

Can She Bake A Cherry Pie?



Jaye Watson

Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?

A Novel Byte Mystery

By

Jaye Watson

Uncial Press

2007

Aloha, Oregon

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events described herein are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locations, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2007 by Judith B. Glad

ISBN 13: 978-1-60174-026-7

ISBN 10: 1-60174-026-3

Cover art and design by Judith B. Glad

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the author or publisher.

Published by Uncial Press,
an imprint of GCT, Inc.

Visit us at <http://www.uncialpress.com>

Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?

"You're neglecting me," the old man said. "That's no way to stay in my will. All I have to do is call Jared and he'll be here with my lawyer."

For a minute there he thought Emaline was going to answer back. Her mouth firmed, something her spine never seemed to do, and something like hatred glared from her eyes. In the next instant he wondered if he'd imagined that short flash of rage, because her usual placating smile trembled on her lips and her downcast eyes hid any rebellious thoughts she might have harbored.

"I'm sorry, Grandad. I haven't intended to. Tell you what, I'll take the afternoon off and make you something special for tonight. How's that?"

He didn't let himself smile. "About time. I haven't had a good home-cooked meal for weeks. A body gets damned tired of broiled chicken and rabbit food."

"You know the doctor said—"

"Hang it all, girl, I don't care what the doctor said. I want some pot roast with gravy and some real mashed potatoes, the creamy kind with a few lumps here and there. And green beans, cooked with real bacon, not that texturated soybean pap you use."

"Then that's what I'll fix you. Now, I've got to get to work. You know Dr. Burton doesn't like it when I'm late." She made sure his coffee-cup was filled—with decaffeinated coffee, damn it—and set the TV remote on his chair-side table. "There now, you're set until Mrs. Forrester gets here."

He leaned back in satisfaction as she carried a pie into the dining room. "That's more like it. I love a good pie," His mouth watered in anticipation. "I hope it's not one of those cardboard things from the freezer."

"No, Grandad, I made this myself. It's cherry, and I used Grandma's recipe. Would you like some ice cream with it?"

Tempted, he gave it a moment's thought. She only allowed him ice cream twice a week—doctor's orders. "No, just give me an extra large piece of pie. God knows I don't get a treat like this often."

"I'm sorry. It's just that after a day in the lab, there's not much time—" She took a deep breath. "Mrs. Forrester does her best."

"Bah! All she thinks about is low-fat, low calorie, low taste. Won't even give me ketchup. Too much salt, she says. How the hell can a man eat his cabbage without ketchup?" Reminded, he brought up another bone of contention. Yesterday she gave me a poached egg for my lunch. I told her I wasn't gonna eat poached eggs. Sunny side up, that's how eggs are supposed to be cooked. And that damned woman told me I'd eat it poached or go without."

"She's only following the doctor's orders, Grandad."

"And I'm paying her, so she can damn well follow my orders. Or she'll find herself on the street."

Her lips thinned, as if she were biting back words.

He ignored her, watched as she cut the pie into quarters. She lifted one piece onto a plate, and the blood-red juice spread slowly. Licking his lips, he let himself anticipate that first tart taste, the way the rich pastry would dissolve on his tongue. He picked up his fork.

Emaline sat, but she didn't take any pie. "I overdid it on the pot roast," she said, in response to his raised eyebrow. "Besides, you know cherry pie isn't my favorite."

He smacked his lips. "All the more for me."

"I hope you enjoy it, Grandad." She watched as he cut the point off the pie slice, lifted it, dripping to his mouth. "I worked hard to make it just to your taste."

As he pushed the fork between his lips, he sniffed. "Overdid it a bit on the almond flavor, didn't you?"

"Did I? It seemed like just enough when I was measuring it."

He chewed. "Tastes all right, though." The tart cherries puckered him up a bit, just the way he remembered. It took him back to his youth, when his Bethany had served him pie for breakfast, dinner and supper, like a good wife ought.

These modern folks didn't understand pie, he thought, not for the first time. Called it dessert. In his day pie was a part of the meal, like meat, spuds and bread. He cut off another bite.

"That almond's really strong," he said, as he got another whiff of it.

"Probably because it was fresh." She fiddled with her napkin. "I'm glad you mentioned a real home cooked meal. It was good, wasn't it?"

He nodded and took in the second bite. Chewed. "Good pastry. You've a light touch." As he swallowed, he realized that the cherries had a hot, bitter aftertaste. Getting old was pure hell. Nothing tasted like it ought to, and it took a lot more spices to make an impression. Maybe his taster was wearing out. Or going bad on him.

"I thought about what you said this morning," Emaline began, as he forked up a third bite. "I'm sorry you feel neglected, Grandad. Today I made up my mind you'd never feel that way again. So from now on, things are going to be different."

