

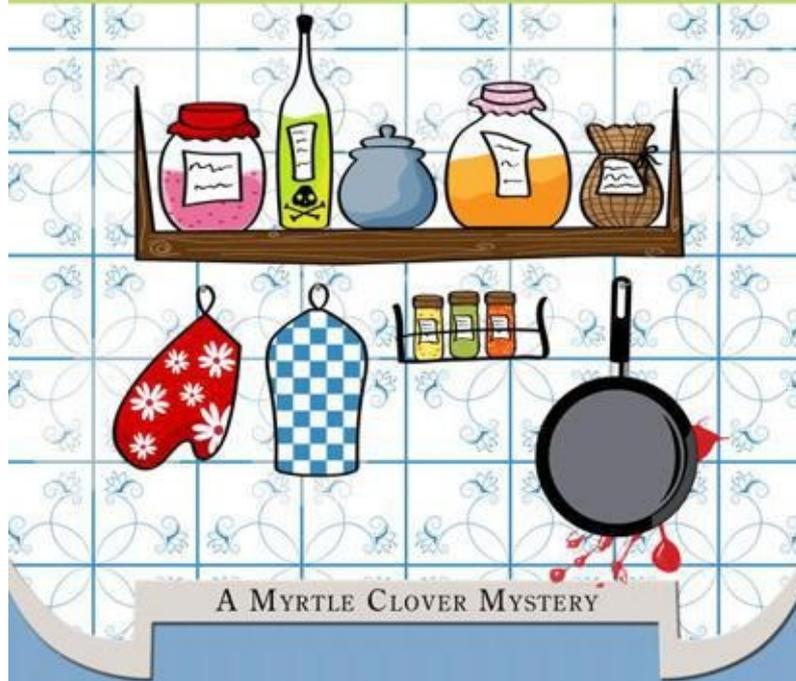
ELIZABETH SPANN CRAIG



A MYRTLE CLOVER MYSTERY

PROGRESSIVE
DINNER
DEADLY

ELIZABETH SPANN CRAIG

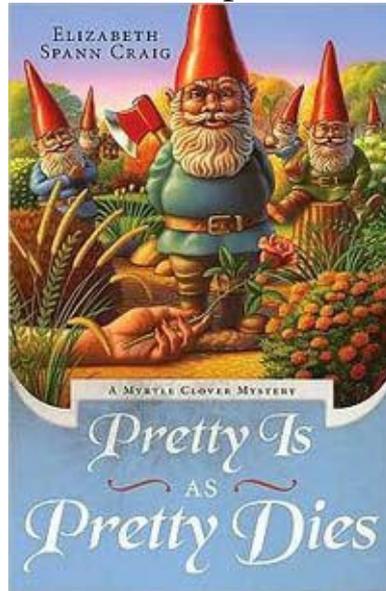


A MYRTLE CLOVER MYSTERY

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Other Myrtle Clover books
by Elizabeth Spann Craig



Pretty Is As Pretty Dies

Publishers Weekly: “The amusing first in a new cozy series from Craig...Myrtle's wacky personality is a delight.”

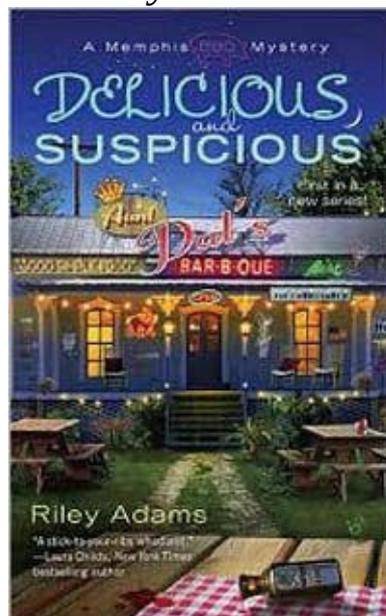
Mystery Scene magazine: “Craig’s skill at evoking a small town and its idiosyncratic inhabitants renders this mystery a pleasure to read. I’m looking forward to the further exploits of Myrtle Clover.”

ForeWord: “The treat here is Myrtle’s eccentricity, brought to life with rich humor and executed for the most part with breezy skill.”

Mystery News: “Wonderful cozy mystery: solidly written, well-plotted and funny.”

Midwest Book Review: “I loved this book. The story is typical of a lot of small towns anywhere in the US, but Elizabeth Spann Craig added a new dimension with Myrtle and her elderly friends.”

Other books by Elizabeth S. Craig

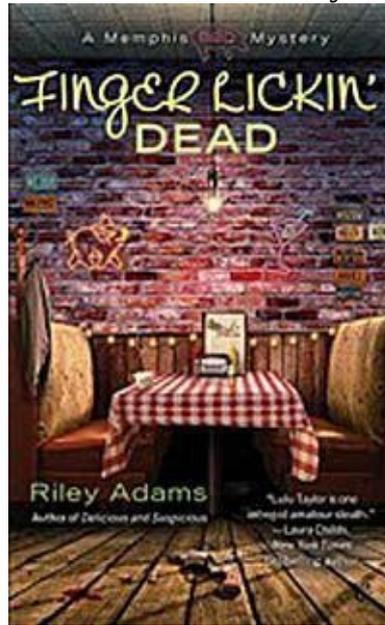


Delicious and Suspicious

(written as Riley Adams)

Publishers Weekly: “A sassy first in a new series from Adams.”

