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KILLER IN CRINOLINES

PEARLS AND POISON

GEARED FOR THE GRAVE

Geared for the Grave

Duffy Brown

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Chapter One

While cowering in the back of a ferryboat, head over railing and losing my lunch in Lake Huron, it occurred to me that no matter how old I am I want to impress my parents. Deep inside I'm just a kid yelling, *Mom, look at me! No hands!* Granted, this wasn't exactly a *look at me* moment but it's what got me into this mess.

"Hey, lady. Where should I put these paint cans?" a man in a neon yellow vest asked as I staggered off the last ferry of the day. After a ten-hour drive plastered with orange construction barrels followed by the boat trip from hell, I so wanted to tell this guy where to put those cans. Instead I handed him a twenty and said, "Get a taxi and put them in the trunk."

"First-time fudgie?"

I was thirty-four, had been around the Chicago block a few times and ten months ago got left standing at the altar thanks to a sports-aholic fiancé and the seduction of last-minute game three World Series tickets. I wasn't a *first-time* anything. "Fudgie?"

"Yeah, good luck with that trunk."

And for that smart-ass crack I'd forked over twenty bucks. I zipped my fleece against the lake chill, grabbed a paint can and my duffle and trudged up the dock with the rest of the tourists to Main Street, lined with twinkle-lights and cute shops shutting down for the night, the whole place smelling kind of . . . earthy?

"Can you get me a taxi to Rudy's Rides?" I asked a college kid as he tossed luggage onto a horse cart. He nodded to a two-horse-power red and yellow wagon with people merrily climbing on board.

I dangled the can. "A car taxi, like as in fast transportation weaving in and out of traffic scaring everyone. It's been a long day."

"Lady, this is as fast as we get around here." College guy added another bag and people, and the luggage cart clip-clopped off past meandering pedestrians and bikes, with no traffic lights or roar of internal combustion engines anywhere. A poster in the window of Fred's Deli announced a Dirty Pony Wash. Not a car wash? Where the heck was I?

I yanked out Sheldon, my BFF iPhone. *OhthankGod* he had bars. I hadn't slipped into some time-warp thing, and there on the screen right below the Mackinac Island ferry schedule was the no-car statement. *You got to be kidding*. This was Michigan; Motown; the birthplace of hydrocarbons and gas-guzzling engines and ozone central.

I followed Sheldon's directions past the Lilac Hotel, Doud's Market and one, two, make that seven fudge shops just within the two blocks I could see. My guess was that fudgies were tourists, and dentists and Weight Watchers owned the biggest houses on the island. Rudy's Rides sat next to Irma's Fudge Emporium. Why couldn't it be the broccoli emporium? I could resist broccoli ten feet from where I'd spend the next two weeks.

Propped-open, weathered double doors marked the entrance to Rudy's, where a shiny new yellow three-wheeler sat at the curb next to a horse and buggy. I stepped inside the shop only to find rental bikes from the Ronald Reagan years. Dusty handlebars and pedals lined the wall next to a spotless trophy shelf, and tools littered the workbench. A pool table sat in back with a stained glass light suspended overhead. Mark Twain said, *Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated*, and here he was in a white crumpled suit, wild gray hair, cigar balanced across a whiskey glass and his left leg in a cast.

The Twain look-alike, who I took to be Rudy, aimed at the nine ball as a girl about my age in a purple sequined paperboy hat with a pencil stuck in the band hustled inside scribbling in a notebook. A

knobby-kneed granny in electric pink biker shorts brought up the rear.

"I took a good look around this place," Knees huffed at Rudy. "It's a dump, just like I thought. Town council meets tomorrow night, and I'm getting on the agenda and recommending they shut you down."

Knees turned to the sequined-hat girl. "But whatever you do, Fiona, don't put that in the *Town Crier*. You're just getting the hang of being the editor since your mom and dad headed off for Arizona and left us in the lurch. This isn't that *Inside Scoop* rag where we tell all. You need to say something like *Rudy's Rides is closing for remodeling*. Fudgies pay for Norman Rockwell around here, so we give them Norman Rockwell." She swiped her finger across a dusty bike fender. "This is *Beverly Hillbillies*."

Fiona scribbled more notes. "It's late and I'm tired and cranky and getting a lot crankier the longer this takes. I'm doing an article on bicycle shops like you want, Bunny, and right now Rudy's Rides is open for business, period, end of discussion."

Rudy sent the nine ball across the green felt, missing the left pocket by a mile. "Geeze Louise." He jabbed his cigar at Bunny. "I know what you're trying to pull, and it's not going to work. That snotty historical committee of yours up there on the bluffs has three votes on the council—just three. The business owners down here in town trying to make a buck got the other three, and I'm one of 'em. Our shops would go belly-up with rules about original windows, pine floors and the other half-baked ideas that pop into your little pea-brain 'cause you got nothing else to do. You wanna shut me down to get me out of your hair?"

Bunny stuck her prune face inches from Rudy's. "The only thing up to snuff in this joint are your euchre trophies and that pool table. Start packing, Rudy boy, you're toast."