He paused, fork halfway to his mouth. She knew which side her bread was buttered on, sure enough. "See that they are," he told her, determined not to soften his stance. Hadn't he learned long ago that folks didn't do anything from the pure goodness of their hearts? They needed the carrot on the end of the stick, just like

a recalcitrant mule. Emaline's carrot was this house and his investments. As long as she kept him happy, he'd make sure her cousin Jared wouldn't get his hands on it.

Damned puppy. No family feeling at all. Only came around when he wanted something. Not that he wanted Jared to inherit. The lad was a wastrel, and he'd go through the estate like a hot knife through butter. *Everything I worked for would be gone in a matter of months—if not weeks. Emaline won't waste it.*

The girl might mutter and frown, but she took good care of him. And she was thrifty.

But she's only going to inherit if she takes care of me. Good care.

For some reason, the almond smell was stronger in the next bite of pie. *Damn nose. Is it going bad on me too?* The flaky pastry still melted on his tongue, but the cherries seemed a little off. He swallowed and again tasted that hot bitterness. His throat tightened, like it was sore, and his breath seemed to catch in his chest.

Emaline leaned forward. "Is something wrong, Grandad?"

He shook his head. "Fine. I'm fine. Good pie." To prove his words, he took another bite, a nice chunk of the outer crust with a big, fat cherry sitting on it. This time the almond odor almost choked him; it sure did make him dizzy.

Fear caught him in sharp talons. *Am I having a heart attack?*

Impossible. My heart's strong. The doctor said so, just last week. It's just the rest of me that's wearing out. He chewed and swallowed, determined not to give in to this momentary weakness.

His vision blurred and he shoved the plate away. "Had enough. I need coffee."

"Oh! I forgot." Emaline jumped to her feet. "Be right back." She disappeared into the kitchen.

As he forced himself to relax, the feeling of pressure in his chest went away. His head ached though, like he'd had too much to drink. *"Ha! Like they'd let me have more than a sip of whisky."*

By God, he resented the way that Forrester woman and the doctor—young whippersnapper!—rationed out him pleasures. He hadn't had a good cigar in years, and the meager one-ounce shot of whiskey they let him have three times a week was hardly enough to give a man a good taste.

"Bethany? Where's my coffee?" *No, not Bethany. Bethany's dead and gone, these many years. Wally?* Then he remembered, and the pain was new again. His son was gone too, drowned trying to cross the Columbia Bar in too small a boat. There was only one left of his blood now. Only one.

A girl. *Em...Emily? Something else...Emaline?* "Emaline? Where's my coffee?"

She came through the door, carrying the coffee carafe. "Right here, Grandad. But first, let's see if you can't finish your pie. Here. Let me help you."

Cherry pie. His favorite. He'd never left cherry pie on his plate in his life. When she forked up a good-sized bite, he opened his mouth. *Just the way I like it. Nice and juicy.* As he chewed, sweet juice trickled from the corner of his mouth.

The light in the room seemed to dim. Damn power company. They hadn't given good service since that Enron thing.

He swallowed, and this time the bitterness burned, all the way to his belly. The lights dimmed more, until he could hardly see Emaline, smiling at him.

But he heard her.

"I hope you like your pie, Granddad. I made it special, just for you."

* * * *

"He was fine this afternoon. I've been here since about two, and he was fine until just after dinner."

"You were here..." Detective Jordan rubbed his chin. She heard the rasp of his whiskers against his callused fingertips. "You're not usually here?"

"No, I work at BioLogic Labs." At his raised eyebrow, she said, "We do DNA sequencing and genetic matching."

"I've heard of them. Out in Beaverton, aren't they?"

"Raleigh Hills, actually. It's about a half-hour drive, but I usually take the bus."

"Hmmm." He turned on his heel, his sleepy eyes taking in the sideboard with its antique compote full of artificial fruit, the rubyglass sconces, the puddled velvet swags over mullioned windows. "Fancy," he said, as if he'd never seen anything quite like it.

"My grandfather disliked change," she told him. "He wouldn't allow us to redecorate. This is exactly how the house was when my grandmother was alive."

"Your grandmother?" More scratching. "When did she...pass away?"

"She died nearly twenty years ago." Despite herself, Emaline stressed the word. Grandmother had not 'passed away'. She died. She was dead. Gone.

So were Mama and Dad. All gone.

She was the only one left.

"So you only have a child's memories of her." His voice was casual, not quite asking a question.

She could have kissed him. Thinking she couldn't remember a woman twenty years dead.

Then she remembered he was a cop.

"I remember my grandmother well," she said, "I was thirty-one when she died."

He could get her records. Why should she lie to him?

