'd find a hero to love, they were right. They also promised I'd live happily ever after. I didn't know "ever after" was only eleven more years.

I distract myself from dredging up the past by rereading a few pages from an old favorite, *Gone with the Wind*. (Is that a boring title, or what? I guess all the good biblical titles had been taken.)

Is it eight a.m. already? I see the girls out my window gathering for our morning workout and I close the book.

Like Scarlett, I'll think about the bad stuff tomorrow.

14



A New Job

It's eleven a.m. and the mail has arrived. Front doors open, people stroll over. For many, this is the big event of the day.

Evvie is already at the mailboxes. It's also the day her weekly Lanai Gardens *Free Press* is delivered, and she's graciously handing them out to her admirers. There's something for everyone in this newspaper my sister started years ago because, as she said, she desperately missed the *Daily News* and the *New York Post*. She covers everything from Hadassah meetings, clubhouse events, and religious services to garage sales. Everybody reads her reviews of plays, movies, lectures, and concerts, written in her own highly individualistic style.

Sophie is down early, a minor miracle. The pile of *Bingo Bugles* is there and she can't wait to see the photos of this week's big winners from all over the country. Sophie's flavor today is lemon and she's dressed head to toe in that confection.

I open my mailbox to find letters from my grandchildren in New York. Bless them, they write me every week, with a little urging from my daughter, Emily. I look around to make sure Ida isn't here. She never gets mail from her family. It breaks her heart, and I don't like to read mine in front of her. This week's offerings are drawings. Elizabeth, the oldest, sent ballet sketches. Erin drew her beloved horses. Pat sent cartoons he's created, and Lindsay, the budding photographer, sent funny photos of her menagerie of dogs and cats. I put the mail in my pocket to reread and enjoy again later.

I hear a smattering of laughter and I turn to see a group clustered around one of the picnic tables. Tessie is holding court. I walk over to see what's got everyone's interest. Tessie is reading Evvie's latest review aloud. She's laughing so hard her massive chins and arms are jiggling. Her audience is rapt.

Our two newest tenants, the cute cousins Casey and Barbi, are enjoying the entertainment. They look like they are just about to leave to play tennis, and they are adorable in their tennis togs. It's nice to see young faces around here.

Even Denny Ryan, our maintenance man, has stopped sweeping the palm fronds to listen. Denny has finally recovered from the harrowing escape he had two months ago. He's back to working on his garden, and he has a new interest: the adorable Yolanda, who takes such good care of our Millie. So far, the two of them have only exchanged shy smiles, but we hope they'll soon get further along in their relationship.

When Tessie sees me she starts over. I want to tell her not to bother, since Evvie makes me read everything before she sends it in, but Tessie starts emoting.

"Knishes or Knocks? Good Girl Goes Très Bad by Evvie Markowitz. Review of the French movie *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not*."

Evvie, pretending to stroll, is watching people read her paper, occasionally smiling at a thumbsup sent in her direction. Hearing Tessie, she turns. She waves toward us in her most grandiose manner, graciously bowing, like the true *artiste* she is.

Tessie waves back. As she continues to read, Evvie lip-syncs along with her.

"Another French movie, and you know how this reviewer loves French movies.' We sure do know, Evvie." There is a happy nodding and murmuring at that.

"We loved her in *Amélie*, but I warn you, you're not gonna love Audrey Tautou here as she stalks a doctor, a handsome cardiologist who she loves. Wink, wink, a cardiologist, a doctor of the heart. So how come he doesn't love her back, she's so

sweet? But then again, he's married, so maybe that's why. At first it doesn't look like she's stalking, she looks like a girl in love. But believe me, she is stalking, because later in the movie everything turns all around and what was one thing five minutes ago is now something else. But we don't care; she's gorgeous whether she's good or bad, until she starts destroying her friend's apartment and then rips up her wedding dress. She gets weirder and weirder and we start to think maybe she should have gone for a psychiatrist instead of a cardiologist. It was a confusing movie but I'm sure I explained it perfectly.' " Tessie grins as she finishes the review. " 'So, Knishes or Knocks? I give it two knishes. Loved Audrey but the story was not much.' "

Tessie bows and her audience applauds. Evvie comes over to shake hands with all her admirers.

