

THE BODIES OUT BACK

By

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Chapter I

Dusk arrived on Manning Street the same time Phillis Toner did. She checked the number on one of the houses, then rang its bell. The sounds of traffic seemed excluded from this street, one of the oldest in the city of Philadelphia . She wondered if such intrusions had been banned by Molly Montgomery, the woman she had come to see. Phillis told herself not to be ridiculous. And not to be nervous.

A uniformed maid, an old woman with a halting walk, admitted her to the house, then quickly disappeared behind a sliding door. She immediately reappeared. "Miss Montgomery will see you," the maid told Phillis, pointed toward the open door, then shuffled off, mumbling to herself.

"Good evening, my dear." Molly was standing in the middle of a small parlor, a woman of white hair, stern features, and perfect posture. She was wearing a simple black wool dress and a single strand of pearls, which Phillis immediately recognized as being quite expensive. "Do come in." Molly reached out, took the younger woman's hand, and led her toward one of a pair of chairs in front of the bay window.

Phillis was in her mid-twenties. Her auburn hair was cut short and her deep, almost-plum-colored eyes were busy taking in both the room and the woman who was speaking to her.

"Please be seated," Molly said as she sat down.

The maid reappeared with a small silver tray bearing a decanter and two glasses.

"Thank you, Margaret," Molly said, then addressed Phillis. "I know you're coming from work, and you should take a moment to relax. A spot of sherry is just the thing, don't you agree?"

Phillis smiled. *How quaint*, she thought. *Just what I'd expect, the dear offering sherry. I'd rather have a vodka gimlet.* She thanked her hostess.

"I have the answer to the question you asked on the telephone today. Let me see now." Molly took her reading glasses from the table next to her and began reading from a small notepad, which had also been on the table. "All the utilities will be paid--heat, electricity--so you see you don't really have to worry about them." She put the pad aside and replaced her reading glasses in their case. "I

understand Mr. Sutton-Sponge arranged to have someone show you the house in Society Hill. I believe you saw it yesterday?"

Phillis nodded.

"Very well, then. You know what it looks like. You would be renting the third floor. Quite handsome, if I do say so myself. And large. I daresay a dozen people could live in that house and not feel crowded, so you and Pat should have no trouble."

"I understand your niece Pat won't be back from Europe until the fall." Phillis was beginning to feel uncomfortable. There was something about the way the old woman was staring at her with her dark brown eyes, as though she were more than appraising a prospective tenant for her niece's house. It seemed--so Phillis felt--more like the witch in the woods wondering how Gretel would taste, once roasted in the oven.

"Pat is due back in a few months, my dear. And I just know you'll like one another."

"That's one problem. Actually, it's the only problem I have. I really don't think it's very intelligent going into a sharing arrangement like this, even sharing such a large house, without first meeting the person I'm going to be living with. One should be... well, careful, you know."

"Oh, I know, my dear." She reached out and patted Phillis' knee. "You are right. Absolutely right. One should always be very circumspect in such matters. But, as I explained to you the other day, the rent is so reasonable because Pat is away so very much of the time and would like to have someone--the right someone, of course--living there. Sort of insurance, you might say. So, you see, it will be rented before Pat returns and I'm afraid if you don't take it, someone else will. And I do so wish you would. I like you. I don't mind admitting it. I do like you very much and I think you'd be the right person."

Phillis stood up and stared out the window onto Manning Street with its old Philadelphia cobblestones and its narrow houses--some of them stone, most brick, with flower boxes and painted front doors. There were hitching posts, no longer for horses, but practical just the same. Since the street was so narrow, they protected both pedestrians and houses alike from careless drivers.

She had only a few days left before she would have to be out of her present home. She had returned to Philadelphia little more than a year ago, partly to stay with her aunt, the only family she still had left, and partly to search for some roots. At least those were the reasons she gave others and tried hard to believe herself. She never knew her father. A dozen years before while in her mid-teens, she had been uprooted from this city when her mother died and an aunt by marriage had taken her to Texas to live. Aunt Beth tried hard to be a mother to Phillis. After high school, Phillis got a job as secretary in a small office. She liked

it. What she did not like was the interest her boss took in her: subtle remarks at first, then outright propositions. Compounding the problem was the boss' son, Ron, with whom Phillis fell in love. As she stood at the window, she remembered with bitterness the lost baby, the lost lover whose family sent him away--paid him off to forget her--and finally, the day she went to see Ron's father in that hotel room. She knew it was a mistake even as she walked the hall toward his room, but she wanted to plead with him to bring Ron back. She didn't care. With the recklessness of youth, she was ready to swallow her pride for the man she loved. Flashing before her was the scene of herself running down a fire escape behind the hotel, the blood on her dress, her trying to burn the dress, and the fear that the police would find her.

Aunt Beth might have suspected something had happened. Then, two days later, she died in her sleep. Phillis wrote to her Aunt Olive, her mother's sister, and spoke of coming back East. Olive urged her to come to Philadelphia and said she thought Phillis would have no trouble getting a job. She came. She found a job. She was happy. Then Olive, like Phillis' mother and Aunt Beth, died. There had been times lately when Phillis wondered if she were somehow to blame for their deaths. *Why was it*, she asked herself late at night when she couldn't sleep, *that those close to her, those who cared for her, were all dead?*

Olive's heirs--of which Phillis was not one--sold her house, giving her very little time in which to find another place to live. In the past few weeks, she had contacted what seemed to her to be all the real estate offices in the city of Philadelphia and had answered dozens of ads for apartments, only to have nothing to show for her troubles. The places she liked, she couldn't afford; those she could afford, she either disliked or they were too far from where she worked.

