

JULIE B COSGROVE

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



A BUNCO BIDDIES MYSTERY

**THREES, SIXES
& THIEVES**



Threes, Sixes, & Thieves

Julie B Cosgrove

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Threes, Sixes, & Thieves

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Prism is a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC

www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

Prism Edition, 2017

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9754-0

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9753-3

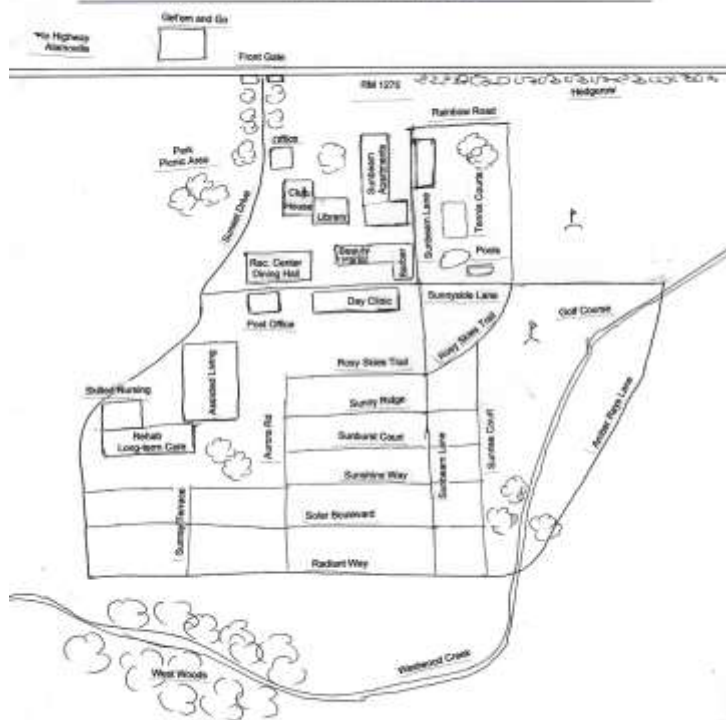
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

Dedicated to my Bunco Biddies in Burleson, TX.
I love being with y'all as we roll the dice, pray, and
share our stories.

The food everyone brings is scrumptious, too.

Sunset Acres



What People are Saying

Julie's a genuine jewel when it comes to dishing this delightful tale of sleuthing by seniors.

~Mary Daheim, author of the B&B and Alpine/Emma Lord mysteries

From the moment the gals decide to help the busy local police solve a murder on their territory, Betsy Ann, Ethel, Janie, and Mildred will wiggle their way into your heart with their determination to learn "real" detective work while protecting Sunset Acres and serving the best bakery and tea.

~Lisa Lickel, author of the best-selling Buried Treasure mysteries

Ms. Cosgrove's Bunco Biddies cozies will be a welcome addition to many reading lists, mine included.

~Sharon McGregor, author of the Island and Boarding Kennel mysteries.

Julie Cosgrove has created a laugh out loud mystery with quirky older characters. Bring on the next book!

~Cynthia Hickey, author of the Nosy Neighbor Mystery Series

ONE

“Blake?” Janie Manson grabbed the back of her hospital gown and trotted down the glossy, antiseptic-smelling hallway. Her clinical-issued footwear barely gained traction as she halted to peer into each room on the ward. “Blake? Blake, where are you?”

A certified nursing assistant stopped and put her finger to her lips. “Shhh, Mrs. Manson. May I help you?”

“Where is Chief Detective Blake Johnson? Ah, there he is. Never mind.” She slid into the entryway of Room 229.

The CNA shook her head and went about her duties.

Janie’s son-in-law sputtered when his gaze caught hers. “J-Janie?”

His eyes stretched into his forehead as Janie shuffled toward his bed, one hand clutched behind her.

“Is that you?”

“Of course it is.” She sighed as she caught a glimpse of herself in the reflection from the window. Her skid-free socks tumbled to her ankles. Her bony-knobbed knees, bed-pillow hair, and one-size-fits-none institutional garment completed the look—not one of her best.

Melody, her daughter, gawked at the sight. “Mom, what are you doing?” She thrust one hand to her hip.

The other aimed at the door, her forefinger pointing. "Get back to your room, right now."

Blake laughed. "Talk about a parent-child role reversal."

Melody gave him a don't-cross-me glare.