Besides, he had to be at least her age, if not older. Look at his gray hair. At the pouches under his eyes, that made him look like a basset -in-training.

That made him look interested, comfortable, sympathetic.

Careful. He probably cultivates that look, so people confess their youthful indiscretions to him without his even asking.

"You say your grandfather had high blood pressure. Anything else?"

"The blood pressure was under control with medication. He had an aneurysm, but the doctor said that at his age it was less risky than the surgery. And prostate cancer. The slow kind."

"Hmmm."

She wanted to scream at him. What the dickens did 'hmmm' mean? "Doctor Rogers said he didn't understand why Grandad was still alive. Most of his patients..." She realized she was babbling and fell silent.

"He was ninety-three, you said?"

"Ninety-four in five months. He was really proud of that. No one in his family had ever lived past ninety before." As she spoke, she recalled how Grandad had celebrated his ninety-first birthday.

"I'll not make it to a hundred," he'd said, "but by God, ninety-one's worth crowing about." He'd demanded whisky that night, and she'd given him the bourbon bottle, only three-quarters empty.

It should have killed him, if Dr. Hedley had been right about the effects of alcohol on his fragile system.

He'd had a hangover the next morning. That was all.

"Ordinarily I wouldn't have been the one to respond, but I was in the neighborhood, so they asked me to stop by. The medical examiner will be in touch, probably tomorrow morning." More chin scratching. "Purely a formality."

"There won't be an autopsy?"

"Not unless you request it. An old man, one with medical complications, waste of money. The taxpayers only pay for it when there's evidence of a homicide. I don't see any here."

"Good heavens, no."

She felt the pressure of Gladys Humboldt's arm across her shoulders, and wanted to thank her neighbor for coming to her defense, even if unnecessary:-

"Mr. Banister was not the world's most friendly sort, and he certainly wasn't easy to get along with, but Emaline never complained. I've know her since she was a young woman—"

I am a young woman, Emaline wanted to scream, but she knew she wasn't. Not at fifty two.

"She isn't like these women who devote all their lives to aging parents," Gladys went on. "Emaline has a life of her own. She only moved in with Mr. Banister when he started forgetting things, like eating and bathing. And she's making a good living, so she didn't need to share a house with him. I tell you, Detective, sometimes I wondered how she put up with the old man, he was so cranky."

"Not with me," Emaline demurred. "Grandad was hardly ever cranky with me."

"Because you gave him whatever he wanted," Gladys said. "But that's not all bad. I imagine you saved quite a bit, living here with him. And you had plenty of respite, what with hiring someone to be with him all day, every day."

"You didn't take care of him?" Detective Jordan asked. "But you lived here?"

"A nurse comes in every day, except Sunday," she told him. "Between Grandad's pension and my income, we could afford full time care for him."

"But you were with him at night?"

"Most of the time. I usually had someone in on Friday nights, so I could go out with my friends." She looked him straight in the eye. "I'm not a particularly sociable person, Detective. One night out a week is plenty for me. Particularly since I am out ten hours a day, at work."

He raised his hands, as if to ward her off. "Calm down, Ms. Banister. I'm just trying to get a picture of what his life was like. This

isn't even a formal investigation. I'm just giving the M.E. a hand, since he's tied up in court today."

She bit her tongue. What was it Grandma used to say? 'Least said, soonest mended?'

The less she said to Detective Jordan, the better. Then there would be no need to fix anything after the fact.

With one last look around the dining room, he rocked back onto his heels, teetered a moment, and stood straight. "I don't think I have any more questions, Ms. Banister. I'll tell the medical examiner that in my opinion, your grandfather's death was natural, and there's no suspicion of foul play."

She forced herself to look appropriately sober. "Thank you, Detective. I...I'm not quite sure what comes next. Relatives to call, and..." She buried her face in her hands. "Oh, lord, I have to tell them all. And funeral arrangements..."

He patted her shoulder awkwardly. "Plenty of time for that tomorrow. Get some sleep. You'll be able to cope better in the morning."

Gladys came up behind her and again laid an arm across her shoulder. "He's right, sweetie. Get some rest first, then you can deal with all the details." She squeezed, "I'll help."

Emaline saw them out, first Detective Jordan; and then Gladys. After she closed the door after her neighbor, she leaned against it and took a deep breath. *God! I am exhausted. I thought they'd never leave.*

She locked the door and slowly made her way upstairs. Once in her bedroom she reached, out of habit, for the baby monitor on her bedside stand.

One finger on the switch, she paused. *I don't need this tonight. I won't ever need this again.* No more would she have to sleep lightly, waiting to hear a guttural call, a thud and clatter of his walker, a pain-filled moan as he pulled himself out of bed and made his slow way to the bathroom.

