

Bygone Days

A Cozy Retirement Mystery

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Chapter One Sample

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First Publication: October 2017

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Chapter One

"Mary Louise! Opal! Come quick!" With her pink fuzzy socks lacking traction, Pearl slid to a stop. All heads turned. The activities room was packed with card players but Pearl provided more entertainment as she hobbled around like she needed to find a restroom. "Follow me! We have a dead one!"

"Don't get up." Mary Louise folded her poker hand and smiled at those who offered a kind look of understanding. Pearl had developed a melodramatic reputation and most of the community's residents knew her by name.

"We'll be right back." Opal slowly rose from her chair. She reassembled her lucky turquoise bonnet that matched absolutely nothing before she fell in line behind Mary Louise. "She means a live one."

"I know," Mary Louise grumbled.

Pearl motioned for them. "Hurry." Ten or fifteen steps later, she stopped at the edge of the foyer. "I had it right the first time."

"Hope not." Opal kept her voice low. "Ya scared everyone half to death."

"Must've been what happened to him." Pearl pointed and sighed. "With friends like me, you two need more enemies."

Opal squatted next to the older gentleman. "He pulls off the dead look as well as anyone can."

Mary Louise couldn't disagree. Better dressed than most Cozy Retirement residents, the fellow wore recently polished boots and a matching russet-colored belt. His fitted white shirt hugged an athletic build while a rounded club collar embraced the thickest part of his neck.

"We can't rule out death by choking." Opal released his sports tie and felt for a pulse. "Ya know this guy?"

"Not by name." Under most circumstances, that meant she didn't know him at all. "Oh this is simply awful. Why'd I leave our pod today? Why didn't I read or watch a mystery marathon?"

"Shh." Opal studied the stranger's face. "Sorry, Pearl." She lowered her head to his chest. "No heartbeat. He's gone."

"That's what I thought." Pearl paced. "Set eyes kind of gave it away."

"I was hoping he might have been in shock," Mary Louise said.

"Considering this one?" Opal tilted her head at Pearl. "Anything's possible."

The faint thrum of a heat pump fan made the open space seem more serene. With the faded voices and muffled laughter in the distance, this man's death would go unnoticed. Folks had bets to place and pots to win. An element of deep sadness washed over Mary Louise as she considered the blurred and fragile line between life and death.

"I was first on the scene. The murderer got away." Pearl stood at a nearby window as if she were standing watch. "I didn't get a good look at him."

"You saw someone?" Mary Louise joined Pearl at the window.

"Not exactly, but I heard the clunk-clunk slamming of the door."

"That was the guy's boots!" Opal stood. "Poor fella."

"No, I don't think so. I've been reading Harry Hankerly's mysteries so you might say that I'm now experienced in crime matters."

Opal groaned. "Then who am I to challenge a voice of authority?"

"I can spot a dead one. Thanks to the set eyes, I'd go as far as to say that this was an unexpected death."

"How 'bout going for a voice of reason?" Opal turned to Mary Louise. "Take your cue."

"No one plans for a heart attack."

"Is that the best ya can do? Make an assumption?" Opal drew in a deep breath. "Okay then."

Pearl had reached her own conclusions anyway. "Too bad I didn't see the killer." She looked at the corpse with great sorrow. "Maybe next time."

"Pearl, stop!" Mary Louise guided her dear friend to the left of the foyer. "You're assuming too much."

"What makes ya think there was a killer?" Opal asked. "Given this guy's age, I'd say he was old enough to have one foot in the grave."

"Good thing, too, since he fell the whole way."

"Why don't you go find Nurse Waterbury? She'll know what to do. We'll stay with the body."

"Mary Louise, I hate to be the one to break it to you *again*, but Nurse Waterbury is a resident, not a medical professional. If it's help you seek, I'm your girl."

"That's debatable. Waterbury always knows where to find the real staff members."

"Good point."

The oldest resident at Cozy Retirement Community, Waterbury stayed in the know so she could keep up her charades. If she didn't cross paths with the real professionals, the nurse routine worked.