Ida and Bella show up finally and our group moves off to another of the picnic tables on the grass. We are gathering to plan our errands for the day.

"So how was your date last night?" Bella jumps right in.

"Great," I say noncommittally.

"So how was the food?" asks Sophie, still reading the *Bugle*. "You really ate raw fish?"

"Yes," I say.

"So how's Morrie?" asks Ida.

I love the way they always take turns. I wonder if they draw straws beforehand to see who goes first.

They never take the hint. They know I won't tell them anything, but they still ask. "Fine."

"*Feh*," complains Bella, "she's worse with words than that stingy Irving." She gives me a gentle poke. "It wouldn't kill you to share."

"Hey, listen to this," Sophie says, excitedly waving the newspaper. "They're having a drawing in the *Bugle* for a free luxury bingo cruise for two! And it ends this week."

"Big deal," says Ida. "You really think you have a chance in hell of winning?" She continues to browse through her mail. "All ads," she says with disgust. She hides her disappointment.

"Well, it couldn't hurt to try. I'm buying five dollars' worth. Anyone want to throw in a buck?"

Bella dips daintily into her purse, pulls out a dollar bill, and offers it over to Sophie. "Count me in, partner."

There are no other takers. "You'll be sorry," Sophie warns. "When I win, I get to pick my companion, so you better start being extra nice to me."

"What do you mean—when *you* win? What about me? I put my money in. Can't I be the companion?" Bella says.

Sophie ignores her.

"I miss bingo," Bella complains. "Now that we stay out late on our stakeouts, I'm too tired to play the next day."

"Me, too," adds Sophie.

"I never win, so I don't miss it," says Ida, the perpetual voice of negativity.

A group of women walk toward us, looking very determined. Those who are still hanging around the mailboxes stay to see what this is about.

Hy and Lola, standing on their balcony on the second floor, are leaning over the railing scanning the action. Mr. and Mrs. King of the Roost!

"Well, look who's here," says Tessie, sunning herself on her bench while eating potato chips. She's always eating something. She waves to one of the women. "Hey, Sarah, what's up?"

There is an exchange of greetings between those who know these members of Phase Five.

May Levine is the spokesperson. "We've come to see Gladdy." The four women walk up to our picnic table. "We want to hire you."

Hy leans far over the railing. "Hey, Glad, I told you about the peeper. She's the one who got peeped." He struts up and down the balcony, proud of himself.

May looks at me, surprised. "You already know?"

Hy isn't finished. "Of course she knows. I told her. I know everything that goes on around here. Sometimes before it even happens."

May scowls, turns her back on Hy, and looks at us.

Evvie asks, "Did you recognize the guy?"

"No," May says, hands on hips, "but if I ever see that limp *putz* again I'd know it!"

Bella covers her ears as everyone else laughs.

"The coward was wearing a mask!" number two in the delegation, Sarah, contributes.

"A Superman mask," says number three, Edna.

"Did he wear a cape?" Casey wants to know. Her cousin Barbi adds, "With a big yellow S on it?" Apparently this is more interesting than getting to the tennis court.

May says, "I don't know, all I saw were his eyes through the mask. And the *putz*."

More giggles.

Practical me asks if she called the police.

May says, "Of course I did. Did I expect they would do anything? No. They laughed! And embarrassed me because they wanted me to translate *putz*."

"This is a job for *Superwoman*," Sophie announces dramatically, pointing at me.

Sarah announces, "We, the women of Phase Five, want to hire you to find—"

"The *putz*!" Tessie screams out hysterically, spilling potato chip crumbs down her sizable bosom.

It's becoming a circus. But why am I surprised? I should have moved this meeting upstairs. Too late. Hail, hail, the gang's all here.

Hy joins in again from above. "Let's get all the guys around here to drop their pants!"

Lola smacks him on the head. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, you leech! Showing off your equipment. We don't know that he's even from around here!"

"First," says occasionally practical Evvie, "let's talk about the fee."

The four ladies of Phase Five look shocked.