



JULIE B COSGROVE

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

A BUNCO BIDDIES MYSTERY



**BABY
BUNCO**



Baby Bunco

Book 2

Bunco Biddies Mystery

Julie B Cosgrove

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Baby Bunco

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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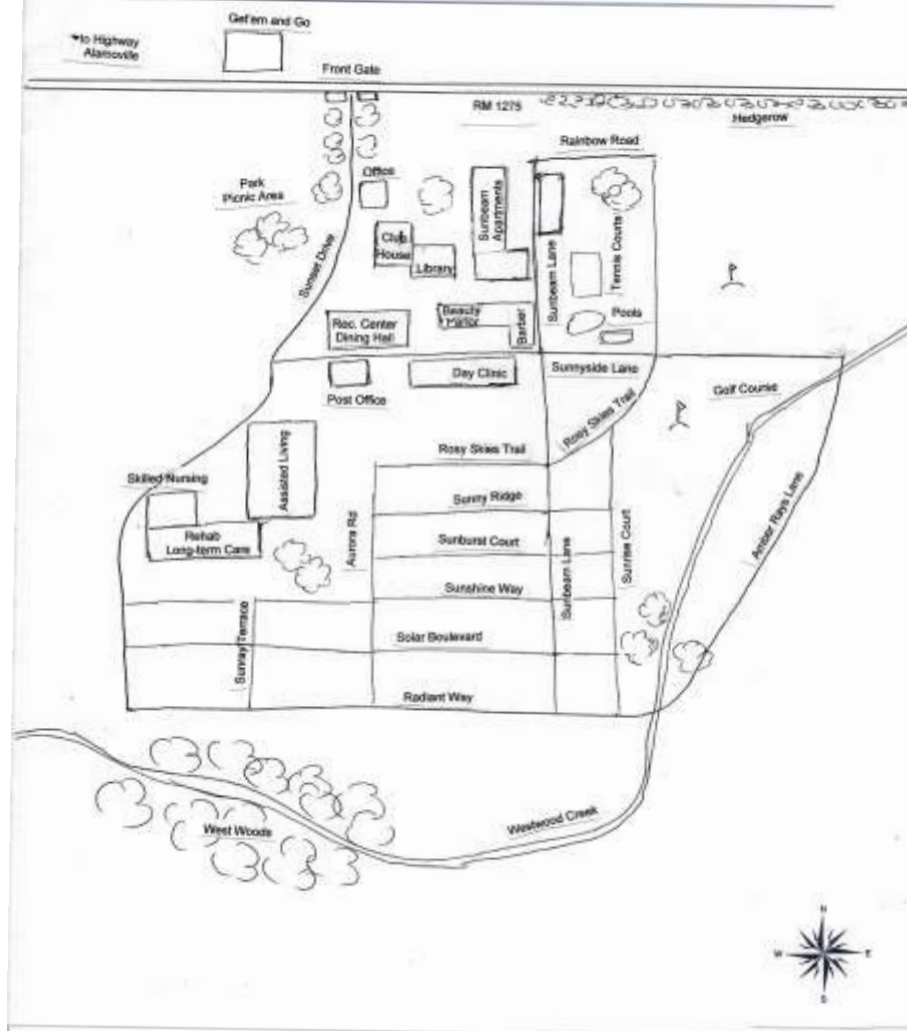
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Dedication

Dedicated to my great niece, Emily,
who is a budding mystery aficionado, bassoon player,
and a pretty good knitter.

Sunset Acres



ONE

“Did you say she found a baby?” Janie stopped mid-roll, the pink and white dice warming in her clutched fist. “Here in Sunset Acres, a retirement community?”

Babs, seated to her left at the Bunco table, nodded. “That’s what Mildred told me as we were walking up to your front stoop tonight. Right, Mildred?”

“I went to collect a few more of my things since I’m staying with Ethel, and no more than three minutes later the leasing agent pounded on my door. ‘Come see,’ she motioned to me. Her eyes grew as wide as those mega donuts at the Crusty Baker.” She thumped her pencil against her score pad and groaned. “It took every ounce of gumption to follow her into that—ugh!—place next door.” She quivered her shoulders.

Janie shifted her gaze to the woman sitting across from her. “Ethel, you knew about this?”

“I did.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Her voice elevated to echo-off-the-ceiling volume. She harrumphed and pivoted to face the storyteller. “Mildred. What happened?”