New York Times bestselling author *Laura Childs*: “A stick-to-your-ribs whodunit.”



Finger Lickin' Dead
(written as Riley Adams)

When an anonymous food critic blasts several local restaurants—including Aunt Pat’s—Lulu Taylor and her customers are biting mad, especially when they learn that Eppie Currian is the pen name of their friend Evelyn’s cheating boyfriend. When “Eppie” gets his own fatal review, the list of suspects is longer than the list of specials at the best BBQ place in Memphis.

Krista Davis, national bestselling author of *The Diva Cooks a Goose*: “A saucy Southern mystery!”

ELIZABETH SPANN CRAIG

PROGRESSIVE
DINNER
DEADLY

A MYRTLE CLOVER MYSTERY

Progressive Dinner Deadly

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*For
Riley and Elizabeth Ruth
with much love.*



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“**The first step,**” said Myrtle to her friend Miles, “is to stage a coup.”

Miles took off his wire rimmed glasses and rubbed his eyes. “A coup.”

Myrtle beamed as if at a prize student. “That’s it. The book club—as we know it—must be abolished.”

“You’re saying...now stop me if I’ve got this wrong...that you and I—the *new* members of the decades-old book club—will somehow commandeer it away from its current leadership, force it to restructure, and compel the members to read literature we deem worthy instead of beach books.”

“That,” said Myrtle, thumping *The Complete William Butler Yeats* triumphantly, “is exactly what I’m saying.”

Miles looked at his friend. She was really on a roll this time—she’d run her hand through her poof white hair until it stood up on end like Einstein’s. She stood six feet tall, not at all bent or cowed by her considerable years.

“And you’re proposing that we do this *how*?”

“It’s a simple marketing principle. You’re a former businessman, you must understand it. Marketing, you know. Delivering what the people need.”

“Myrtle, I was an engineer, not a salesman.” Myrtle shrugged. Miles gave a sigh. “And we’re doing this *why*?”

Myrtle rolled her eyes. “You weren’t listening again. We’re doing this because book clubs should celebrate great literature. Literature, sharing a wonderful story, is what brings the world together. *Trixie Does Myrtle Beach* does not accomplish this goal.”

Miles leaned forward in his chair. “Are you saying the book club actually picked a book called—”

“No, no. I’m saying that’s the kind of tripe you might find on its reading list. And once we’ve started down that road...” She took a deep breath.

*“The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”*

Miles glanced over at the *Yeats* collection. “Got it.” He straightened his glasses. “You believe that if we offer the book club serious reading alternatives, they’ll follow us in droves. That we’ll have taken it over. I’m just not sure it’s going to work out that way. It seems a little too easy.”

Myrtle snapped her fingers. “Good point. And I’ve got a terrific idea.”

Miles groaned.

“If things *don’t* go well, I need a plan B. I fully anticipate that everything will go according to plan but if it doesn’t, then I’ll leave to go to the bathroom. And *you’ll* say, “I think Myrtle has a great

idea.”

“And why,” asked Miles, pushing his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose, “would they care what I think?”

“Half those ninnies have set their cap for you, Miles. You’re the new widower on the block, you know. Anything you say will be taken as gospel.”

Miles looked doubtful at the appeal his steel-gray hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and seventy years he for the Bradley widows.

“Think of it Miles—you can still drive! You’re a hot commodity for aging widows, I promise you. Here’s our plan. I’ll listen in from the hall and when they’ve decided it’s a good idea, I’ll come back in and get it all organized!” Myrtle was practically rubbing her hands together in glee.

“Don’t count your chickens until they hatch,” said Miles. “You never know how things could turn out.”

“Nonsense. I predict we’ll make a smooth transition to being a club with honest literary discussions.”

“You know,” said Miles, “no one else seems unhappy with the book club. You—a retired English teacher—are the only one needing honest literary discussions.”

Myrtle shook her head impatiently. “Because they don’t know what they’re missing.”

“Have you told Red that you’re planning a literary coup?”

Myrtle just glowered at him.

“You haven’t because you know he’ll think you’re just stirring up trouble again. Remember Red’s motto? ‘Leave well enough alone.’”

“That’s only because my son is the police chief and wants me to live in stagnant misery so I can’t cause him any trouble. I want to wake up the town of Bradley! Take their blinders off and show them the possibilities! And Red is fixed on keeping me out of his hair. Did you know that he signed me up for some volunteer work this weekend? The cheek.”

“I’m assuming that’s why the army of gnomes resides in your front yard?”

Myrtle put her extensive collection of ceramic gnomes on display for Red’s viewing displeasure whenever he tried manipulating her. Lately, the gnomes had been on Myrtle’s front lawn more often than not.

“That’s exactly why the gnomes are out there. So he’s already well aware that I’m displeased with him. I don’t think he’ll have a problem in the world with some reorganizing on my part.”