Bunny tromped through the bike maze and climbed on her three-wheeler as Rudy raised his whiskey glass. "Here's to the old bat going, and that's a heck of a lot better than the old bat coming."

Fiona closed her notebook. "Bunny thinks she's hot stuff around here because her family's been on the island longer than dirt and she lives in a big house. Rudy's Rides is staying in my article." Fiona gave Rudy a kiss on the cheek, then hurried out, her departure followed by the sound of horse hooves on pavement fading down the street.

"Take any bike that suits you," Rudy said to me as he lined up his next shot. "I keep them all running good even if they are a little rough around the edges. Put the money in the coffee can on the workbench—no charge for local drama. It's free, and there's a lot of it these days."

"I'm Evie Bloomfield from Chicago. I'm here to help you."

"The only help I need is with sinking the dang nine ball. Haven't made a decent shot all day."

I dropped my duffel and purse, snagged a cue, aimed for the far pocket and sent the yellow-striped ball sailing across the felt, till Rudy plucked it right off the table. "Hey, why'd you do that? I nailed it."

Rudy scooped his hand into the pocket, dragging out a sleepy black-and-white kitten. "Bambino hangs out there; left pocket's off-limits." Rudy balanced on one crutch—he was a one-crutch kind of guy. "So, Chicago, what brings a pool shark to my doorstep this time of night? From the way things are going, it can't be anything good."

I did the innocent look and got the *don't mess with me* look in reply. "Pool's the only thing I could do better than my brother, and the doorstep part is that I work for your daughter." Though one look at Rudy's Rides and it was hard to see any connection to a daughter with dollar signs on her license plate. "Abigail's tied up with a business deal at the ad agency so I'm here in her place to lend you a hand."

"Or a leg." Rudy took a piece of kibble from his pocket for Bambino. "What juicy carrot did my daughter dangle to get you out of Chicagoland to an eight-mile island without a shopping mall or car in sight?"

"Just trying to be useful." I plastered my best perky *please the nice client* smile on my face.

"Twain says, *Don't tell fish stories where they know the fish*. I know my daughter. There's a carrot."

My perky died. It was late; I was tired. Rudy had me, and he knew it. I plopped down on my gallon can of beach-baby blue paint. "Bloomfields are lawyers—really successful lawyers except for me—and my apartment's the size of your pool table, except the table's nicer. I'm thirty-four, Thanksgiving's the next great family gathering and I need a promotion—some bragging rights for a change." I tapped the can I was sitting on. "Hauled nine of these all the way out here so I could spruce up the place. So, what do you think?"

"I think you're kissing up to the boss."

"Being of assistance sounds better. Abigail sort of takes me for granted."

"Abigail takes everyone for granted unless they're a client." Rudy sipped the whiskey. "I'll get caught up around here once the cast comes off." He rapped his knuckles against the white plaster. "Planned on making repairs this spring till I got busy with this town council feud and maybe a euchre tournament or two. How'd Abigail find out that I broke my dang leg in the first place? I sure didn't tell her."

"That would be my doing," a man said, making his way through the shop. He was about the same age as Rudy and balding, and had the words *Euchre Dude* embroidered across his shirt pocket.

"You'd think your only offspring would show up," the guy said, giving me the head-to-toe disapproving glare. "I came to check on the bikes I ordered last week and I heard you had a visitor from Chicago. Never thought Abigail would send in a pinch hitter who—"

"Look," I interrupted, acing out another *go away* speech. "There aren't any ferries till morning, so unless you want me to doggie paddle it back to Mackinaw City with paint cans strapped to my ankles . . ."

Rudy took a sip of whiskey. "Well, you're here now. Guess there's no harm in you waiting around for my last rentals while Ed and I play a few hands of euchre down at the Stang." Rudy brightened. "Sounds pretty good, actually. The tournament's on and I got room for a new trophy up there on the shelf."

"I can do whatever," I said in a rush. I had no idea how to play euchre or what the Stang was, but I could park a bike and I'd have time to figure out how to make Operation Brownnose a potential success instead of a looming failure.

Ed snuffed the cigar in a crackled flowerpot. "Don't know why anyone smokes these things. I'll get our lucky deck from my place. Can't believe Abigail isn't here. Kids—they grow up and only come around when they're the ones needing something."

Ed sauntered off, and Rudy tucked Bambino back in the left pocket on the pool table. He pointed his crutch at the front door. "All you gotta do is pull it shut. It sticks, so you gotta give it a tug. Then turn off the lights. There's one little lock that don't 'mount to much, but it keeps the drunks at the Pink Pony from taking my bikes and peddling themselves straight off a dang cliff and into the lake. This isn't the big city; nothing happens around here. Kitchen's in the back, cold pizza in the fridge, extra bedrooms upstairs, make yourself at home for the night. Just one night."

Rudy thump-stepped his way down Main Street, and I saw my promotion thump-stepping into oblivion. Bunny was dead-on about the place being a dump, and if I didn't think of something fast I'd be on the first ferry back to the real world by morning and eating turkey at the little kids' table by Thanksgiving.

