



MURDER

BY

CHEESECAKE



RACHEL EKSTROM COURAGE

A Golden Girls Cozy Mystery

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HYPERION AVENUE



“What do you all think?” Dorothy said, looking from one woman to the other, hoping they’d say yes. She didn’t think she could do this alone—she needed her friends.

Blanche shifted in her seat, then looked down at her frosty coral manicure. Rose took a slurp of the tea Dorothy had made for her, conveniently avoiding her eyes.

“Come on, you two!” Sophia said, lifting her hands in disbelief. “You know if it was one of you in trouble, Dorothy would do everything in her power to help you.”

Blanche looked up from her nails with a tortured expression. “It’s not that I don’t want to help you, Dorothy, I do,” she insisted. “But I’m no Jessica Fletcher. I have no idea how to solve a murder.”

“We all have our different talents,” Dorothy said. “Can’t you think of any that would be helpful in our own investigation?”

Blanche tapped a finger against the side of her face. “I see. Like maybe if we’re spying on someone, Jorgen could lift me up to peek in a window with his big strong hands around my waist. Maybe a stakeout on a secluded beach at sunset, huddled together for warmth as the sun dips below the horizon. Or, if there’s trouble, he could fight off some bad



guys and catch me in his arms when I faint at the sight of blood. . . .” Having clearly transported her mind to a soft-focus daydream, she stared into space for a moment. “I think I’ll be able to help,” she said at last with a slow smile.

Sophia peered at Rose over the rim of her glasses. “And what about you? How can you help my poor, wrongfully accused daughter? The one who’s treated you like family all these years and would never blame you for going on the worst of the worst bad dates like this one?”

Dorothy turned to Rose, locking eyes with her. Rose’s were bloodshot from being up all night worrying. Dorothy’s probably looked the same after being at the station so long.

“What do you say, Rose? Will you help me?” Dorothy asked. Rose sank back in her seat and nodded. “I don’t like any of this,” she said. “This whole wedding—it’s made me turn against you and even some members of my family. And I’m so exhausted already. I want to believe we can fix everything, but . . .” Rose dropped her head and dissolved into sobs.

Dorothy patted Rose’s heaving shoulder.



“I don’t see why we can’t do it all, if we work together,” Dorothy said.

A plan started to form in her mind. Whenever she engaged her intellect, instead of giving in to feelings of anger and helplessness, she started to feel calm and clear-headed. “Most likely the real suspect is someone in the Miami area. Based on what the police said, it was probably a crime of passion—or revenge—on Henry for his dirty dealings with women. It could be a jealous ex-lover, an angry husband, or a concerned family member.” The possibilities laid themselves out in Dorothy’s mind as if she were drawing a diagram on a chalkboard. As a teacher, she’d always encouraged her students to look at the information they had, ask questions and to follow the answers to a logical conclusion. She simply would have to apply that method to herself if she were going to get out of this troubling situation.

“And we already know—and have access to—the scene of the crime!” Blanche said, getting excited. “We could start there.”

“That’s the ticket!” Dorothy said. “The killer had to be at the Cabana Sun Hotel at some point to trap Henry in that freezer. There might still be clues at the scene, and at such a bustling hotel, someone must have seen him—or her—before or after the murder was committed.”

“Okay, but what do we do?” Rose said. “I’m ready to help! But—and



this may come as a shock to you all—I'm afraid I'm also not the best detective. Back in St. Olaf, somebody stole a cherry pie that I'd baked and left on the windowsill to cool, and I never found the culprit. I put up signs, offered a reward, and grilled everyone in town in case they'd noticed anyone sneaking around my house. But even the neighbor boy with that sticky red face didn't see who did it."

Dorothy and Sophia exchanged smiles, and Sophia started to laugh, which she hid with a cough.

"None of us are trained police officers, it's true," Dorothy said. "So we'll have to work with what we have. Rose, you're the closest to the Bryant family. You have the perfect reason to get to know Nettie's future in-laws, and any possible ties they might have to Henry or to what happened. Especially that Patricia—she manages the hotel, and she seems to know the most about the goings-on there. She also manages the staff, who may have seen someone hanging around the kitchens that night."

Rose nodded solemnly. "Maybe I can do that . . ." she said. "I already have a lot of questions for them. And to be honest, a few things that the Bryants said last night gave me pause. They're so laser-focused on their business, and there are clearly tensions in that family. Normally I don't like to pry, but this is a good reason to."



Then Rose’s face fell and she bit her lip. “But I’m not very confrontational. I don’t think I’ll be able to get them to spill their guts like the boys on Miami Vice do.”