“I don’t know, Myrtle. I can’t seem to shake this sinking feeling that our reorganization of book club might have unexpected consequences.”

Myrtle squinted at her rooster wall clock. Where was that blasted Puddin? She was supposed to have been dusting Myrtle’s knickknacks hours ago. A phone call was in order. Myrtle steeled herself. Puddin never answered her calls—it was always her ancient husband, Dusty, Myrtle’s yard man. Always assuming Myrtle was calling for him, he answered her greeting with some variation of, “It’s too hot to mow!” Puddin wasn’t exactly enchanting to talk to, but it beat Dusty howling at her like an old basset hound.

Myrtle dialed their number. The phone rang five or six times then, “Hullo?” asked a gruff voice.

Myrtle sighed. “Dusty? It’s Mrs. Clover.”

There was a great yowl on the other end. “Too wet to mow, Miz Clover!”

“For heaven’s sake! It hasn’t rained for days, Dusty. And that little teaspoon of water that trickled down evaporated before it even hit the clay.”

“My blades’ll get clogged. It’ll empty smelly grass clods all over your yard, Miz Clover. And I saw them gnomes in your yard when I drove by. Them things is the dickens to cut around...”

“Never mind. I wasn’t calling for you, anyway. Your nonsense knocked me off track. May I speak to Puddin? She’s supposed to be cleaning my house now.”

Dusty hollered for Puddin and after a few minutes during which Myrtle wondered if she’d been hung up on, Puddin sullenly answered. Myrtle could imagine the dour expression on her face.

Before Myrtle could summon up a pleasant-enough voice to find out why Puddin was hanging out with Dusty instead of doing a mediocre job cleaning up Myrtle’s house, Puddin muttered, “Back’s thrown out, Miz Clover.”

Myrtle bit her tongue. She did not need to have her “help” quit on her before she’d lined someone else up. But how convenient. Puddin’s back always threw itself out whenever Puddin didn’t want to polish silver, scrub dishes, or work at all.

“I haven’t got time for your foolishness, Puddin. Book club is coming over tomorrow. Are you *sure* you just can’t take an ibuprofen?”

Puddin considered this. “Hmm. No. It’s thrown, all right.”

Apparently the conversation was over because Puddin said, “Have a good club,” and clunk! Myrtle heard a dial tone.

Myrtle pushed the receiver onto its base with unusual force. There was nothing to do but call in reinforcements. As irritating as Puddin’s defection was, it was probably for the best.

Puddin was just not going to do for this Very Special book club meeting. Puddin, in her current state of unhelpfulness, was entirely inappropriate for a book club cleaning.

Extreme times called for extreme measures. Myrtle needed a cleaning A-team. She picked up the phone. Blanche Clark should have a good housekeeping recommendation. Considering Blanche lived in a sprawling chateau, she must have at least one person helping her clean, if not a small army.

As she made her call, she noticed a scrawny-looking black cat peering at her through the window. She’d seen the cat before—it was clearly a stray. It ran off, but she swore it had an approving look on its face as she dialed Blanche’s phone number.

Jill, reflected Myrtle an hour later, was a top-notch cleaning sensation.

It was lucky, thought Myrtle as she watched Jill Caulfield’s energetic cleaning, that she’d been able to get a substitute in such short order. The idea of pushing around dust and mopping her own floor had lost its appeal. But Jill was delighted at the opportunity and was certainly doing a great job. A member of Myrtle’s book club, she seemed to have fallen on hard times. What was even nicer is that she lived right on Myrtle’s street, just around the bend.

“Cleaning isn’t so bad,” said Jill as she expertly glossed Myrtle’s end table with lemon oil until it shone. “I’m good at it. It’s a steady job. It’s good exercise.”

“And,” she continued as she buffed, “it’s money in the bank.” She briefly stopped her buffing and looked directly at Myrtle. “You know what I mean? Sometimes you just do what you have to do to survive in this world.”

“Teaching preschool doesn’t cover your bills, I’m guessing,” said Myrtle, clucking.

“Not a bit. It helps, of course. But it’s just not going to be enough for me and Cullen. And Cullen, with his disability and everything...” Here she paused and searched Myrtle’s face for any signs of disbelief. “Well, he just can’t work. And that does make things tough. But I’ll never leave him, Miss Myrtle. Not ever.”

“I will never desert Mr. Micawber!” thought Myrtle, although Cullen Caulfield was no Mr. Micawber. His disability, well-known by all of Bradley, was his insatiable desire for alcohol.

Jill was now finished with the tables and, very sensibly adopting a top to bottom approach to cleaning, was cleaning the floors.

Myrtle said, “I’m just delighted you could help me out on such short notice. I’m too old to push

around my own dust. I got your number from Blanche Clark. She'd been bragging on you during the last book club meeting, you know—how great you cleaned.”

Jill suddenly became very focused on scrubbing a stubborn spot on the floor. “Is that right?”

“So,” said Myrtle in a purring voice, “I was surprised to hear you weren't working for Blanche anymore. She gave me your number,” (somewhat ungraciously), “but said y'all had gone your separate ways.” Actually, Blanche had gotten so mad just talking about Jill that her voice trembled on the phone and she'd spat out Jill's name like she was trying to rid her mouth of something nasty. It was interesting enough to want to investigate.