She was alone in the house. All alone.

* * * *

Emaline kept her gaze on the flowers at the foot of the coffin. She hated open-casket funerals, but Grandad had made it clear he wanted one. She didn't know why. Just seven of his friends were here. The rest were all dead. Hadn't she taken him to their funerals, time and again, over the past ten years?

The big room was nearly empty. Only Jared sat beside her in the front pew. They were the last remaining relatives of John William Banister. Her three girlfriends, Amy, Jerri, and Marty, would have come, but she'd asked them not to. She'd rather see them Friday night, when she didn't have to pretend a sorrow she didn't feel. Dr. Burton and his wife were here, as was Mrs. Forrester, the weekday caregiver. She was weeping quietly. Emaline was certain her tears were genuine. *A nice lady. I wish I had her patience. Her tolerance.*

I wish I'd cared as much for Grandad as she did.

As the minister ended his short speech, the door at the back of the room opened. Unable to resist, Emaline glanced over her shoulder. *Detective Jordan! Oh my God!* She knew, from having read hundreds of murder mysteries, that the police often attended funerals in hope of seeing someone acting suspiciously guilty. She turned back and clasped her hands together in her lap. *Stay cool,* she told herself. *You've nothing to fear.*

Randall Jacobs stood to give the eulogy. Emaline didn't listen as the old man, his voice choked with tears, spoke of a friendship that had endured three-quarters of a century. *He didn't have to live with Grandad, didn't have to listen to him complain about the least thing.*

"Johnny Banister wasn't the world's easiest man to get along with, but he was a good man," Mr. Jacobs was saying. "He'd lend a hand without being asked, if he saw someone in trouble. Even after his son was grown too old for the Scouts, he kept on working with them, taking on boys from broken homes and treating them like

his own. Once he retired, he volunteered once a week at the Red Cross, and he never failed to lend a hand at the church's annual rummage sale."

Boy Scouts? Grandad? Who never had a good word for the neighborhood kids?

"When his son, Wally, drowned, the heart went right out of Johnny..."

Emaline closed her mind to Mr. Jacobs' words. She couldn't plug her ears, but she could refuse to listen. *I'll have to hold an estate sale. Clear out the house before I can sell it. But first I'll need to go through everything, see what I want to keep...*

"Let us pray..."

Caught unawares, Emaline quickly bowed her head as Reverend Gregson delivered a final prayer. When the funeral director came to escort her past the casket, she almost turned and ran. Instead she kept her eyes carefully on the spray of gladiolus draped across the coffin until she was right beside it. Then she closed her eyes.

She couldn't look at his face.

She had the horrible feeling that if she did, his dead eyes would open and accuse her.

The graveside service was mercifully brief. The morning's drizzle had turned into steady rain, blown almost crossways by a gusting southerly wind. Despite the canopy, her shoes were soaked and her skirt was dripping. Beside her Jared shivered beside her in his leather coat. He might be stylish, but he was certainly not dressed for the weather.

As the mourners started to drift away, Jared said, "How come you're holding a reception? That's just weird."

"It's customary. People expect it." Gladys had advised her to, and she'd agreed it was a good idea. While she wasn't able to pretend to be overcome with grief, she was not going to do anything to make people think she was glad to be rid of Grandad.

Even if she was.

* * * *

Probate dragged on forever. Even though she was both principal beneficiary and executor, there were still legal hoops to jump through. She stayed in the house while she slowly inventoried everything. It was heartbreaking toil, because Grandad had never given or thrown anything away.

She found half a dozen boxes in the attic, carefully labeled 'Wally'. Inside them was the story of her father's life, from infancy to death. A birth announcement, grad school report cards, high school yearbooks. A photo album from her own childhood, showing her mother and father young and happy, showing her a bright, cheerful child with fat, rosy cheeks and a wide, carefree grin.

She stopped there, setting the rest of the boxes aside, knowing what they held but unable to deal with what happened later. There had been no happily ever after for Wally and Florence Banister.

Someday she'd sort their contents, but not now. She had an inventory to complete, a probate to close.

She moved on to boxes of old tax returns. Thirty years of them. Complete with backup receipts and records.

"Didn't Grandad ever throw anything away?" But she patiently went through them all, for there should be information about improvements to the house. No sense in not taking all the deductions she could when she sold it.

* * * *

"I thought that was you over here? Enjoying the play?"

Emaline turned slowly, until she was facing Detective Jordan. Although she hadn't seen him, hadn't spoken to him for six months, she'd recognized his voice immediately. "Yes, I am. It's exciting." She'd always been a fan of Agatha Christie, and this revival of *Witness for the Prosecution* was superbly staged. Although her

stomach was roiling, she forced herself to smile. "Are you here for pleasure, or is this a professional visit?"