I parked the late rentals inside as the phone on the workbench rang—a customer needing two bikes delivered to a house called RestMore by morning to get an early start and catch the sunrise at six. Must be one heck of a sunrise.

The phone went dead before I got an address, and I had no idea where or how to deliver bikes around here. I found a pencil on the workbench and scribbled RestMore on a can of red primer as the words "Yoo-hoo, Rudy, me darling man, how ye be doing this fine night?" sing-songed through front door.

"But you not be Rudy, now are ye, dearie," the woman said, an Irish lilt in her voice. "I suspect ye be that Chicago fudgie girl with a bunch of paint cans we've been hearing about all night long. You kind of stand out, ye do."

Before I could answer, two handlebars fell off the wall, crashing to the ground, an owl hooted three times, the lights blinked on and off, and a rooster crowed somewhere in the distance. The woman clutched the gold shamrock around her neck, her eyes big as goose eggs. "Great day in the morning and blessed be Saint Patrick!" She kissed the shamrock. "How can it be you're still alive?"

"Hey, Chicago isn't *that* bad."

"'Tis not the geography that's the worry, me dear, but a big black cloud that's hanging right over ye." She gazed around me. "Bad signs these are," she said in a low voice. "Bad indeed, and all happening at once! Saints preserve us. I be Irish Donna and I know these things. I got the gift, I do." She lowered her voice even more. "Ye should be making up a will; the sooner the better if you be asking me."

Irish Donna was on the upward side of sixty, with curly red hair and a gold shamrock around her neck, and she scared the heck out of me, but the dark cloud theory explained a lot about my life lately. I said to Donna, “Rudy and Ed are at the Stang, and a customer needs bikes delivered. Got any ideas where RestMore is, and just how big is this cloud anyway?”

Ten minutes later Irish Donna and I did the slow . . . really, really slow . . . clip-clop up a steep hill in her one-horse carriage. We’d wedged two bikes in the back, and after Donna patted the Saint Christopher medal where a cup-holder should be, we took off.

A nearly full moon lit the street, which had huge Victorians standing guard on one side and the town stretching out below the cliff on the other, and me contemplating the fact that they should make Pampers for horses. Amazing what you think about when dead tired, the minutes ticking away like hours and the business end of a large animal swaying in front of you. I was suffering from car withdrawal. “What do you do on the island?” I asked Donna, to keep awake and get my mind off giant-size Pampers.

“Shamus and I run the Blarney Scone over there on Market Street, and I be helping answering the phones with Fiona at the *Town Crier* on occasion. It gives me dear husband and myself a break from each other and we don’t end up in screaming matches over how much butter to put in the pastries and what to charge for Earl Grey. I’m working my way up to reporter. Lucky for you, Paddy here and me were out delivering the newspapers and could lend a hand with the bikes.

“You know,” Irish Donna went on. “While we’re riding along like we are, ye can be telling me all about your lovely self so I can be working on your obituary for when things take a turn for the bad as I figure they might anytime now. A touch of autumn in the air, did ye notice, just a touch.”

I was with her till *obituary*. Donna nodded up ahead. “Well fancy that, will ye, it be Bunny’s yellow bike all by itself. On her way to the euchre tournament be my guess.” Donna pulled the reins and our four-legged engine shifted into neutral beside the yellow three-wheeler. “And will ye look at this.” Donna clutched her shamrock. “The front’s all mashed in, the lights busted out and the handlebar’s twisted up like a giant pretzel, it is. Yoo-hoo,” Donna called out. “Bunny me dear. Are ye in need of a wee bit of assistance this fine evening?”

“There,” I said, seeing the moonlight hitting Bunny’s electric pink shorts. “She’s sitting by those two trees.”

“More a’leaning if you ask me,” Donna said on a quick intake of breath. She gave a nudge. “Go have a look-see?”

“Me?”

“I need to be minding Paddy here.”

Right. Paddy was a thousand years old and asleep where he stood, and after the hill he had just climbed I couldn’t blame him. I stepped down from the carriage, the sound of crickets and night stuff I didn’t know everywhere. I crawled between the wood fence slats, hoping that something with wiggling antennae didn’t land on me. “Bunny?”

Heart rattling around in my chest, I crept through the bushes. Leaves crunched underfoot, moonlight weaved between the overhead branches and I tried to remember to breathe. Maybe Bunny had fallen asleep on her perch and didn’t hear Donna calling, or maybe she was just enjoying the view.

Bunny’s eyes were wide open all right, but they weren’t taking in the view. They weren’t taking in anything. They were cold; vacant; dead.

My legs went to jelly and I crumpled to the ground. I’d lived all my life in Chicago and had never come across a dead person. There were a few bar fights when the Bulls lost or shoving matches at a Bloomingdale’s sale but that was it. Yet here I was in the middle of freaking nowhere sitting next to a corpse named Bunny. Next time I wanted to impress my parents I’d buy them theater tickets.