"Humph." Janie ignored her daughter's admonition and turned her focus to Blake. "Guess what I just heard?"

Blake scooted up a bit in his bed. "What?"

She swirled one hand around like a lopsided helicopter blade. "More crime at Sunset Acres. We need to bail from here and head over there lickety-split."

Blake's attention flashed to Melody then back to Janie. "Excuse me? We?"

"You know what I mean." Janie waved away his comment and perched on the edge of his hospital mattress.

Melody plopped in the visitor's chair with a defeated sigh. "Oh, for goodness' sake, Mom. You two are in the hospital because of your last harrowing experience." She gave them both a dagger-laden stare, her arms laced over her waist.

"Honey, take a deep breath. Let's hear her out." Blake shifted his attention back to his mother-in-law. "What crime?"

She leaned in. "Burglary. The Baileys were robbed two nights ago, while they were at their granddaughter's junior high graduation."

"Calm down. I'm sure Chief Gates is on it."

She discounted his placating tone. "Here's the bizarre thing. They live at number 366."

Blake breathed through his nose. "OK? And that is significant because...?"

"Let me finish. Well, yesterday afternoon while she attended the opening of her great-nephew's summer baseball season, Joan Stephens, in apartment 633, had her big screen TV and video recorder snatched."

"In broad daylight?" Melody clucked her tongue.

"It's easier than you might think. It is a retirement community, hon. Everyone is usually napping after lunch." Blake winked.

"I'm serious, Blake." Janie tugged on her gown. "Anyway, they also took her diamond earrings and an opal brooch she inherited from her grandmother."

"They?" He scoffed. "You've already established there was more than one?"

"Hello? I said big screen TV. We're talking sixty-five inches. Her grandson gave it to her for her birthday last March because she's half-blind and refuses to wear her spectacles."

"So?" He took a sip of water.

Janie rearranged the items on his hospital tray. "So, it makes sense there were at least two burglars. They'd both need to carry it out the door."

"OK. It's feasible." His eyebrows squished together as he held his cup in midair. "Wait. 366 and 633, you say?"

She bobbed her head in rapid motion. The mattress wobbled like a car with worn-out shocks bumping over a pothole-filled road. "You see? You see? There has to be a connection."

Water sloshed from the rim in the wake of her excitement. Blake set the toss-away cup down and wiped his hospital robe with the back of his hand. "Your enthusiastic movements just gave me a second sponge bath."

"Sorry. But you see my point, right?"

"Perhaps. I think you might be stretching it a bit."

Janie harrumphed. "Well, at least call it in. I bet no one else at the station will have put two and two together."

He took another deep inhale and decided to segue from her jab about his police department. "How did you discover this news?"

"Babs and Mildred. Oh, along with Ethel and Betsy Ann. They're visiting as well."

"Now?"

"Yep." Janie motioned with her head toward the doorway.

Four of the Bunco biddies—a title the ladies dubbed themselves during their first crime investigation at the retirement community where they played the dice game weekly—huddled at the doorway sheepishly wiggling their fingers in hello.

Blake motioned them into the room. "Ladies. Please join us."

They began to speak all at once—

"How are you doing?"

"Hope we aren't intruding."

"You gave us a fright."

"I'm so glad you're OK."

Blake pivoted his head, no doubt trying to catch the gist of what each said. "Glad you came by. I'm fine, honestly. A little tired, perhaps, but..."

Melody stood and laid her hands on two of their elderly shoulders. "Ladies, I think it is time for everyone to leave, don't you? My mother and husband need to rest. They were kidnapped and drugged yesterday, remember?"

Each looked to the highly-polished, green-

speckled floor and mumbled their apologies. They wished him well, hugged Janie, and shuffled out.

"I'll be there in a minute, y'all. Meet you back in my room," Janie called after them.

The last of them, Ethel, gestured OK as she closed the door.

Blake cleared his throat. "Look, Janie. Most likely the Baileys and Mrs. Stevens already reported it. I'm certain a police team is investigating as we speak."

She folded her arms over her waist. "Most likely? You mean none of your team has informed you?"

"I'm sort of on administrative leave right now."

Janie gasped. "Because of me?"

He gave her a soft smile. "No, my fault. I broke protocol. Mostly, it's due to the fact we're both here." He whisked his hands around to encompass the room. "I need to be cleared medically before I return to full duty."