His chuckle seemed to wrap itself around her heart. "I'm a murder mystery fan. Never miss a play or movie, especially when it's a classic like this."

"Me too. And books. I've got every one of Christie's."

"I'm a Travis McGee fan myself. He's sort of my role model. Or at least a model for the role I'd like to play, if I didn't have this old-fashioned work ethic." Stepping to her side, he cupped her elbow in one big hand. "Let's get out of this mob. Hard to hear yourself think."

Adroitly he maneuvered her into an alcove where he could stand between her and the intermission crowd. His wide shoulders and solid body made a good sound barrier.

"How are you doing, dealing with your grandfather's estate and all? I know it can be a real strain."

Was there suspicion in his voice? Again her stomach clenched. She willed her voice to be steady. "I imagine the tangle of red tape is no worse for me than anyone. Fortunately Grandad updated his will about five years ago. He made no major changes in his estate since then, so probate is relatively uncomplicated. Just time-consuming." A good thing, too. She wasn't sure what she would have done if Grandad had carried out his threat to revise his will before... *Don't go there. Don't ever go there.*

"That's good. I—" The chime sounded for the last act. He grimaced. "Look, I'd like to see you again. Are you busy this Friday?"

She felt a stab of surprising disappointment. "I am. I have a standing date...—"

Another grimace, this one accompanied by a quick lowering of his dark brows.

Good heavens! Is he hitting on me? "My girlfriends," she said quickly. "We meet for dinner and a show. Every week." She

wondered what would happen if she didn't show up because she had a date with a man. They had all agreed that only fire, flood or disaster would prevent their weekly get-together, and for a long time everyone had kept her vow.

The crowd had all but disappeared. "I guess—" she said.

At the same time he said, "Time to go back—"

"I'll call you," he said, as they parted.

She wished he would.

Remembering what he did for a living, she hoped he wouldn't.

* * * *

The bottle was still in the cupboard. It sat innocently beside the bottle of vanilla. Almond Extract, 36 percent alcohol by volume. There was about a quarter inch of liquid in it, too much to throw away.

Too dangerous to keep.

Emaline reached for it, then drew her hand back. She couldn't simply toss it into the trash, and pouring it down the toilet was out of the question.

She turned to the stove, where a pot of soup simmered. She'd made and frozen it last summer, when a long spell of hot, sunny days had ripened far more tomatoes than she and Grandad and all the families on the block could use.

If she went ahead with her plan to sell the house and buy a condo, would she find one where she could have a garden?

Don't be silly! You don't need a garden.

But she did. There was something elemental about digging in the rich, dark soil, watching the growth of the seeds, the ripening of the fruit. Every summer, when she picked the first tomato, the first bean, the first cucumber, she felt...awed. Almost as if she should worship Nature, for the miracle of turning sunlight and water into green, growing things.

She forced her thought back to the incriminating bottle. She had to dispose of it. Somehow.

I suppose I could bury it.

But where? In the back yard would be tempting fate, particularly if she decided to sell. What she needed was a place where it would stay in the ground indefinitely. Like under a...a tree, a bush. She'd buy a rhododendron and plant it in the back yard. And before she put the big root ball in the ground, she'd carefully inter the little brown bottle.

Satisfied she'd found a solution to the bottle problem, Emaline gave the soup one last stir and turned the burner to *simmer*. As she was pouring herself a celebratory glass of Riesling, the phone rang.

She almost didn't answer it, certain it was someone seeking her vote. They always called at dinnertime. As if she'd vote for anyone who called her with a recorded message. If they didn't care enough to call her in person, why should she care enough to vote for them?

At the fifth ring, she decided it must be a real live human being. "Hello?"

"Emaline Banister?" A hard voice. A voice used to getting answers.

A cold knot of fear formed in her gut. "Y-yes?"

"Harry Jordan here. I— did I catch you at a bad time?"

The knot thawed a bit. Only a bit. He was a police detective, for goodness sake. "No I was... just fixing some soup for supper."

"A good night for it. I just about drowned coming in from the car."

Surely he wouldn't make small talk if— "You should have walked from the bus stop with me. It's two blocks." She tried to inject a note of humor into her voice. Instead it trembled, ever so slightly.

"Sounds like you haven't gotten warm yet. I should let you go back to your soup."

She twisted the cord around her finger. "No I— It's got to simmer a while. How can I help you, Detective?"

"Harry. Please call me Harry." He didn't sound so big and bad now. Almost hesitant, in fact. "This isn't an official call."

Thank god! "Oh." Emaline chewed her lip. She couldn't just hang up on him. Could she?