The other eight ladies halted their Bunco round. Each swiveled to listen in, their eyes fixated on the first card table.

Mildred leaned back and raised her voice for all to hear. “I paused at the steps, determined to not go

inside. Only peek in from the front door. Then high-pitched, frantic cries came from the direction of the bathroom. Well, I had to rush to its aid. Every motherly fiber in my being dictated it."

Murmurs and head bobs filtered through Janie's living room.

Mildred sniffled. "Poor little thing. Alone, scared, and red as a beet from wailing so hard. That house is cursed, I tell you."

Janie patted her hand. "Now, dear. Just because someone murdered Edwin soon after he moved in there doesn't mean..."

Mildred shot from her seat and paced, her arms flaying in circles, resembling the duck windmill on top of the antiques store down the road. "Ever since I relocated into Sunset Acres it's been one thing after another. Edwin murdered, then my nephew Bobby arrested, and now an abandoned newborn in a bathtub? This is supposed to be a quiet retirement community."

"Maybe because you live on Solar Boulevard." Annie huffed. "Nothing weird ever happens on my street, Sunrise Court, except for an occasional stray golf ball. Then again, if you kept your nose out of everyone's business..." Her voice trailed off with a smug cock of her head.

"My nose?"

The other ladies mumbled to each other.

Ethel blew a whistle through her teeth. "OK, everyone calm down. We all lived through the ruckus of one of our neighbor's brutal murder last month. It's not Mildred's fault. Nor mine or Janie's that this happened..."

Betsy Ann raised her hand, as if her legs once

again dangled from under her desk in Ms. Everett's kindergarten classroom.

Janie rolled her eyes. "What?"

"Well, it is sort of our fault." She pointed to Janie, Ethel, and herself. "We helped solve the case and Bobby did wind up in the middle of all of the commotion. That's why he threatened you and tried to break into your house." She folded her hands and gazed down at them. "I'm just saying..."

"Duly noted." Janie felt the healing, pinkish wound on her neck where his knife had grazed her skin. "I must add, my dear son-in-law, Chief Detective Blake Johnson, appreciated all of our"—her hands encircled the room—"research, sleuthing and cunningness. He told me so." A smile curled along the edges of her mouth. "Besides, it did beat back the coldrums for a while, right?"

A few silvery heads bounced in agreement as the condo sprinkled with giggles. Annie crossed her arms and harrumphed.

Janie led Mildred back to her designated chair. She patted her on the shoulders and scanned the room, making certain every slightly glaucoma-pressed or cataract-corrected eye fixated on her. "Now we must figure out who placed a newborn baby in a vacant garden home bathtub and why?"

Babs cocked an eyebrow. "We do?"

"Absolutely. Let's face facts. Someone put the little thing in a home in our community so she would be discovered. Therefore, it is our responsibility—"

"Well, now. I'm not sure..." Mildred frowned.

"We are all over fifty-five, correct? The child certainly doesn't belong to one of us. If so, we should be renamed Sarah after Abraham's elderly wife in

Genesis.”

“Or Elizabeth in the New Testament.” Betsy Ann added, this time with a forefinger, not a full hand, aloft.

“Exactly. Therefore, unless one of you wants to confess...”

Cackles ensued.

Janie allowed the cacophony to settle, her eyes glimmering with escalating excitement. “I, for one, do not think this is a coincidence that this wee one ended up in Edwin’s old garden home. There may be a connection we overlooked. Blake never discovered who left long, black hairs in that comb or ruby red lipstick on those empty beer cans when the police searched Edwin’s place for clues.”

Ethel scoffed. “Pffft. We all can guess what she was, even if we don’t know who.”

The women eyed each other and chuckled.

Annie shook her head. “But the officials only released him from prison a couple of days before he died, right? Last I heard, it takes nine months to make a baby.”

Mildred arched her eyebrow. “I thought it only took one night.”

Several of the elderly ladies laughed so loud Janie’s china tea service jiggled.

Janie pumped her hand toward the floor. “All right. All right. Even so, someone knew that home remained unoccupied.”

Babs flipped up her palms. “His demise dominated the local news for several weeks. Which means thousands of readers learned about it.”

“More than that,” Roseanne Rodriguez spoke up. “Hundreds of thousands. It was all over the nightly

news, too.”