“Business relationships don't *always* work out,” said Jill in a careless voice. “But I'm sure ours will. Need me to come by next week?”

Myrtle opened her mouth to say that Puddin would be there next week. But then *something*...could it be the fresh clean pine scent? The gleaming tables? The attentive housekeeper in front of her?... changed her mind. “I do believe I *will* have you over next week.”

That darned Puddin never cleaned like this. She didn't have a *passion* for cleaning. Myrtle quieted the voice in her head that reminded her that Puddin and Dusty were a package deal—and *what* was she going to do without a yardman? Even a very *bad* yardman?

“If you're okay here, Jill, I'm going to pop across the street to Elaine and Red's house for a little visit.”

“I'll be fine. I saw Elaine the other day, but haven't seen Red for a while. How's he doing?”

“Oh. He's keeping the peace,” said Myrtle with a shrug. The annoying thing was Myrtle's police chief son's insistence on keeping *her* peaceful. He interfered. “I'm really going over to get some cuddle time in with my grandson, Jack. He's got the cutest chubby legs...” and she pulled out a hand album to prove it.

To her credit, Jill appeared thrilled to coo over grandbaby pictures. In fact, Jill was quite disgustingly perfect in every way. Puddin's sole redeeming quality was her quirkiness. Everything about Puddin was unknown: would she be in a chatty mood and yak at the kitchen table with you instead of cleaning? Would she have a nicotine fit and spend the entire morning smoking furiously outside? Would she show up for work at all?

Jill's perfection was enough to make Myrtle pine for the wicked Puddin. Almost.

Myrtle grabbed her cane from next to the front door and tapped her way down the front walk. There were a few birds perching on the gnomes that scattered, chirping, as she approached. She paused for a moment to survey her handiwork. Lots of little gnome backs were facing her since, of course, they were all arranged to maximize Red's viewing pleasure...and passing motorists'. She chuckled, but the laugh turned into a gasp when a dreaded voice behind her asked nasally, “Fighting with Red again, I see?”

It was Erma Sherman...her evil next door neighbor. Ordinarily, Myrtle carefully checked to make sure the coast was clear before venturing out her front door. Having her house restored to such an immaculate state had clearly made her giddy. As she saw Erma looming over her, arms outstretched for a determined hug, Myrtle reflected how fast one's mood could plummet.

“Just trying to make a subtle point,” said Myrtle. Not that Erma would know the definition of the word *subtle*. “Red mistakenly thought it would be a good idea to volunteer me for the Kiwanis club pancake breakfast.” Red frequently displayed this shockingly poor judgment. It was an appalling characteristic for a police chief to have.

“How will Dusty cut the grass around the gnomes?” asked Erma, looking pointedly at the spires of grass brushing the gnomes' bellies. “With a weed whacker?”

As if Dusty would own sophisticated yard equipment like weed whackers. “No, I guess he'll just c

what he can reach.”

“How long are you planning to feud with Red?” asked Erma, frowning at Myrtle’s grass and at a particularly animated gnome who seemed to be gleefully imbibing a beverage.

“How long are you planning to allow your crabgrass to infest my yard?”

Erma gaped at Myrtle, then erupted with haw-haws of laughter. “Don’t you have that backwards, Myrtle? There’s a whole crop of crabgrass right there that looks like you’ve actually been fertilizing it.”

There was, actually, quite a bare spot there that Erma’s weeds had made inroads with. She’d shoot that Dusty! She’d *asked* him to aerate and seed.

Myrtle turned toward the street when she heard a gentle toot-toot of a car horn. It was her daughter-in-law Elaine, waving out her minivan window and looking sympathetically at her. There went her whole reason for being outside to begin with. “I’ve got to go in,” she gritted out between her teeth.

“But you were coming out for a reason, Myrtle. Can’t you remember what it is? Let’s see, you were heading out here, without your bag. You weren’t planning on going very far, were you? Let’s retrace your steps.” Erma also displayed sympathy, but it was a more salacious version that would likely be spread all over town: “Did you hear? Myrtle Clover has gone completely gaga! Couldn’t even remember why she’d left the house yesterday!” “Oh, what a shame!”

Myrtle spun around and thumped back up the walkway. “Have a good one, Myrtle. See you at book club tomorrow!” called Erma behind her.

Not if I see you first, thought Myrtle. She slipped quickly into her front door and leaned against it. Next time she’d be more careful when she ventured outside. She listened for the sound of Jill in the kitchen, but didn’t hear anything. No sounds of cleaning at all. Curious, she walked through the kitchen to the back of the house.

When she peered through her bedroom door, she saw the light on in the bathroom. She hadn’t meant Jill to waste any time cleaning in there since it was still pretty clean from the week before. She walked back to the bathroom.