"Look, I'd like to see you. Uh... socially, I mean." A long silence. "Ms. Banister, I'm not usually this gauche. I guess I'm out of practice. What I'm trying to do is ask you to have dinner with me."

Her silence was just as long. Talk about being torn. She'd liked him the first time she met him, even as she feared him. If only he weren't a cop.

What are you worrying about? There's no reason for him to suspect you of anything. Have dinner with the man. It's not like he's asking you to sleep with him or anything.

A shiver of—desire?—made her insides quiver. "Look, Det... Harry, I appreciate your asking, but I—"

"Just dinner. I promise." His voice was a soft purr, like rich fur against bare skin. "I'd really like to get to know you better."

Her willpower trickled away like snow under a warm sun. "All right." Were those weak, muted words hers?

"I've got Saturday off, for a change. How about I pick you up about seven? We'll go somewhere comfortable, somewhere I don't have to wear a tie."

That meant no romantic setting. No candlelight and wine. Thank goodness. "That sounds great. I'll see you then."

"I'm looking forward to it. Good night."

She managed a weak good bye, before letting the receiver drop from nerveless fingers. Had she really just accepted a date from a cop? A homicide detective?

You are out of your weak little mind!

Somehow she tended to the soup, even ate most of a bowl. As she was cleaning the kitchen, she opened the spice cupboard to put away a bottle of dried oregano that had somehow escaped her earlier tidying. Sitting right there, at the very front of the shelf, was

the bottle. The one she'd done her best to forget. Almond Extract, 36 percent alcohol by volume.

I'll bury it tomorrow.

When tomorrow came, she realized that the back yard was the last place on earth she should dispose of something so incriminating. Even if she didn't sell the house right away, she'd no intention of spending the rest of her life here. What if the new owners decided to landscape? Not many people were interested in old fashioned perennial borders surrounding raised bed vegetable plots.

Where would she plant a rhody anyhow? No matter where she put it, the stupid thing would look out of place. Someone would be sure to wonder about it.

The question plagued her dreams, leaving her foggy-brained and bleary in the morning. A good thing she only had routine work to do at the lab. She plodded through her morning routine, and shuffled down the sidewalk. She missed her regular bus, and the next one was always full by the time it got to her stop. So she stood, half asleep, all the way to town.

Naturally the later bus made her miss her regular connection, so she stood all the way to Raleigh Hills too.

That damned bottle sat in the back of her mind all day long. Perhaps that was why, when her bus passed the dark two-block section of Midland Avenue that bordered the cemetery where Grandad was buried, the answer to her dilemma came to her in a blinding flash.

A long time ago she'd overheard a neighbor telling Grandad about planting a rosebush in the cemetery. "It's against the rules," the woman had said, "but if they don't catch you, they don't do anything about it, as long as you plant it nice and keep it out of the area where the graves are."

Grandad, being the maverick he was, had approved. "Too damn many rules," he'd grumbled. "Senseless ones, mostly."

She called in sick the next day. As soon as the nursery was open, she went down to look over their selection. Although it wasn't the season for planting rhodys, they had a small selection.

Emaline read the tags on one after another. She wanted something that would grow to a decent size and bear spectacular flowers. The nicer the shrub, the less likely it was to be dug up. Finally she decided on one called Pink Pearl. The small picture on the tag said it had big trusses of seashell pink flowers and would grow to be eight to ten feet high in ten years.

Perfect.

She bought a bag of planting compost. If the cemetery soil was anything like that in Grandad's back yard, it needed all the help it could get. On the way home, she stopped by Grandad's grave and laid a bouquet of carnations on it. And picked the perfect spot for a rhody. Over near the far fence, in a corner where there were a couple of straggly looking deciduous shrubs and no empty gravesites nearby.

That evening, in the misty October rain, she planted the thirty-dollar Pink Pearl in a sixty-dollar hole, just as her grandmother had always advised. "Pretend you're planting something twice as big, twice as expensive. That way the roots will have room to spread and the plant will know you cherish it."

At the very bottom of the hole, she carefully laid the small brown bottle, after wiping it one last time with a dampened paper towel. Earlier she'd scrubbed it with detergent, and had since handled it with gardening gloves.

She watered the rhody from the five-gallon container she'd brought, having barely managed to carry the heavy thing from her car to the hole. Once the soil was properly tamped around the root ball, she bundled the leftover soil into the tarp she'd piled it on and put it into the trunk of her car. *A good thing I've been going to the gym.* She'd have sore arm muscles tomorrow.

There was no way she could hide the evidence of her activities, but she made the place as neat as she could. As she trudged back to her car, carrying the remaining planting compost, she wondered how long it would be before someone noticed the new shrub in the corner.