She lifted off the bed and rearranged her clinical garb. "Very well. But mark my words. There will be a third robbery. Things do happen in threes."

He rubbed his temple. "They often do, yes."

"I think you should beef up patrol, especially around every condo or garden home with house numbers that contain only threes and sixes."

He reached for his cell phone. "OK, OK. I'll call."

She nodded in approval.

Melody stepped forward. "Is Mom really onto something, hon?"

He leaned toward her. "It doesn't hurt to request it. Otherwise your mother will set up a geriatric command center in her hospital room." His focus flipped to Janie. "Won't you?"

She jiggled her head from side to side. "It had

occurred to me..."

Melody sighed. "Fine, then. Call."

Janie grinned and went back to her room.

TWO

The women gathered around Janie as she crawled back into her assigned bed. She peered into their eager faces. "OK, ladies, Blake obviously needs our help. Well, I mean, yours until I'm discharged from here."

Betsy Ann frowned. "Are you sure about that, Janie?"

Ethel rubbed her hands together. "Ignore her question. What can we do?"

Janie scooted into a sitting position and punched the button to elevate her head. "Start by discovering how many units in Sunset Acres have house numbers with only sixes and threes."

Babs giggled. "What if one is number 666?"

Janie rolled her eyes. "If a witches' sign isn't hanging on the front door, call St. Matthew's and ask for an exorcist."

Mildred crossed her arms. "She meant house numbers containing both threes and sixes, Babs. There are no threes in 666."

"Oh, yes, there are. That is, if you divide them by two." Babs peered over her readers with a school teacher expression perfected after forty-four years in an elementary classroom setting.

Her comment led to mumbles and a few nods.

Janie knocked her knuckles against her wheel-around tray. "Ladies, please."

Betsy Ann snickered. "Well, Babs is correct."

Ethel crossed her arms over her chest. "I doubt if the burglars would figure it out though."

"Moot issue." Janie sighed. "I don't think there are any streets in our retirement community with six blocks except Radiant Way."

"Not even that street." Ethel shook her short silver locks. "Last house is 462. The Jonahs live there."

Mildred raised her forefinger. "What about Rosy Skies Trail?"

"Nah. Don't think so." Janie tapped her chin. "Half of the street is tennis courts and swimming pools on one side and golf course on the other."

The other ladies muttered in agreement.

Janie gazed at the acoustic tile ceiling, deep in thought. "So, let me see. The Sunbeam Apartments, where Jane Stephens was robbed, has six buildings."

Babs nodded. "I lived there for a while until a condo came available. The numbering system is convoluted. The beginning number indicates what unit they're in, the second tells you the floor it's on, and the third their apartment's location on that floor."

Ethel knitted her forehead. "Why did they number them in such a weird way?"

"Ask the Board of Trustees."

Everyone groaned.

"Wait a second." Babs scrunched her eyebrows. "There are only four apartments per floor, and none of the buildings are more than three stories high."

"So, only Jane Stephen's qualifies. 633. Which means she lives in unit six, third floor, third apartment."

"Correct, Janie." Babs folded her arms.

"Anyone got a piece of paper?" She eyed each of

her friends.

Mildred pulled out a small notebook. "I use it to make grocery lists."

Betsy Ann snapped her fingers. "Super idea. I always end up see-buying."

Janie cleared her throat. "Um, ladies?"

"Ethel showed me, didn't you?" Mildred nodded to her. "I saved over fifty dollars last month alone by sticking to my list."

"Ladies? Can we get back..." Janie darted her eyes between her friends.

"You did, Mildred?" Babs's eyes widened under her half-rimmed spectacles. "Oh, I definitely need to start doing that."

"Trust me. It works." Ethel grinned.

Janie whistled, which caused one of the nurses walking by in the hall to stop and peer in with a stern glare. She gave the woman in scrubs a finger-wiggle wave. "We'll keep it down. Promise."

The nurse gave them a terse smile and moved on.

"Back to the project at hand. My guess is there can't be too many house numbers that fit the pattern. Find the homes which do. Go knock on their doors. Make sure they learned about the burglaries and tell them to take caution."

Ethel stomped her foot. "Perhaps now Mrs. Jacobs can convince the board to put in one of those state-of-the-art alarm systems. You know. The models with a medical alert button as well."