There she saw Jill, face obscured by the medicine cabinet door. There were several bottles of pills on the sink and a couple of other bottles in her hand. Myrtle tiptoed back to the front of the house. Why was Jill rooting around in her medicines? Was she a prescription drug addict? No, Jill was too clear-headed, too detail-oriented with her cleaning. She seemed a lot less befuddled than Puddin did. Maybe she sold prescription drugs on the black market? There had been an article in the newspaper recently about drugs being sold on the internet at rock bottom prices. Could it be yet another way for Jill to make extra money?

Myrtle slipped out the front door and then noisily re-entered. By the time she’d thumped back into the kitchen, Jill was busily cleaning in there. “Elaine wasn’t home, so I’ll have to catch up with her later. Instead, I ran into Erma Sherman,” Myrtle couldn’t repress a shudder. “Otherwise known as the neighbor from hell.”

Jill laughed. “Is she that bad? I’ve always kind of liked her when I’ve seen her at book club, but I don’t have to live next to her. But I noticed she didn’t take care of her yard. I’m such a stickler about the yard, it would drive me nuts to have crabgrass creeping over the border.”

“You must be a good neighbor to have, then,” said Myrtle in a wistful voice. Aside from the possibility she’d sneak in your house and searching through your stuff, of course.

“Oh, I have a lot of fun with the house. The yard is one of my hobbies, I guess.”

When the heck did Jill Caulfield find time for a hobby? Between two jobs, volunteering at church, and trying to keep her husband out of trouble, she must be pretty busy.

“When I think about your yard, Jill, I think about all those Christmas lights you string up every year.” Myrtle was careful to smile. No need to have Jill realize that her Christmas extravaganza didn’t

put Myrtle in the holiday spirit. In fact, Jill's decorations made Myrtle quite Grinchy. How many times had she nearly been mowed down by a creeping car whose occupants were gorging their eyes on neon Santas and twelve foot nutcrackers with ominous grins? On top of that was the music—*Holly, Jolly Christmas* and some other annoying tunes on a loop blasting from speakers from November fifteenth through January fifth.

Jill smiled. "So many people have told me the same thing, Miss Myrtle. They look forward all year to our light and music show. It's just not Christmas for them until they drive past our house, they say."

"Do the lights and music go on all night?" Myrtle was scandalized. This was definitely cause to revise her thoughts on Jill's suitability as a next-door neighbor. "I can't see your house from here since it's right around the bend in the road."

"Only from five to midnight. Everyone is simply crazy over it. They've told me our display is such a blessing. Jill, they say, when the *Twelve Days of Christmas* starts playing, we get tears in our eyes."

Especially Sherry Angevine next door, guessed Myrtle. "So you string all these lights and speakers and things up yourself? Doesn't Cullen help you?" That dog.

Jill suddenly glowed with an almost spiritual, evangelistic radiance. "Not with his disability. He couldn't, could he? No, I'm *honored* to put them up for him. Really. Then he has a Merry Christmas and doesn't have to worry about the decorating."

She clearly loved this Jill-the-Martyr act. Myrtle said, "Would you like some sweet tea, Jill? I think I need something sugary to bolster me after my encounter with my next door monster."

"No thanks, Miss Myrtle. I'm getting ready to finish up. I'll see myself out, okay? And then I'll be back tomorrow for the club meeting. Did you read the book?" Myrtle looked at Jill blankly. "*Jennifer's Promise*? Remember?"

Myrtle's skin prickled with irritation at the thought of subjecting herself to *Jennifer's Promise*. "No. No, I didn't get around to it, Jill."

"Well, don't worry about it, dear. These books get so complicated. I only read the first few pages, myself. I wish they'd choose a really quick read—you know?"

Clearly Jill was not going to be on the side of great literature during the book club coup. Myrtle took her tea into the living room to think a little more about Jill. She wouldn't just have been in her medicine cabinet for an aspirin. No, she was after something. Not that she'd found it there. The cabinet was crammed with ancient amoxicillin bottles, dated over-the-counters, some blood pressure meds, and an old bottle of witch hazel.

Was Jill's snooping the reason Blanche Clark fired her? Did Jill discover something about Blanche that made it impossible for her to keep her on?

When book club morning dawned, Myrtle climbed out of bed with high hopes. Minutes later, she was already devising what novels might be a good introduction into the world of books. Because, Myrtle thought, the stuff that the book club had been focusing on definitely couldn't qualify as books.

Milton *might* be a little ambitious for the group, she admitted as she boiled grits and threw in a liberal amount of butter into the spitting, spattering mixture. Dickens would be an easy adjustment. Everyone was familiar with his books anyway and it would be a popular place to start. Yes, maybe *David Copperfield* instead of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's masterpiece was too richly worded—book club might get ill on the richness of the imagery after starving themselves on beach rot for years.

Hours later at the meeting, though, Myrtle had given up hope of proposing Dickens as a book club selection. The coup was not going well. Everything had actually started out just fine with the ladies trickling into Myrtle's living room like little lambs and lining up sweetly for their muffins, cookies, and iced tea. Both Blanche Clark and Jill Caulfield were there and successfully keeping apart from each other. The entire book club membership was actually very well represented, considering it was

late summer and prime traveling time. There were about fifteen ladies in Myrtle's living room and kitchen.

