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AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



A BUNCO BIDDIES MYSTERY

'TIL DICE DO



US PART



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Book 4
Bunco Biddies Mystery

Julie B Cosgrove

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'Til Dice Do Us Part

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Dedication

Dedicated to Joan Bauer Alley, who did so much for each of us authors at Prism. You made us feel special. Thanks for supporting me through six novels and three novellas.

Other Bunco Biddies Mysteries

Dumpster Dicing Someone diced up one of their newest residents—a grouchy loner named Edwin Newman—and placed the pieces in the club house dumpster. Did he unpack too much of his dicey past? Janie and her Bunco playing friends are dead set on helping the police find out, whether they want them to or not.

Baby Bunco After the cleaning service readies Mr. Newman's garden home for lease, the real estate agent discovers a newborn baby. A young woman is found dead behind the convenience store. Could this be the birth of a new crime wave in Alamoville?

Threes, Sixes and Thieves Victor and Lynn Bailey's condo in Sunset Acres, number #366, is robbed. Then, Joan Stephens is burgled in #633. Janie detects a pattern but her son-in-law, Chief Detective Blake Johnson, disagrees. After the burglar is caught in the act at 3636 Sunnyside Ct, he is found hanged in his jail cell. Suicide or murder? The Bunco Biddies gather to find out while Blake is on vacation with his family.

Sunset Acres



1

“Look out!” Janie Manson waved her arms over her head. “The ladder is wobbling.”

Ethel spun toward the direction of her friend’s shrill voice, streamer in one hand, and dispenser of cellophane tape looped over her finger. As her heel swiveled, it caught on the seventh rung.

The next two seconds dragged in slo-mo for Janie as she screamed—half a room away.

Mildred turned as she swooshed a plastic pink cover, etched with doves and bells, over the rectangular gift table. Her hands froze in mid-air.

Babs let loose a tray of white and black disposable salt and pepper shakers, which rolled across the floor like tiny nuns tumbling down a hill.

Annie Schmidt, sporting her new Florida tan, squealed with her palms slapped to her cheeks.

Janie dashed to the ladder, arms extended...a second too late.

Ethel’s leg flipped into the air and, in a half-twist somersault which would’ve scored a 9.5 in an Olympic diving competition, landed shoulder first on the tiled surface. Popped on her back and laid there. Very, very still. Only the silver-gray curls on her forehead moved in the breeze generated from the ceiling fan’s soft whirs.

Everyone halted, as if afraid to breathe.

“Is she...?” Betsy Ann whimpered, fist to mouth, as the idea of wearing black in the morning and white

in the afternoon in four days' time sank in.

The Bunco Biddies had gathered to decorate the recreation hall at the Sunset Acres Retirement Community for her wedding shower.

"I'm not sure." Janie knelt by Ethel and pressed two fingers on the carotid artery in her neck.

About that time Ethel groaned. "Ow. I see stars." She clasped her hand to her shoulder. "Is it out of joint?"

Janie rocked back on her knees. "I don't know. It is kinda angled funny."

Ethel jerked to a half-sitting position, propped with her good arm. "Don't you dare pull on it, Janie Manson." Her face paled as her eyes rolled into her forehead. A long moan escaped from her lips. She melted to the floor like a marshmallow off a stick over a campfire.

Babs's rubber-sole shoes squeaked across the linoleum. "She's sinkin', folks." She cupped the back of Ethel's head nanoseconds before it hit the ground.

"Don't just stand there, people." Janie grabbed her cell phone from her slacks' pocket and pressed 911. "Someone fetch a wet rag for her brow. Elevate her feet. Cover her in one of those linen tablecloths." With the mobile device wedged between her chin and shoulder as she waited for the operator to answer, she clapped rapidly. "Move."

Nine other elderly ladies scurried around the center, bumping into each other in the process. They reminded Janie of newly hatched sea turtles scrambling toward the surf.

"Janie, you sound like my second-grade teacher calling us in from recess." Betsy Ann huffed a sigh and knelt to wipe a stray curl from Ethel's clammy

forehead. "Oh, this is all my fault."

"No, it's not. I decided to climb that stupid ladder." Ethel's whispered voice shook with emotion. "Ohhh. It really, really hurts."

"I understand, dear." Janie patted Ethel's hand, the unhurt one with white knuckles clutching onto her arm. "Help is on the way."

Ethel nodded and closed her eyes.