When she got home, she cleaned her tools, dumped the soil and the compost into the vegetable beds, and took time to rake them smooth. Once the tools were put away, she dusted her hands. Now she could face Harry Jordan without a worry in the world.

He was a very interesting man, something there had been all too few of in her life for the past ten years.

* * * *

Saturday arrived before she was ready for it. She spent the day working in the room where her grandfather had kept his collections of magazines. Shelf after shelf, some of them with magazines fifty or sixty years old. She had enjoyed the *National Geographics* when she was a child, but *Car and Driver* from 1953? *Road and Track* from 1968? She'd try Freecycle, but she had faint hope of them going anywhere but to the landfill.

The timer went off at five thirty. Reluctantly she laid aside the July 1977 *Sunset* and stood, stiff from sitting in one place for several hours. She really should have stopped to stretch more often.

Bathed and blow-dried, she was ready when Harry arrived a few minutes before seven. True to his word, he wore chinos and an open neck sport shirt. His corduroy jacket was soft with wear and his sneakers a little scuffed on the toes.

"I hope you like barbecue," he said, as he held the door for her. "One of the guys at the shop told me about this great new place up in Northeast."

"Love it," she admitted, "even though I know I shouldn't."

"Nonsense. You can eat healthy all next week. Tonight we feast." He took her arm as they walked to his car, a sleek red Acura.

"I live on junk food all week, but I'll be dam...darned if I'll eat like that on weekends."

"Grandad always accused me of being half rabbit. I eat a lot of salads," she confessed as she slid into the warm leather seat. "Oh, my, it's heated."

He shut the door and walked around the front of the car. As he settled himself behind the wheel, he said, "Nothing but the best. I figure if I only buy a new car every six years or so, I can have what I want instead of what's practical." When he turned the key, a whole galaxy of lights appeared across the dashboard. "Do you like jazz?"

The seductive notes of a noodling piano drifted out of the speakers. "Mm-mmm." She closed her eyes. When was the last time she'd felt so pampered?

The evening only got better. The restaurant was a micro-brewery, offering a variety of house labels. Dinner was the next thing to decadent, with falling-off-the-bone spareribs, potatoes baked with crispy skins and delectable centers, tangy sour cream and melting butter topped with real bacon crumbles and fresh cut chives. Det... Harry recommended a hearty brown ale and she found it perfect.

Their conversation was limited to ecstatic groans, muted growls as they gnawed bones clean, and the occasional hum of pure pleasure. When at last she sat back in her chair, she felt more relaxed, more comfortable, and more replete than she had in a long time.

Harry ordered coffee. While they waited, he said, "I had a case this week that reminded me of you."

Suddenly the dinner sat like a block of greasy ice in her belly. "Like mine? I didn't know I was a... a case."

"I had to file a report on your grandfather, so that made it a case. This was similar. At first glance, anyhow. An old man who

dropped dead after a big meal. The difference was, he had no reason to, other than over-eating.”

Emaline carefully poured sugar into her coffee. Too much sugar. “You suspect something... peculiar?”

“I know damn well there’s something peculiar. Trouble is, I can’t put my finger on it. Not yet.”

Without thinking, she said, “But you will, won’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll find out who killed him.”

He looked almost surprised at his own words.

Emaline gaped, then forced her mouth shut. “Are you saying it was...*murder*?”

“Sure as God made little apples” He reached across the table, took her hand in his. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to talk shop. And I certainly didn’t mean to remind you of your grandfather’s death.”

“Can you prove it?”

His expression changed, hardened. All at once he looked the complete cop. “I will. No matter how old, no matter how close to death someone is, taking his last days from him is a crime.” His lips thinned into a hard line. “Even if society didn’t say it was, I would. He had a right to those days, however few there might have been.”

Mouth dry, Emaline could only nod. After a few labored swallows, she nodded. “I can’t argue. But...but what if he was...was mean. Not all old people are kind and godly. Some are selfish and mean and cranky.”

His gaze seemed to pierce through her. “Like your grandfather.”

She swallowed. “Like Grandad.”

He held her prisoner with his eyes, dark and piercing. “Would you have killed him? Could you have stolen his last days?”

She couldn’t look away, couldn’t lower her lids. “No...yes. Yes, I did think about it. I almost—”

He held up his hand. “Don’t say any more. I may be off duty, but I’m still a cop.”

Paralyzed, caught in the fierce gaze of a true predator, she sat unmoving for endless moments. "I was going to... to poison him. I brought it home from the lab. Prussic acid. It smelled just like almond extract. I even used an empty almond extract bottle.

"I made the cherry pie. Just before I put the filling into the crust, I opened the bottle. Tipped it." She buried her face in her hands. "Oh, god, do you have any idea what that stuff smells like?"

She'd never forget that faint whiff of the deadly contents of the bottle.