Miles stood next to Myrtle's fireplace, looking uneasy. He clutched a copy of *Absalom! Absalom!* and fingered the knick-knacks on the mantle. Myrtle had cleverly designed new end tables by several of the chairs by stacking large books from her personal library on top of each other. Each book was a masterpiece, of course. "What a fun idea, Myrtle!" chirped one of the ladies. Myrtle beamed. If the members were *surrounded* with excellent literature, Myrtle knew they wouldn't be able to resist.

Finally Tippy Chambers, the well-heeled club president, called the meeting to order. After the minutes to the last meeting were read (Tippy being a stickler for Parliamentary Procedure, even for a book club), She asked if there were any new business. Myrtle straightened in her chair, then rose carefully to her feet. She noticed that, like a seesaw, when she stood up, Miles sank down into a chair. He looked pasty white and a bit of perspiration trickled down the side of his head. How *had* he survived the dog eat dog world of business?

Myrtle cleared her throat and used her best retired-teacher voice. Even after all these years of retirement, it still had a weighty pitch that carried to the corners of the room. The right kind of voice to make an important announcement.

"I've been thinking," she intoned, "about ways to improve our book club. What has brought us together is our mutual love for literature." There were nods of agreement and Myrtle soldiered on, taking a deep breath.

"But I don't think that the books we're been focusing on," here she lifted up a copy of *Jennifer's Promise* in illustration, "are worthy recipients of our leisure time. I think," Myrtle said sternly, "that our time could be better spent."

There was a small pause. Then Erma Sherman piped up, bobbing her head emphatically. "You know, I was thinking the same thing, Myrtle." Myrtle doubted it. "The books we're picking only take a little bit of the meeting to review."

There was a chorus of agreement.

Myrtle said quickly, "So what I was thinking..." she bent to reach for a handy volume of Charles Dickens.

Erma jumped in again from the floor. Why did Tippy's Parliamentary order nonsense never occur when it needed to? "So why don't we change the club?" she demanded loudly. She was warming up to the subject and seemed to be on a roll. "Instead of reading books, we could turn it into a...supper club!"

There were oohs of agreement and stomach rumblings among the ladies. Even Tippy was caught up in the fervor. "We could," she suggested, "make it a progressive dinner supper club. You know—one house for the drinks and appetizers, another for soups and salads, a third for the main course, and dessert at the end."

Now the room was buzzing. "That way it wouldn't be too much for just one person!" said Jill Caulfield.

"Our husbands could even participate in it," said Blanche.

Erma proudly surveyed the room, which had become electrified with her idea. Myrtle stood there, open-mouthed, clutching Dickens. Miles looked torn between amusement and horror. What would he do? thought Myrtle viciously. He was a foodie just as much as a reader. It would work out well for him no matter what.

It was time to abort this plan and head into Emergency Plan B. Myrtle rose abruptly and walked toward the hall. She looked behind her. Her entire library was animated with discussion and Miles just soaked it all in.

Myrtle cleared her throat. But Miles was absorbed in watching Erma. He had a revolted expression

on his face as she blathered on, off-topic as usual, about her cousin who shot deer and stored the carcasses, whole, in a huge freezer in his garage. Myrtle again cleared her throat and walked, exaggeratedly, toward the bathroom. No response from Miles.

“I *think*,” said Myrtle in her former-schoolteacher voice, which had the power to silence the room, “I will go to the bathroom!” She glared at Miles, who looked flustered.

Tippy looked concerned. “Are you sick, Myrtle?”

“No. I just think I’ll go to the bathroom.”

“Well,” said Tippy in a puzzled tone, “of course. Anyone is free to visit the restroom at any time.”

The room remained quiet until Myrtle was out of sight. Then Erma said, “No wonder she’s feeling sick! She’s the worst cook in the history of the world. She probably ate some of her own chicken salad sandwiches.” Erma pointed to indicate the full and untouched platter of sandwiches.

“Good point,” said Tippy in a low voice. “Does anyone know if Myrtle made the chicken salad or bought it?”

Myrtle listened, fuming, in the hall. “Although her chicken salad is *excellent*, I know for a fact that she ran low on time and purchased this batch,” Miles said. His voice sounded pained.

Myrtle peeped around the side of the door. The women looked at Miles curiously as there was suddenly a run on the chicken salad sandwiches.

“And while we’re talking about Myrtle,” said Miles, in was apparently a desperate attempt to wrestle the wayward conversation back on track, “I think she had an excellent idea.”

“I do too,” said Tippy warmly. “It was so clever of her to think up a supper club. She was absolutely right that book club was getting stale.”

Myrtle gritted her teeth.

“I meant her suggestion that the book club start reading some different kinds of books.” Miles tugged at his collar.

“Was that her idea?” Tippy sounded dubious. “Well, her supper club idea is much sounder.”

“Now if we can only convince her not to cook!” said Erma. She gave a sneering laugh.

Jill Caulfield said, “I’ve got a great recipe for pulled pork for the slow cooker. How about if I cook the main course for our first supper club?”