Annie pressed a wet paper towel to her hurt friend's forehead as Mildred and Babs tucked a cream-colored cloth around her body. Betsy Ann bowed her head. "Oh, my sweet Lord. Take care of Ethel. She's one of my bridesmaids. And one of my very best friends."

The other ladies huddled over the limp figure of their companion and mouthed, "Amen."

Outside, the whine of a siren grew louder, and then shut off with a *whop-whop*.

Roseanne and Josephine dashed to the double glass doors to usher the emergency medical technicians inside.

"The EMTs are here."

A medical crew with bright orange cases rushed in. "Back away, people. Let us through."

After a few minutes of blood pressure taking, pin lights flashing in her pupils, and latching a foamy brace to secure her neck, they slipped a board under Ethel. Next they lifted her onto a gurney.

Janie trotted by her side as the ambulance workers wheeled her outside to the parking lot. "Do you want me to come with you, Ethel?" Janie slid her glance to the emergency medical technician she assumed to be the team leader. "It is allowed, right?"

"Are you next of kin?"

Janie narrowed her eyes and cocked her right eyebrow into a sharp arch. "Close enough, young man."

The EMT took a step back. "Well, um. OK."

Ethel smiled through a shimmer of tears. "Thanks, Janie." She motioned with her hand for Janie to come closer. "See? Nothing like an emergency to draw a crowd of senior citizens. Reminds me of the day you found Edwin in the dumpster."

Janie rose to view at least forty of her retirement community neighbors gathered on the curb, either clasping the front of their shirts or murmuring to the person next to them.

"Yep." Betsy Ann's voice appeared on the other side as the techs lifted the gurney into the back of the ambulance. "Like kids around the ice cream truck."

Ethel gave her a thumbs up sign and a weak grin as she disappeared inside the emergency vehicle.

Betsy Ann tugged Janie's arm. "Call us the moment you learn anything."

Janie winked and squeezed her hand, the one with George's diamond solitaire on it. "I will. Don't worry. Go finish decorating. Ethel's hard-headed enough to be back here on that rickety ladder again within the hour."

"I heard that." Ethel stuck out her tongue.

Betsy Ann laughed.

One of the rescue crew offered his hand as Janie crawled into the back. She waved as they shut the doors. She peered through the dirty windows of the van at the recreation center's parking lot, and her fellow residents, her fingers pinched by Ethel's tight grasp.

With a jerk, the ambulance pulled away.

Janie toppled, but the technician caught her by the waist. "Here sit. It's often a bit bumpy back here."

Janie perched on the narrow metal bench as he took Ethel's vital signs again. Her eyes were wide and wild with pain. Janie blinked back the tears and nodded with the most reassuring smile she could muster. With a sigh, she lifted up a quick prayer as they peeled out of the gated retirement community and down the highway to the hospital.

She hated ambulances. They made her stomach twist backwards. She recalled her grandson, Jamie's, five-year-old comment ten years ago. "Ambulances take people away to die, don't they?"

The one which transported her Jack after he'd been shot ten years ago did. Dead on arrival. But Ethel was not in that bad of a condition. She'd be up and about, and walking down the aisle as an attendant, be it in a sling, in a few days. Nothing to worry about.



"What's taking so long?" Ethel let out a deep sigh, her uninjured arm flopped over her forehead. "The E.R. doc ordered an MRI an hour ago."

Janie gave her a sympathetic shrug. "Hospital time is rarely real time. You never know who you've been bumped for. Maybe a closed head injury after a brawl, or a compound fracture from a car accident."

"Thanks, Susie Sunshine." Ethel scooted up into the hospital bed with a grimace. "Whoa, these pain pills they gave me are making me loopy."

Janie pressed the button on the mechanical

gurney. "Then lie back down."

"Owwww. Not so fast." Ethel growled as she clasped her now-sling-cuddled arm.

Janie threw her hands up into the air. "Nothing I seem to do helps. I'm going to grab a soft drink from the machine. Be back in a minute."

"I want one." A child-like whimper laced Ethel's request.

Janie paused, her hand on the curtain dividing Ethel's space from the others in the emergency room. "You can't have anything to eat or drink until they decide whether or not you need surgery."

"Whatever. I'll just take a snooze." She pouted and closed her eyes. "But I hope they hurry. I wanna go home."

Janie clucked her tongue and left the cordoned-off section. She leaned into the earshot range of the nurse walking by. "My grandson acted more mature when he caught a soccer ball in the gut last spring."

The woman snickered and shook her head. "You go get your drink. We'll keep an eye on her and make sure she behaves."