Mildred flayed her arms. “That narrows it down a bunch.”

More laughter.

Janie tapped her fist to the card table. The hum of comments faded. “True, Roseanne. However, I don’t recall them specifically giving out the address, even if everyone heard Betsy Ann and I discovered him in the community dumpster here at Sunset Acres.”

“So, whoever dropped the baby girl off cased the joint and determined no one lived there anymore.” Ethel, the one with the massive cataloged mystery paperback collection, offered the proverbial gumshoe response.

“Which means they planned to leave her at that garden home.” Janie snapped her fingers. “Yes, that has to be it. So a person or persons unknown, who wouldn’t attract attention as they wandered around our senior retirement village, knew about this pregnancy and somehow persuaded the mother to give up the poor thing.”

Babs clucked her teeth. “Well, it does happen.”

“Yes, but what gets me is they figured someone would find the infant fairly quickly.”

“A ‘For Lease or Sale’ sign is planted plain as day on the front lawn.” Annie shoved the last bite of butterscotch brownie into her mouth.

Janie gave her a nod. “Good point. Still, there must be homes all over this area for sale or rent. Why our little corner of the world? A fifty-five plus community. Why not a neighborhood with young families? That’s what we must discover. Something tells me the answer might be the key to the whole dilemma.”

~*~

Ethel leaned into Betsy Ann. "Get a load of Janie. Proud as a peacock and giddy as a school girl. She's in her element. A new game's afoot."

Betsy Ann lowered her auburn, curly head into her hands. "Here we go again. Bunco Biddies to the rescue whether anyone wants us involved or not."

TWO

Janie wiggled her foot as Mrs. Jacobs, the community manager, shuffled papers on her desk. Betsy Ann, seated in the chair next to Janie, flashed her stern warnings and mouthed the words, "Calm down."

Janie huffed and re-crossed her legs.

"Hmm. Let's see. I know I put your to-do list somewhere." Mrs. Jacob's reading glasses dangled on the tip of her nose, the crystal-beaded string attached to each earpiece reflecting the midday sunshine filtering through the windows.

In order to stealthily gather clues as to the identity and history of the newest Sunset Acres resident, Edwin Newman, now deceased via butchery, the women had volunteered as office staff a few afternoons a week. Even after the case had been solved, the two agreed to continue helping out as needed. Working a few hours twice a week passed the time and made them feel productive and useful. For Janie, the job provided the added benefit of first-hand insight into the happenings of her neighbors. So it miffed her that she hadn't been one of the first to learn about this newborn.

Janie decided on the direct approach. "Mrs. Jacobs. Mildred told me the leasing agent found a baby in the bathtub at Edwin Newman's place?"

The middle-aged woman rocked back in her executive desk chair and tented her fingers in front of her. "I guess there is no such thing as keeping a secret

from you."

"You've got that right," Betsy Ann muttered under her breath.

Janie dashed a glance to Betsy Ann, who looked away. Janie then returned her attention to their manager. "Where is the infant now?"

"Children's' Protective Services came for her."

Janie clucked her tongue. "According to Mildred, the poor thing lay naked."

Mrs. Jacob removed her glasses and rubbed her eyes. "Yes. Brand spanking new per the emergency medical technician. Still had a shriveling umbilical cord attached to her little tummy."

Janie cleared her throat. "So, not a hospital delivery."

"Apparently not. Probably some wayward teenager got herself in trouble. Their guess is the boyfriend, or her girlfriends, helped her deliver. They panicked and decided to dump the newborn."

"But here?"

"Exactly my reaction." Mrs. Jacobs sighed. "In all the years I've managed this quiet, rural retirement village, never did such strange goings on occur. I do not understand why they are now..." She rose from her chair and stared out the window, her arms hugging her torso.

Janie placed her hands on her knees and straightened her back. "If there is anything we can do to help discover..."

Betsy furrowed her brow and riveted her eyes to Janie's face. Her lips formed the word "We?"

"Would you?" Mrs. Jacobs swiveled on her high heel and faced the two elderly residents. "You assisted your son-in-law in solving Edwin's murder, and I am

sure the case would have dragged on if not for your diligence."

Janie responded with a practiced demure grin. "Thank you."