"Oooh." Babs clutched her hand to her chest. "I'd love it. The commercial says everyone receives a pendant or wrist watch to wear as well, in case you slip in the bathroom."

"My friend, Margaret, has one. Of course, she pays

almost double what we do for her condo at Senior Shores in Austin." Mildred scoffed. "Their fees are higher than a cat's back in a dog fight."

Ethel joined in. "Well, I hear those units leak like a sieve. They think they can get away with the high cost because it faces Lake Lady Bird."

"Who'd want all those tourists and joggers peering into your windows?" Betsy Ann screwed up her nose.

"Well, the view is spectacular if your unit faces the water like Margaret's does. Then again, the other side offers a shot of downtown and the capitol."

Janie sighed and closed her eyes. She'd lost control of the conversation. They were off on another tangent again. Her temples started to throb. If she lay quietly, they might get the message and leave.

In a few minutes, the chattering stopped, and the squeaks of orthopedic soles marked their exit from the room. Ah, peace at last. Now she could think. Her mind churned, the ideas taking shape, but soon they faded as her body begged for yet another nap.

~*~

The next day, both Blake and Janie were released from the hospital. To keep Melody from overstressing, Blake told her to tandem with Ethel when she came to pick up Janie. "Follow them to Sunset Acres in your car. Settle in your mom first. I can manage."

"Are you sure?"

"Jamie has his learner's permit now. School gets out early today, so he can be my chauffeur. It'll give him practice."

"Well, I don't know..." She tucked her teeth into her lower lip.

Blake leaned in and smacked her cheek. "Go. I'll be fine."

Janie smiled from her wheelchair in the doorway as the orderly stood behind her. Ethel held onto the metal trolley bulging with flowers and balloons. "Very gracious of you, Blake. But Ethel and the gals can help out. Melody, go be with your husband."

"Janie. I can handle it. Please, let her go with you."

"Absolutely not. I've intruded enough."

Melody slipped her purse onto her arm. "Well, since neither of you need me, I'll just go shopping instead."

Blake and Janie looked at each other.

She snickered. "I mean for groceries. For both of you. I'll come by your place in an hour, Mom." She waved good-bye.

Janie shook her head "I thought she always had to be there when Ellie and Jamie got home from school."

"They carry their own keys. It gives them a bit of independence. The helicopter mom has landed."

"You think so, huh?"

"The kids are getting older, Janie."

She shoved her lips to one side. "As am I. She hasn't landed, my friend. She's hovering over me instead. Groceries, indeed." Janie waved good-bye as the orderly wheeled her out.

Blake grinned. Yep, role reversal. Yet he knew his mother-in-law all too well. Like a bronco not used to being ridden, put too much weight on her back and she'd buck. He admired that quality in her, though at times it almost caused him to take an extra blood pressure pill.

While he dressed, Blake pondered the house number sequence. Surely a coincidence. Right? Of

course. Purely circumstantial that the two places burglarized had addresses of threes and sixes. More likely the connection merely meant both owners were not at home. The perps probably staked out the retirement community to see who left in their cars and who didn't. They hit one at night, saw it went over without a glitch, and became bolder. Happens all the time.

Still, in order to placate Janie and to keep the Bunco biddies at bay, he'd ask Chief Gates to provide extra security measures in case the idiots tried it again. Third time would not be a charm. No, sir. Those folks at Sunset Acres worked all their lives to procure a little peace and quiet in their old age.

Besides, he had a vested interest, and not just because of his mother-in-law. He'd be living there in about twenty-five years or so. He hoped. Assuming a bullet didn't find him first as it had Jack, Janie's late husband and Melody's father. It happened all too often, especially nowadays. His own partner had caught one three months ago, and his medical leave didn't end until next week.

Blake raised his eyes to the ceiling and whispered a short prayer for protection for himself and all of those in law enforcement as he dug his cell phone from his pocket. Then he called his underling, Detective Hemphill. "Hey, Connor. Yeah, I'm out of here. Do me a favor, though. Ask Gates if he'll beef up the patrol in Sunset Acres."

The detective chuckled. "Already done, sir. Tell your mother-in-law we've got this."

"Sure. You wanna try to convince her of that?" He clicked off, pocketed his phone. and went to meet his son, Jamie, in the lobby, discharge papers in his hand.

No way was he waiting for the orderly to bring him a wheelchair.