"Good luck with that." Janie harrumphed, and turned to peer back through the curtains as her eyes welled. Her close friend appeared so lonely and helpless, almost swallowed by the white sheets, like a carrot stick in a slice of Texas-sized toast. "I promise I won't be very long."

"Don't worry." the nurse winked. "Nothing will happen."

Exactly what Janie had told herself an hour ago. She flashed a half-grin and headed down the hallway.

2

Betsy Ann sniffled as she sat on the steps to the stage.

George wrapped his arm across her back. "It's not your fault, my dear. Accidents happen."

"I know." She dabbed a tissue to her eye. "But Ethel wouldn't have fallen if she hadn't been decorating for our shower."

George leaned back. "*Your* shower. You honestly don't expect me to attend, do you?"

She swiveled to face him, her hands jammed to her hips. "I most certainly do. I am not walking down the aisle by myself."

His eyes took on a twinkle. He lifted an auburn hair strand off her face. "Actually, you will. I'll be waiting at the altar gawking like a school boy."

Betsy Ann felt her cheeks flush. "Oh, George." Any miff rising in her craw dissipated as she gazed into his big blue peepers. "Are we nuts to get hitched at our age?"

He raised his arm and flexed his bicep. "Speak for yourself, young lady. I am fit as a fiddle and ready for a rambunctious honeymoon." He leaned closer. "Thanks to these wonder pills the doc gave me."

Betsy Ann shoved him away. "Oh, for mercy's sake." She fanned her neck and walked over to Mildred to help her sort the metallic plastic ware, which almost imitated a setting of sterling silver. But

deep in her stomach a yearning quivered. It did so every time she came into George's presence after the first time they'd kissed. Silliness for a woman her age to act like a hormonal teenager again. Almost sinful. But she admitted to herself, and to God, that she liked it. Not that she'd let anyone else in on the fact.

She swiped the thought away like a June mosquito and glanced at the clock. In ninety-nine hours she'd be Mrs. George McGuffy, full of punch, wedding cake, and too many salty nuts. Then, Katy-bar-the-door. Since they'd agreed to wait until their vows were uttered, she doubted he would need any pills that night. A sly smirk inched over her lips as she sashayed across the floor humming the wedding march.

"You've perked up." Babs stopped her, two more tablecloths laced over her arm.

"Oh, Janie says Ethel will be fine. They relocated her shoulder and ordered an MRI just in case. My bridesmaid might be in a sling, but she only needs one hand to carry a bouquet, right?"

Babs chuckled. "Wild horses wouldn't keep her from your shower this afternoon."

Betsy Ann puffed a long sigh. "Unless they admit her and do surgery." Her chin fell, along with her mood.

"Hush. Don't even mention it." Mildred wagged her finger. "Bad luck."

"I don't believe in luck, Mildred, and you shouldn't either. God's providence prevails." She spun on her heel and strutted towards the kitchen.

Mildred called after her. "Man, these wedding preparations are making you moody. If you were thirty years younger I'd think you were preggers."

Betsy Ann spun back around, her mouth wide

open and her cheeks heating. As George's laughter ricocheted off the ceiling, Betsy Ann tossed a plastic salt shaker at Mildred's head, then a pepper shaker at her fiancé's.

The whole room broke into guffaws, lifting the stress over their friend's injury from her chest.



"You have to tell them." The hushed tone beyond the emergency room curtain held a sense of urgency in it.

Ethel opened her eyes. Had she imagined voices? Her head resembled a bowling ball filled with lead rolling towards the ten pin. A queasy ripple cascaded through her stomach. Oh, these pills they gave her eased the pain in her shoulder, but fuzzed her senses.

"I can't. I'll go to jail for sure if I do."

OK, that sounded real. She gingerly turned on her side and scooted to the edge of the bed to be in better earshot range. Shadows through the mesh and plastic folds moved. Underneath the end seams, which hung about two inches above the floor, she saw two feet with leather tennis shoes. They were several sizes larger than the other pair she could see.

"You most definitely will if they find out and you don't confess." The first voice, distinctly male, hissed its angst. "My brother's a cop. I understand how things go down. If you come clean, they may plea bargain. I'd advise you to march into the police station and..."

"No way. And you better not squeal or I'll say you were the brains behind the whole thing." The second

one's tone had a higher pitch. Younger male or perhaps female? Hard to tell.

"Oh, no you won't. I'm telling my brother right now."