"Hurry," said Mary Louise, scanning the foyer for evidence of foul play. She didn't trust the local sheriff's department since they'd recently misplaced a corpse and a coroner.

"I'll find Waterbury but don't go anywhere. We don't want the killer to come back to retrieve the murder weapon."

Opal looked around. "I don't see anything that would suggest this guy was murdered."

"Why do *you* think he was killed?" Mary Louise asked.

Pearl frowned. "I saw something..." Her voice trailed. "Oh, here it is." She stooped to retrieve a pill bottle that had rolled under a walnut card table.

"Don't pick it up." Mary Louise helped her to her feet before she snatched it anyway.

Opal squinted. "Wonderful. Three murder weapons in the form of tiny blue pills."

"Hope the Mrs. isn't waiting upstairs."

"Here?" Mary Louise scoffed. "Doubtful."

"Not a chance," said Opal. "The administrator frowns upon romantic involvements between residents."

"Have you seen the wall of past administrators? That's part of the problem. Romantic Rob says that rule is broken all the time." Pearl stared down at the deceased. "Guess this fellow is guilty as charged." She gasped. "Oh goodness. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That's probably a long shot," said Opal.

Always eager to point an accusing finger, Pearl said, "The widow did it."

"Where do you come up with this stuff?" Opal shook her head.

"Keep this up and you'll earn your meddlesome reputation." Then again, that ship had sailed and returned to the dock.

"She reads the comics and watches soap operas. Need I say more?"

Mary Louise didn't bother mentioning that Opal also read the comics and watched daytime dramas.

"I've graduated to informative books." Pearl turned in a huff. "I'll go find *Nurse Waterbury*. Keep your heads up. Harry Hankerly's perps always revisit the scene of the crime."

Once Pearl disappeared, Mary Louise explained, "Hankerly is her favorite author again."

"Thought so." The man was known for detailed and quite gruesome crime scenes. "If this is what retirement looks like, we're in trouble."

"Are you talking about Pearl or stumbling upon corpses?"

"Both. Does he look familiar to ya?"

Every Tuesday, they played a speed dating game which allowed everyone a chance to meet their neighbors. "He looks sort of familiar but I've never had a conversation with him."

"Same here. Ya think he's new to the community?"

Mary Louise frowned. "He looks more like a visitor than a resident. He could be that Sam character everyone mentioned yesterday at breakfast. What was that all about?"

"His wife is trying out the community before they sign on the dotted line. He claimed he wasn't for it but Rob and some of the others said it's an act. Apparently other

married men have left their wives here for a trial month so they can have one last hurrah before settling into retirement.”

“Given the blue pills, the guys will give him three cheers for the effort.”

“Sam!” A woman’s high-pitched screech alarmed them. “Sam! Oh my heavens!” She slapped her hand over her mouth and came to an abrupt halt.

Mary Louise and Opal exchanged a knowing look. Before Mary Louise could stop her, Opal fired off the first thing that came to mind. “Is this your granddad?” The words just tumbled out.

Tears streamed down the woman’s face. She swiped at her cheeks. “Let me guess. You’re the other woman?”

Dumbfounded, Pearl returned in time to hear the accusation. “Really? You think Opal is this guy’s girlfriend?” She doubled over and roared with laughter. “I’m so sorry. It’s not funny.” She cackled again.

“Straighten up,” Mary Louise whispered.

The widow gave the pair a seething look.

Mary Louise tilted her head at the deceased and then the hysterical woman. “Show compassion.”

“In other words, be quiet,” Opal said softly.

Pearl didn’t mean anything by her outbursts, but she often lacked discretion. She was the jittery type that told jokes at funerals and cried at weddings. The latter was for a good reason. Most young women in their day married a local boy because marriage was the first, last, and only option.

Pearl dramatically zipped her lips and threw aside an imaginary key. Unfortunately, her lips didn’t stay locked for more than a minister’s minute. “I’m sure your grandma has—*had*—nothing to worry about.” She grabbed a box of tissues and thrust them at the sobbing young woman. “He looks like a loyal kind of fella.”