"Marzipan. It smells just like marzipan. My mouth watered."

A stranger sat across from her. A hard, stern stranger, who held her life in his big, strong hands. "How much did you use?"

This time when she swallowed, it hurt, as if the membranes lining her throat had been sandpapered raw. "One...one drop. And I scooped it out. Honest!" She lifted her chin and pled with open hand, with wide eyes. "I scooped it out and took it to the toilet and flushed it. Then I screwed the lid back on the bottle and put it in the cupboard."

"Is it still there?"

Shaking her head was an effort, as if her neck was permanently fused into an immovable column. "I buried it. There wasn't much left. Probably less than ten milliliters." At his raised eyebrow, she amended, "Somewhere around a quarter of an ounce."

"Enough to kill a good sized horse—or half a dozen people."

"Yes. That's why I buried it. Even if the bottle breaks, it will be dissipated through the soil slowly. No one will be hurt."

"Where?"

She told him. Waited.

At last he nodded. "I'll buy that. It's not likely anyone will dig it up." He nodded when the waiter offered more coffee. "Can you get the lady a fresh cup? Hers is cold."

She waited until they were alone again. After one sip of the fresh, hot coffee, she said, "You're not going to do anything?"

He shook his head. "Why should I? You didn't."

"I almost did. I wanted to."

"Intent to kill is not illegal. At least not unless you act on it. You didn't."

"Because I was scared of getting caught."

"Were you? Or was there another reason?"

She thought back to that pivotal moment. Remembered the feel of the bottle in her hand, the bright red of the cherry pie filling, the aroma of pot roast. All she'd needed to do was tip the bottle a little more, and she'd have been free.

And she couldn't do it. Underneath all the anger, all the resentment, had been a small, firm nugget of love for her grandfather. Old and cranky as he was, she still loved him. And she couldn't take away one single moment of his life, no matter how long it might be.

"Doctor Hedley said it was probably the aneurysm that killed him. He said the symptoms were consistent..."

"It was."

"You know? How?"

"I wasn't entirely satisfied. He might have been frail, but his doctor said his heart was strong. He was probably good for another year or two. So I asked for an autopsy."

"You—"

His hands went up in a placating gesture. "Before you say anything, let me tell you that I asked it as a favor, not part of an investigation. Unless something had been completely out of kilter, the results would have been included in a paper on hidden causes of death in elderly patients."

Frowning, she eyed him long enough that he started to fidget. "I'll bet that's not according to protocol, is it?"

His cheeks reddened slightly. "No. I could lose my job over it, in fact. And I should have shared the results with you, or at least

with Dr. Hedley. But I didn't. There was no reason to tell you we had any questions at all about the cause of your grandfather's death.

"He died of natural causes."

"Over-eating?"

"That easily could have been a contributing factor, yes. A full stomach putting extra pressure on the aneurysm. Just enough pressure so that it popped like a water balloon when it's stepped on."

She laughed, and caught herself before her laughter became hysterical.

He waited patiently until she was once again under control.

Emaline wiped her streaming eyes, conquered the lingering giggles. Looked across at his hard face, a strong masculine face in which were eyes of astonishing clarity and vision. The kind of vision that saw to the heart and soul of those he questioned.

"You knew I was thinking of killing him?"

His head slowly moved from side to side. "I wondered. My mother nursed her dad for more than ten years while he slowly went from a vital, interesting human being to a sluggish, isolated vegetable. After he finally died, she told me she'd dreamed of killing him, not to put him out of his misery, but to free herself."

"She didn't though?"

"She came close, but like you, stopped before she went too far."

He reached across the table. After a small hesitation, she laid her hand in his. For a long time they sat, silently gazing into each other's eyes. Into each other's soul.

Then she giggled.

"What?"

"I just realized. If it was a full stomach that tipped the balance, then Grandad... Oh, dear!" And she dissolved into laughter.

He waited impatiently. When her last chuckle faded, he raised one brow in inquiry.

“He overate. He’d eaten two big servings of pot roast, mounds of mashed potatoes with gravy; half a can of green beans, and then pie. A quarter of a pie.” Again she dissolved into giggles.

“I guess you could say... you could say he got his just desserts.”

About the Author

Jaye Watson is the alter ego of a sweet little old lady who doesn't want her grandchildren to know what dark and bloody thoughts she harbors in her heart of hearts. She would rather write about serial killers than romantic lovers, and much prefers a good treatise on deadly poisons to any collection of homestyle recipes. For amusement, Jaye plots new and different ways to kill off the people who cut in front of her in grocery lines and crowd her on the freeway.

* * * *

Uncial Press brings you extraordinary fiction and non-fiction.
Put a world of reading in your pocket.

www.uncialpress.com