The feet began to scuffle. Ethel's eyes widened. Should she punch the call button?

"Stop it. You'll attract attention. This is the E.R, you know."

The second voice scoffed. "Duh, Sherlock."

Her other curtain's hooks screeched along the runner. A technician entered, all smiles. "Well, Mrs. MacDaniels. Are you ready to go to x-ray now?"

Ethel sighed. Great timing. Now she'd never learn what crime the first person wanted the second one to divulge.

As the tech maneuvered her gurney out of the number seven slot in the emergency ward corridor, she craned her neck to peer once more under the fabric dividing her area from unit eight's. Both pairs of feet had disappeared.

3

The wide-eyed gaze of medicated pain and stress on Ethel's face worried Janie. She didn't want to be gone too long. She wound through the maze of the hospital wings to the vending machines outside the cafeteria, made her selection, and waited until the dispenser clunked the can sideways into the tray. To sip it in front of a friend who was not supposed to have anything to eat or drink would be cruel.

Janie justified her leaving by realizing she truly needed to calm her nerves—which Ethel, in her anxious pain, had stomped on quite a bit. Working as a volunteer in a hospital for years, she understood their scheduling of events often moved in another time warp than that of their patients with nothing else to do but lie and wait. She would strive to be more sympathetic when she returned to her friend's gurney. But what if they took Ethel while Janie got her refreshment? No way to tell.

She sat in one of the bistro chairs and chugged the cold soda in record time. Big mistake. Carbonated bubbles fizzed and danced inside her as she walked back through the automatic doors into the emergency ward. She swallowed what would most likely be a very un-lady-like belch, rounded the nurse' station and halted. Number seven lay empty, curtains flung back, bed gone.

"She's gone to radiology for an MRI." A young

female voice sounded behind her.

Janie swirled.

A nursing assistant clutched the pole of a rolling vital signs machine. Her voice held a slight Hispanic accent. "But you are welcome to wait for her here. She should be back in a while."

Right. "A while" being the understatement. Janie offered the attendant a quick gesture of gratitude and eased into the plastic chair designed to fit no one's body. She drummed her fingers on the metal arms. She watched the second hand go around ten times on the industrial clock at the nurse's station and counted the footsteps of the personnel as they maneuvered to the different, curtained-off units. Antiseptics, burnt coffee, and bleached sheets mingled in the air. Ah, typical hospital aroma.

Janie huffed into her bangs and pulled out her cell phone. She sent a group text. *Finally took Ethel for MRI.* She clicked off the app and punched up a word game to play with her friends. The first puzzle gave her the rare opportunity to use all the letters in her hand. As the medal appeared on the program to congratulate her, she did a small hand pump.

"Did you win?"

Janie raised her gaze from the screen. A young girl, probably nine or ten, looked at her.

The girl rose on tiptoes and cocked her head to peer at the phone. "Seventy-five points. Cool. My best is one forty-five."

"Really?" Skepticism mixed with a twinge of jealousy swirled in Janie's thoughts. But then again, her own grandson mastered the internet by the age of six. He remained her go-to for techie problems, especially since he now took advanced computer

programming classes in high school.

“Uh, huh. I live on Horne Street. Do you live around here? Are you sick like my grandma?”

“Alexei, come away from there.” A woman in her early thirties with disheveled hair and body piercings, wearing a tank top and torn cut-offs, yanked the child’s arm. Three flowery tattoos adorned her shoulder, forearm and wrist. She gave Janie a shrug. “Sorry.”

Janie started to say it wasn’t a big deal, but the woman had already pulled the little girl back behind the curtain in number six. Janie shook her head. Back in her day children under fourteen were not allowed beyond the lobby of hospitals. Besides, women wouldn’t have dared to show up in cut-offs, tank tops and sporting tattoos. Much less with studs and rings in their noses and piercing their lower lips. How times had changed.

A squeak of wheels caught her attention.

Ethel peeked up from the gurney as the technician backed and filled it into its slot. The petite Hispanic nurse, with whom Janie had spoken earlier, tagged along behind pushing the vital signs machine.

Janie rose and stood out of the way until the ruckus calmed.

When Ethel once again remained the only body in her unit, she motioned Janie to come toward her. “Close the curtains.”

Janie tugged on the folds and scooted her chair closer to the bedrail. “What is it?”

“Something weird happened while you were getting your soda.” Ethel raised her head and searched the perimeter of her quarters as if scanning for electronic listening devices. She rolled to her good side