“But that’s the beauty of our investigation,” Dorothy said. “You don’t have to be confrontational like the police. You’ll be subtle. You’ll find out things over the course of getting to know them, just like any prospective family member. Anything that seems odd or doesn’t add up—make a note of it and we’ll discuss it together. Your approach will be more delicate, nuanced, and sophisticated than what they do on Miami Vice.”

“Sophisticated?” Sophia said. “Ha!”

Dorothy shot a silencing look at her mother. She was finally getting everyone on board—and needed everyone to stay that way.

“As a matter of fact, Ma,” Dorothy said, “Rose is the perfect undercover detective. She’s so sweet and sincere that no one will suspect she has ulterior motives.”

“Ah, I get it,” Sophia said, winking at Dorothy. She leaned over and whispered close to Dorothy’s ear. “You want her to play the role she was born to play: dumb.”



Dorothy cleared her throat loudly to cover up her mother's crack. "What my mother is trying to say is that, Rose, you can just be yourself. That's the best thing to be."

Rose smiled. "People always underestimate me. They think I don't have anything going on beyond what they see. A simple girl from St. Olaf, blessed with a knack for milking and churning, just a farm-raised, corn-fed beauty with an undeniable talent for tap-dancing, chicken-calling, and cow-brushing, with dancer's legs and perfect pitch and—"

"We get the point," Sophia said. "We all know you're very special. Now can you use that wining personality of yours to help my daughter avoid the slammer?"

"Yes, sir!" said Rose, her spirits clearly lifted.

Dorothy hugged Rose. "Then let's get started. Since there are four of us, we can divide and conquer different aspects of the case."

Sophia rubbed her hands together. "There's my genius daughter. Your father said educating a girl was like trying to teach a duck the tarantella, but you proved him wrong!"



Rose grinned and pulled out a notebook and pen from beneath the papers she'd been reading overnight. "I'm going to start on my list of questions for the Bryants," she said. "I could go to the hotel this morning and offer to help them with their version of the wedding plans. I'll get in good with Mrs. Bryant, under the guise of just wanting to be included."

"Good thinking, Rose," said Blanche. "But what if they give you the brush-off? You already said they like to steamroll people, and they clearly weren't very happy with you last night."

Rose scrunched up her face in thought. "I suppose then I'd try to get close to Patricia, or her husband, Chip, and see if they need my help with anything. And I could always stick close to Nettie. After all, no matter what type of wedding she has, there's still so much to do—which can be a reason for all of us to spend some time together."

"Very smart," said Dorothy. By dividing this case up into manageable sections, they just might be able to solve it together. "Now, Blanche, while you help Rose with the wedding, I want you to talk to everyone you may meet along the way. Find out if any similar crimes have occurred in the city, or if anyone has an aunt or a grandmother or a friend who got taken in by a charming con man that looks like Tom Selleck. And of course, pump Jorgen for information on anyone else in the wedding party."



“That I can do,” Blanche said. “I’ll make plenty of notes and report back. You’ve never seen someone who can pump information out of a man as well as I can.”

Sophia snickered.

“And what about you two?” Blanche asked Dorothy and Sophia. Dorothy thought it over. Should she pore over old newspaper crime reports on microfilm at the library? Should she call Lucky Chances, or locate their offices, to try to get more intel on Henry—or the man who called himself Henry? Maybe she should go back to Wolfie’s and try to re-create their first (and last) date minute by minute. Her head began to spin with all the options spiraling out before her. Even with everyone’s help, solving a murder was a daunting task.

Sophia watched Dorothy’s face as if she could read the churning thoughts in her head.

“Don’t overthink it, pussycat. I’ve figured out our next move. We’re going to do a stakeout,” she declared. “We’re going to watch that hotel like the FBI watched Lucky Luciano. No one will go in or out without us making a note of it—including a full description. If there are any suspicious characters lurking around, we’ll find them.”



Dorothy looked dubiously at her mother. The idea of them parked in an unmarked van, wearing fedoras and tossing back corn chips and lukewarm coffee all night like television detectives seemed like a stretch. Her mother would need plenty of bathroom breaks, for starters. And even if she gave Sophia a phone book so that she could see over the dashboard, her mother's eyes weren't the sharpest. Dorothy wasn't sure if Sophia's hips—or lower back—would allow for that much sitting. Or if Dorothy's would, for that matter.

"I'm not sure lurking in the car with a set of binoculars is the best idea," she said.

Sophia sighed with annoyance. "I'm not talking about outside the hotel," Sophia said. "I'm talking about inside! We'll set up right in that fancy lobby of theirs."

"So more like a stake-in . . ." Dorothy drawled.

Rose frowned. "But that won't work at all. Dorothy is the whole reason this wedding is in limbo—and the Bryants don't want her anywhere near their precious hotel."