“Don’t go there,” Opal warned.

“I’m helping,” Pearl explained, tilting her head in an empathetic gesture.

“Sweetie, I’m sure your grandmother loved him. Tell her that he didn’t die alone. Tell her that I was with him. Maybe she’ll feel better.”

“One, he didn’t die in your arms.” Opal glanced at the young woman. “And two? Meet grandma.”

“There is no grandma,” she blurted.

“Excellent,” Pearl said, lowering her clasped hands. “It would be a shame if he left behind an old widow.”

“As opposed to a young one?” Opal jabbed her finger at the forty-something year old woman now bawling like a baby.

Pearl gasped. Mary Louise rolled her eyes.

“He was *your* husband?” More composed, at least for a second, Pearl said, “I didn’t see that one coming.”

"Keep diggin' that hole." Opal blew out a hard breath. "She's all yours."

The woman wadded a tissue and dotted her eyes. "We said our vows last Friday."

Pearl plucked the spilled pills from the floor and handed over the bottle. "We don't have to guess what killed him then. Do we?"

Mary Louise turned to the newlywed widow. "Nurse Waterbury went to find someone. I'll wait with you until staff members arrive." She wondered what was keeping them. "Why don't you two go on. We'll be fine here."

Pearl shrugged. "We don't have anywhere else we need to be. Besides, I think she feels connected to me on some level."

"Sure she does. She thinks you were seeing her husband."

Selma, the activities director, rushed to the scene. "Everyone, back up." She spread her arms like wings. "We need some space here. Give the man some breathing room."

"He won't be doing a lot of that," Pearl assured her.

Dr. Smalls, the resident physician, rushed to Sam's side. He checked for a pulse and started chest compressions. "Anyone know what happened here?"

"Don't," Opal said, sticking her hand in front of Pearl's face.

Mary Louise watched as the widow's demeanor shifted from one of horror and sadness to one of deceitful conspirator. The latter occurred when Dr. Smalls worked to revive her husband.

"The grieving widow didn't exactly throw herself over the deceased's body," Opal whispered.

"I noticed."

"It's because she thinks Opal was the other woman," Pearl said.

"No. I'm pretty sure ya cleared *that* up."

"Good."

"By taking on the title yourself."

Pearl frowned. "I don't know what to say."

"We have those rare blessings," Opal said. "And they are treasured moments."

"If the cops hurry, they can interrogate the wife while she's under duress. In Hankerly's mysteries, they always do that." Pearl pasted on a smile as others gathered. "Wonder if they'll call Sam's death a homicide or immediately rule it out thanks to his recent marriage?" She stared at his wife. "Loved him right to his deathbed, didn't you?"

"Pearl!" Mary Louise steered her aside.

"I'm betting it was a heart attack," she said, resisting a bit as Mary Louise dragged her away.

"But you don't know," Mary Louise quietly reminded her.

Sam's wife glared at Pearl then Opal. "The dingbat's covering for *you*. That's why you're here, right? To meet my husband?"

“Me?” Opal chuckled at the absurdity. “No.”

“As the first dingbat on the scene, I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.” Pearl pointed. “Except for him, of course.”

“What did you give him?” She shook the pill bottle. “Hum? What is this?”

At that moment, local police officers and detectives rushed on the scene. Dr. Smalls further assessed the situation. “Mary Louise, why don’t you take Pearl and rejoin the games. If the detectives need you, I’ll come and find you.”

“Great idea.”

“How come she gets to stay?”

“Because I can handle the stress,” Opal said. “If that doesn’t sound reasonable, assume the dead one may want to borrow my bonnet.”

“She did it,” Pearl blurted again, pointing her finger at the young widow. “I’m now experienced in crime matters thanks to joining Hankerly’s Head Hunters, a group for his...”

“Fans?”

“No, Opal. I was going to say followers since we’re on social media.” Pearl watched the officers. “Trust me on this. The perpetrator returned to the scene of the crime.” She grinned at the widow. “As far as I’m concerned, you have an open and shut case.”

Opal groaned. “If only your mouth worked in a similar fashion.”

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