"I am told Child Protective Services will investigate this whole thing, but they're so overworked. The board is already raising eyebrows over the fact Edwin's body ended up in our gated community's trash receptacle. And now this?" Her eyes glistened with tears. "I suspect the person who dropped off this poor little tyke picked Sunset Acres for a reason. Still, it makes no sense whatsoever." Mrs. Jacobs's attention returned to the scenery outside her office. Beyond the parking lot lay serene Texas meadows dotted with canary wildflowers amidst sprawling oaks. "Why pick a quiet, pastoral complex for the retired instead of dropping it off at a fire station, hospital, or even a daycare?"

"Let us see what we can find out." Janie motioned between her and Betsy Ann, who in return mouthed the word "no."

Janie cocked her head.

Their boss swiveled around to face them with her brows knitted. "Are you certain you can?"

Janie wiggled to the edge of her chair.

Betsy Ann slunk further into hers. "Tell her never mind," she hissed through her teeth.

"Of course. Happy to help." Janie shot another glance to her friend who'd quickly become interested in a horsefly buzzing near the window sill.

Janie rose. "Well, we better get to work on that tract rack. Isn't that what you mentioned we'd be doing today?"

Mrs. Jacob's cheeks reddened. "So it is. Thank

you." She reached down and plopped a heavy cardboard box on her desk. "These brochures on the regional caves and caverns arrived by mail only yesterday. See if you can find room for them."

"I'm sure we can." Betsy Ann took the load and headed for the door.

Janie stopped at the threshold and pivoted back to Mrs. Jacobs, who had returned to her desk. "Do you, by chance, have the name and number of the leasing agent?"

"Yes, I keep several of her cards. She's landed quite a few of our current residents." Mrs. Jacobs rummaged through the side top drawer of her massive desk. "Ah. Here's one. Janice Louise Oliver with Centex Rural Realty."

Janie took the card and flicked it against her fingernails. "Perfect. I'll give her a call later on today and set up an appointment."

Betsy Ann turned to her, that familiar, ditzy curiosity reflected on her face. "But you already own a condo here, Janie."

Janie pitty-patted her friend's arm. "Never mind, dear. I'll explain it all to you later."

Throughout their shift, the pair worked in silence. Every once in a while, Janie would give Betsy Ann a questioning glare. Betsy Ann would turn her back and humph.

Janie wondered what had gotten into her friend? Maybe she had a sinus headache.

~*~

When Janie stopped by Ethel's condo two hours later, the door stood ajar to coax the rare cool breeze

inside. Carried on a late cold front from Canada, the lower temperatures provided blessed relief from the ninety degree readings Central Texas already experienced in early May. She knocked on the screen door. "Anyone home?"

From deep within the condo echoed Ethel's response. "Come in, Janie. We're baking muffins for the bake sale tomorrow."

Janie followed the aroma into the kitchen where Mildred and Ethel, wearing a good portion of the ingredients on their aprons, poured goop into several paper-lined cupcake tins. The first two dozen of their efforts, fresh from the oven, beckoned from the cooling trays. "Hmm. Cinnamon apple would be my guess."

Mildred smiled—a rarity these days. She licked some batter from her fingers. "That they are. Want one?"

"I'm starved. Been cleaning up the tract rack." Janie peeled the lining from a still-warm cupcake and opened her already salivating mouth.

Ethel cleared her throat. "Those are to be sold to help the children at the mission orphanage."

"OK. Here." Janie set the muffin down and dug into her pocketbook. "Three dollars for the cause for three muffins. I'll grab the butter."

Mildred slipped the next batch in the oven. "I'll put on the kettle, and we'll have a proper tea."

"No need. I bought that one-cup-at-a-time brewer, remember?" Ethel pointed to the silver unit on the counter resembling something from a sci-fi movie.

"Oh yes. I forget the contraption makes tea as well as coffee." Mildred spun the carousel holding the individual plastic cups. "Chai, Earl Grey, or Green?"

"Earl Grey." Ethel placed the pastries on a plate

and put it on the breakfast bar separating her dining room from the kitchen. Jane reached behind the skim milk in the fridge for the low cholesterol margarine substitute. She held the container up. "Is that all you buy? Hardly seems right to disgrace these homemade yummys with fake butter."

"Try to convince my doctor." Ethel sighed as she plopped onto the stool next to Janie.

Mildred came around the other side. "To what do we owe this pleasure? A friendly visit or did your nose lead you here?"