The room was soon buzzing again with ideas for how the supper club would run, who would provide what, and who would host the various courses. Sullenly, Myrtle came back in and sat down with the others. She drummed her fingers on her copy of *The Sound and the Fury* as Tippy efficiently organized the details of the supper club. Miles offered to host the hors d’oeuvres and drinks, there was a clamoring over different recipes and whether they should have a theme for each event.

Myrtle replayed the last few minutes in her head. Everything had gone wrong when Erma had piped up. She instinctively seemed to know what to do to mess up Myrtle’s plans.

Myrtle straightened up in her chair. She wouldn’t let it happen. She was going to regain control of this meeting. “Actually,” she said in a booming voice. “I had another idea completely. We could certainly have a *parallel* club that meets for suppers. But giving up on book club just because the selection has been weak...”

Amazingly, Erma stepped in again. “Weak is right,” she agreed. “I never did get what the writer was trying to say with that Bo and the Boy Scout with that book we did that one time.”

Myrtle said through gritted teeth, “You mean *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

“Which you’d *think* would be about endangered birds! When I read, I want to be able to understand the point! But there aren’t enough books like *Jennifer’s Promise*, so we end up reading about Boy Scouts. But food...we all understand food.”

Myrtle stared at Erma’s protruding tummy and figured that some people understood it better than others. She opened her mouth again to explain that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was real literature and that

there were many others where that came from—but then snapped her mouth shut again. Because where would she start with that argument? How could you argue with someone as dense as Erma Sherman? “Mockingbirds are *not* endangered,” was all she could muster.

Tippy Chambers pushed a strand of blonde hair off her forehead. “I think the point really is,” she said, “that we’ve been doing book club for a long time and we’re ready for a change. A supper club would be fun, and we can even get our husbands involved.” Myrtle opened her mouth to argue and Tippy injected quickly, “Would you be interested in having the desserts at your house, Myrtle? I remember your blackberry cobbler was the best I’d ever had.”

Myrtle puffed up a little in her chair. Miles smiled. Diplomacy was the reason why Tippy was the perfect president of anything. Miles clearly recalled Myrtle’s blackberry cobbler as a soggy, undercooked disaster. But Myrtle was already planning her dessert menu, happily putting the unkind comments about her cooking out of her head.

“Y’all, I’ve got to run,” said Jill Caulfield, picking up her pocketbook. “I’ve got a house to clean. So I’ll host the main course, and we said two weeks from today? I’ll have it all set up.”

When Jill walked out, Tippy said quickly, “I’m a little concerned about Jill having to provide all the food for the main course. I think that’s...well, it’s a lot to ask.”

“Why *did* she offer to provide the main course?” Miles quietly asked Myrtle. “Didn’t you say that Jill just cleaned your house? Providing a barbeque dinner for a house full of people is kind of a pricy proposition, isn’t it?”

Myrtle murmured, “I strongly suspect that Jill likes everyone to feel sorry for her. She piles that misery on herself. You know, the whole ‘Poor Jill’ thing. But she sure does know how to clean a house. I’m going to ditch that Puddin of mine.”

“There will probably be thirty people there, if we include spouses,” Tippy was saying. “Are there three or four people who can volunteer to bring some sides in?”

A few hands went up. At the same time, the front door opened and Jill’s sister Willow came in. The hands drooped, then fell under the censorious eye of Tippy. No one wanted to mention Jill’s financial situation. Especially around Willow, who was sure to blame her brother in law for any money problems her sister might face.

Willow’s long, prematurely-gray hair swung around her shoulders. With her hair down, her black tunic over a long, ruffled black skirt, and the amulet around her neck, Willow looked like she’d escaped from a coven.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said in her low, sing-song voice. “Was that Jill I saw pulling out?”

Erma nodded, eyes dancing as she anticipated trouble. “Yes it was. She was off to clean somebody’s house.”

Willow’s face darkened.

Tippy jumped in with a quelling look at Erma. “We’re all hearing wonderful things about Jill’s housekeeping. It seems that she has a wonderful talent for hearth and home.”

Myrtle glanced quickly over at Blanche, who grimaced before her face resumed its usual placid mask.

Willow shook her head and fingered her amulet. “All this work isn’t good for her. She’s got two really draining jobs. She should be reconnecting with her spirit instead of scrubbing people’s bathrooms.”

Erma nodded sympathetically, avoiding Tippy’s quelling glare. “Which she could do if Cullen could go back to work. Such a shame about his *disability* and all,” said Erma, who sounded hopeful for some disability details, which Willow seemed unwilling to elaborate on. “But don’t worry. Even though Myrtle changed the book club into a supper club, and Jill took the main course, we’re all going to chip in with the sides so Jill can afford to host it.”

Tippy jumped in again in her continuing effort to keep control of the meeting. “Willow. I’d better fill you in. ~~Myrtle suggested we change the book club to a supper club.~~” Myrtle clenched her teeth. “We’re starting it two weeks from today. Miles will have the hors d’oeuvres and drinks, Jill’s covering the main course, and Myrtle is hosting the dessert.”

Willow thought a moment. “What if I host a soup or salad course? It’ll keep the progressive dinner moving.”