A sparkle lit up Sophia's eyes. "That's why we're going to use disguises!



Blanche, get your makeup kit. We're going to need all the spackle and paint you might use for a Friday-night date."

#

The four women piled into Dorothy's car. Blanche once again took the front seat, muttering under her breath about Jorgen not answering the phone when she'd called his hotel room that morning.

"I'm sure he was just in the shower," Rose said. "You can try him again from the hotel lobby."

Soon the quiet residential streets turned to high-rises with glittering balconies. They had reached the heart of Miami. They drove over a small bridge, and on one side the ocean glittered a brilliant aquamarine, cheering Dorothy a bit. Everything seemed a little more possible when the sun was shining, she thought. Thank goodness they were in Miami, where excellent weather was the norm. Dorothy tried to hang on to that sunny feeling as they approached their destination. Even though she was in a storm of her own, she could try to prevent it from becoming a hurricane.

Dorothy dropped Rose and Blanche off at the hotel, then drove off with Sophia still in the back seat.



Dorothy circled a few blocks, tapping her fingers against the steering wheel as she waited for throngs of tourists in sunglasses, visors, sundresses and guayaberas to amble through the crosswalks. She didn't want to shell out for some of the more exorbitant parking lots, but if she didn't find a spot soon, she'd have to. Miami was truly booming as a vacation destination, despite the efforts of the local news to make it sound like there were drug busts and organized crime happening on every corner. That just wasn't the Miami she knew. But this sun-soaked paradise was attracting so many tourists to its beaches and nightclubs that now no one could get a decent parking spot.

After finally finding one on a quiet side street several blocks from Collins Avenue, Dorothy flagged down a taxi and helped her mother into the back seat. This was all part of their act, to look like tourists loitering at the hotel—rather than themselves.

To that end, Dorothy pulled on a broad straw-brimmed hat that covered her hair and hid most of her face, especially when she angled it correctly and dipped her head down. She wore a pair of Blanche's sunglasses in a vibrant teal color that she never would have chosen herself. Blanche had also done her makeup, overlining Dorothy's lips with an exaggerated cupid's bow and filling it all in with a bright tube of Persian Melon lipstick. Being a tall woman made it more difficult to fade into the background, but the idea was to at least look different from the Dorothy Zbornak everyone had met at the Welcome Tuna Teatime and at the bridal shower.



And I look different, all right, Dorothy thought. Like a clown on holiday. Or a lady of the evening caught in the harsh morning light. Instead of her usual blousy tops, long vests and flowing trousers, Dorothy had squeezed her long legs into a pair of blue jeans that belonged to her daughter and had been left behind on a recent visit. She'd been amazed that they fit, even though she'd had to take a deep breath and suck in her stomach to get the button fastened, Blanche pulling on one side and Rose on the other. At least they hadn't needed to use pliers to yank up the zipper. She'd also borrowed a stretchy magenta top from Blanche that hugged her curves, topped off with baggy jacket in white denim. The boxy cut and the generous shoulder pads helped Dorothy feel less exposed, as if the Jordache jacket were a type of armor as well as a disguise.

he'd drawn the line at borrowing shoes from any of her roommates. All their feet were tiny, and if she was going to wear uncomfortably tight pants, then, darn it, she was going to wear shoes that fit. She slid on a pair of white huaraches that she'd bought optimistically during her shopping spree at Aventura Mall, thinking they'd be perfect for a date on Henry's boat. She hadn't had the time to return them yet. After all, there was no chance of another date with Henry, and she couldn't imagine going on more dates—or doing anything fun—until she got herself out of this mess. She prayed that these disguises would work. They had to.



She looked over to her mother and let out a guffaw. They'd toyed with the idea of dressing Sophia up as Dorothy's daughter, since she was so much shorter. But even with makeup, there was no hiding the fact that Sophia was elderly. That, and the cane that she couldn't do without.

The four of them had done their best to disguise Sophia's short, white hairdo under a dark wig, with a drab cotton scarf tied under her chin. "I'll look like Strega Nona!" Sophia had bellowed before admitting that the scarf did help obscure her face.

They draped a camera around Sophia's neck to complete the picture of a tourist staying at the Cabana Sun Hotel, though its bulk looked set to topple her petite frame. Sophia needed her glasses to see, so there was nothing they could do about that, but Blanche did her best with contour, bronzing powder, blush and lip liner to change the appearance of Sophia's features.

In the bright sunlight coming through the taxi window, the results looked even more garish than Dorothy had realized.

"Stop looking at me!" Sophia said. "I know what you're thinking."

"I'm only thinking that you definitely don't look like yourself," Dorothy said. "Which today is a good thing."

"I've seen morticians do a better job," Sophia grumbled.



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