Janie lathered a layer of yellow spread on her muffin and cocked her head. "Mrs. Jacobs practically begged us to help her determine why anyone would leave a helpless newborn in an abandoned house where someone had been brutally murdered."

Mildred put her baked treat down and pouted. "Oh. That again."

Ethel waved her butter knife. "To be more accurate, Edwin only lived there. We established he was chopped up elsewhere, according to Bobby."

"Semantics."

Their friend, and Ethel's temporary housemate, whimpered as she dabbed her quivering lips with her paper napkin. "I wonder where he is now?"

"Edwin? Only God determines that."

"No. Bobby. I am not allowed a peep from him. Rules of witness protection."

Janie squeezed Mildred's hand. "Your nephew agreed to the new identity to protect him from the killers. It's for the best."

"And his only safe bet. He also plea bargained because he already possessed a criminal record. That probably made someone mad." Ethel chomped down

on her treat.

Mildred slouched further into her chair.

"Whatever, Ethel." Janie huffed.

"Ooohhh. I'm a horrible aunt. I failed my dear late sister. I tried to raise him right. Honestly, I did." Mildred rushed out of the room boo-hooing.

"Guess we shouldn't have dredged this up again, Ethel."

Ethel shrugged. "She's still raw. Things will get better when her new condo's ready. She has the crying fits pretty often."

Janie heaved a deep breath. "Does this mean I get her muffin, too?"

Ethel tossed a wadded napkin at her. "Janie. Really."

She caught it and threw it back. "I'm kidding. Sheesh." Chomping on the last of her portion, Janie walked down the hall and tapped on Mildred's bedroom door. A warbled "come in" filtered through the wood in response. She opened it slowly and tiptoed inside. Mildred perched on a side chair, her fingers working a tissue and her eyes red-rimmed.

Janie cocked her hip onto the bed mattress. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be insensitive. It's only that Ethel gets my last nerve sometimes."

Mildred wiped her eyelashes. "I know you two love to banter. That is not what upset me." She blew her nose. "It's Bobby. I do miss him. He's my only living relative."

"There, there." Janie understood. Bobby's parents had died during his teenage years, and he'd become a troubled youth sucked into the wrong crowd. Mildred became his buoy in the storm of delinquency. "May we change the subject? I suspect this baby ended up in

Edwin's vacant property simply because it was that—unoccupied. What's niggling at my brain is why. Did they learn the leasing agent had an appointment to show it yesterday morning?"

"I have no idea, Janie. It's been days since I went over there. You know that. I only went to collect my sweater and extra muffin tins. Oh, and some more foot powder. I didn't think it right to use Ethel's." Mildred dropped her gaze to her lap. "Honestly, I don't want to think about that poor baby or that place next door anymore."

Janie raised her eyebrow and coughed into her fist. Better steer the conversation to a new topic. "Any word on when another condo will come up?"

With a residual snuffle, Mildred let out a long sigh. "Mrs. Jacobs says possibly by the first of June. The Witherfields are moving into their children's guest house in Austin. I'm taking over their two-bedroom model."

"Oh, that is catty-cornered from mine. We'll be neighbors."

"Exactly. I'd hoped to find some peace and quiet. Guess not, huh?" A brief grin upturned the corners of her mouth.

"Oh pooh." Janie stood and enveloped her friend in a hug.

THREE

Ethel eyed Janie weaving with her tray through the dining room crowd. She motioned her over.

Janie plopped her evening meal down. "Where's Mildred?"

"Slurping soup at the condo. Says it's all she's hungry for. I'm worried about her. She's not eating, and she cries at a drop of the hat, as you witnessed."

Janie shook some pepper over her chicken. "Well, she has been through a lot, Ethel. You're a dear friend to let her bunk in with you." She set the shaker down. "I imagine you're correct, though. She will perk up when she moves into her own place away from the crime scene."

Ethel stabbed a few beets with her fork. "Hmm. She will be closer to us. I bet she will like it over where we are. I think the condos are actually better laid out than the garden homes."

"Well, she doesn't need three bedrooms anyway. I mean, who comes to visit?"

"True. Speaking of which? Did you talk to Blake about this baby thing?"

"Left a message. Not sure if he is involved. More of a social worker thing than a police detective crime."

Betsy Ann edged in next to her friends. "Chicken Parmesan. My day just got better." She cut into hers, savoring a bite. Then she blinked at both of them. "Did I interrupt something?"