This house, the one she and Molly Montgomery were now discussing, the one she saw yesterday, the one she'd have to share with someone else, was much more than she had ever hoped to find. It was perfect. There was an enormous living room, which left her near speechless when she first saw it, with its sixteen-foot-high molded ceiling and sweeping staircase leading up to the second and third floors. On the first floor, there was also a formal dining room and an ultra-modern kitchen, both of which, she had been told, she could use whenever she wished to entertain. Off the kitchen, there was a garden with a lilac tree in full bloom, the scent filling the air. The garden floor was red brick and the walls were cement with built-in planters and benches along two sides.

The second floor of the house contained a library; Pat's--her possible housemate's--bedroom and bath; a sitting room; and two guestrooms. Off the end of the long hallway was a pair of French doors opening onto a balcony. Perfect for sunbathing, she decided when she saw it. The entire third floor was to be hers, if she decided to rent it. She'd have a sitting room the width of the house, a

bedroom, a functional and sunny kitchen, bath, dressing room, a second bedroom or den, and more closets than she could ever fill. And the rent, that was the almost impossible thing about this whole proposition. It was less than she had allowed herself to spend, so she'd have a little left over each month and without having to worry about the cost of heat or electricity; it seemed too good to pass up.

There were only two drawbacks she could think of. First, she had not yet met Pat. Second, she would not have a private entrance. She would enter through the front door, use the staircase common to all floors, and there was no door to the third floor to ensure privacy. Still, she did not have to share the other floors, if she did not wish to, and would not really have to see any more of Pat than she wanted to. What the hell....

She spun around and almost startled Molly. "I've decided to take it, Miss Montgomery."

Molly Montgomery beamed. "You have no idea, my dear, how happy that makes me. You've made the right decision, I just know that."

Phillis signed the lease Molly placed before her, wrote a check for the first and last months' rent, wished Molly a pleasant evening, and left the house. What Phillis could not see as she walked away from the house on Manning Street was what Molly Montgomery was doing at that precise moment. With a smile on her face, Molly was tearing Phillis' check into small pieces and watching them fall like a mini snowstorm into her wastebasket.

Two days later, on Friday, with the help of several friends (all of whom told her she was making a big mistake) and a rented truck, Phillis moved into the four-story house on Spruce Street in Society Hill, with its dusty-rose brick front, its cream-colored shutters, and its Wedgwood-blue front door. When the last piece of furniture and the last box were brought up to the third floor and the last friend had left, Phillis threw herself into one of her living room chairs and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she had made the right decision. They were all wrong, those well-intentioned friends of hers. It was not a mistake. She loved her new home and she knew she would be happy there. The deaths of the past year and a half were now all behind her.

The same day Phillis moved into her new quarters, Molly Montgomery was on the telephone with Nathaniel Sutton-Sponge III, Esquire. "Now, Mr. Sutton-Sponge, you do understand what it is I want, don't you?"

"Yes, Miss Montgomery, I understand fully." Mr. Sutton-Sponge and his father before him had been Molly's legal advisors these past fifty-one years since she had reached her majority.

"You'll let me know when you have the papers drawn up and I shall come into your office and sign them. You have the spelling correct? The young woman's name, I mean. It's spelled with an 'i' and not with a 'y.'"

"Miss Montgomery, the document you requested will be drawn up and I shall personally stop by your home for your signature." He didn't need her to remind him how to spell the young woman's name. After all, wasn't it he who found Phillis Toner for her? And wasn't it also he who told Molly that the young woman in question had been followed into a real estate office, that the information had been gotten out of the receptionist at the aforementioned real estate office that Miss Toner was looking for a place to live?

"That is most considerate of you."

"I do trust, Miss Montgomery, that you have given this matter sufficient thought." Mr. Sutton-Sponge could not keep a tone of legal concern out of his voice.

"Yes, yes, I have," Molly said, a bit too firmly. "This is what I want and I know it's the right thing to do."

Mr. Sutton-Sponge III, Esquire, felt an urge. It was seldom that Mr. Sutton-Sponge felt any kind of urge, and when he did, his legal discipline always prevailed. His present urge was to pursue the matter further with Molly, having nothing more in mind than the welfare of his client, but experience had taught him one thing over the years: when Molly Montgomery made up her mind about something, neither he nor his father--and probably not even the Supreme Court--could change it. He sighed and bid her a good day.

Bertha Belmont was sitting at the opposite side of the table, which held the telephone. After Molly replaced the receiver, Bertha took a sip of her tea and addressed her lifelong friend: "I do hope you know what you are doing, Moll. I remember an uncle of mine who had considerable money and he got it into his head to go to Pakistan--or was it Paraguay? I do get those two countries confused, don't you? I mean, they sound so much alike. Really, they should make the names of countries simpler and not similar, so people wouldn't mix them up, I always say. Anyway, he...."

"Bertha, this is not some idea I've gotten into my head. And, I'm not going away to some remote part of the world like your uncle. Let us say that what I am about to do is merely payment for service rendered by that young woman. Miss Toner doesn't know it, but when she agreed to rent Pat's third floor, she also took on a lot more than she bargained for."

"Just the same, Molly, I trust you know what you're doing. I most certainly

do. I for one wouldn't care to interfere with other people's lives the way you obviously are doing. Yes, indeed, I do hope you know what you're doing."

That makes two of us, Bertha, dear, Molly said to herself. *Yes, I most certainly do hope I know what I'm doing.*

This is a sample chapter from

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