“Great idea,” said Tippy. “That cements our plan for the first progressive dinner. The best part is that y’all all live on the same street; we can easily walk from the appetizers to the salads, to the main course, to the dessert. And maybe even enjoy a little wine along the way!” Tippy gave her tinkling laugh. “And thanks again to Myrtle for her brainstorm. To Myrtle!” she said, raising a glass of sweet tea.

“To Myrtle!” everyone chimed in, holding their tea aloft.

Myrtle was ready to trade in her sweet tea for something a bit stronger.



Jill's cat, Miss Chivis, was busily pooping in next door neighbor Sherry Angevine's yard. Sherry glared out the window as Miss Chivis scratched up a big pile of pine needles to semi-cover her transgression. Sherry wondered how many times Jill's cat or dog had pooped in her yard while she'd been at book club. It was yet another reason to hate Jill Caulfield.

There were actually many, many reasons to hate Jill. The leaf blower that blared *every* Saturday morning and many Sundays. The oh-so-perfect flower beds with just the right color combinations of impatiens or pansies. The five million Christmas lights that went up two weeks before Thanksgiving and came down two weeks after Christmas and lit up the neighborhood like a carnival.

But Sherry had found a way to funnel her anger against Jill and get revenge on her at exactly the same time. She had a secret.

Willow let herself into her house and sat down on a corner of a sofa draped with six different cats, all in various stages of napping. There were eight more felines in other parts of the house and a couple of feral cat families that used her backyard as a home base. All five of the dogs came barreling up to greet her and she absently scratched them behind the ears.

Willow had consulted the stars and read her tea leaves, but hadn't yet found any answers to her problem. How could she get her sister to leave Cullen Caulfield? Jill was wasting her life with Cullen. Willow thought about Jill's volunteer work and how much *more* she could do if she didn't have Cullen drinking through all the money she scabbled together. He treated his body like a sewer and just poured in that poison all day long.

Willow knew how he treated Jill, too. He yelled at her and belittled her and acted like her sole purpose in life was to wait on him hand and foot. And now Jill had invited over half the town of Bradley, North Carolina, to show off their dysfunctional household?

Cullen would probably drink for hours leading up to the party. And he wasn't one to stay hidden in the back of the house, either. No, he'd be right in with everyone else—laughing too loud, falling over things, knocking glasses over and yelling at his wife. Unless Willow found a way to stop him.

Blanche arrived home, totally drained from book club. This supper club was going to be a disaster. Now, instead of spending an hour and a half with Jill Caulfield, she was going to have to spend... what? Three or four hours with her? It was intolerable, she thought, as she slipped on designer label sweats and started walking on her treadmill.

But what excuse could Blanche possibly give for getting out of it? Maybe it would have been better if she'd volunteered to host it herself. There was a lot more room in her own house to avoid Jill than Jill's cramped bungalow with her alcoholic husband. And how was she going to survive another gathering where Saint Jill's praises were lauded? Book club had been bad enough with Tippy spoutin

off about Jill's cleaning prowess.

~~There was really no way to avoid this supper club. It was Bradley, after all: a small town. Escaping Jill Caulfield wasn't a long-term option. Unless something changed, Jill would remain an annoying thorn in her side. Blanche could only hope something would happen to Jill. If only she would disappear...~~

Georgia was glad Jill was hosting supper club. She'd never be invited to Jill's house any other way. This could give her an opportunity to stab Jill in the back a few times. She imagined herself now: *Well, it is good barbeque. But I'd rather be a good person instead of a good cook.* Maybe she could put a sticky note in Jill's bathroom, saying what a pill Jill was. People were always saying, "Poor Jill. Taking care of that no-good husband and working two jobs!" But Georgia knew the truth about Jill. And she was ready to share it with everybody she knew.

Simon Caulfield said, "Excuse me? Jill is hosting a supper club at her house? For *how* many people?"

His wife, Libba, shrugged. "I'm guessing thirty or forty? There are usually about fifteen of us who make it to book club and then you count the spouses in there...well, it'll be a big group."

"And she volunteered to host the main course? That's nuts! She cleans houses, for Pete's sake. She cleans *our* house sometimes."

Libba shook her head in frustration. "I'd rather she *didn't* though. Sometimes I get a funny feeling about her. And we really can't afford the help."

Simon said, "You need the help with the housework, Libba. Especially if the cancer is coming out of remission. While we can still afford the help, we need to get it for you."

Libba was no fan of Jill's, but felt the need to point out, "Jill is only cleaning houses because your brother can't hold down a job. The dinner won't be as big of a splurge as it sounds—several of the members are bringing sides. But I don't want to go. Cullen is so embarrassing. He'll probably be staggering around drunk the whole time. Can we stay at home?"

"No. I think we need to go and make sure Cullen doesn't make a fool of himself and embarrass us even *more*."

Libba picked off the last bit of pink nail polish that she'd only just painted on that morning.



“I don’t want to go tonight,” said Myrtle, feeling stubborn.

“Oh come on, Myrtle. It won’t be that bad,” said Miles. “Every one of these folks is a great cook. You know all the people going. It’ll be something fun and different. Besides—you’re hosting the dessert. You’ve got to go.”

“It’ll be tedious and tiring. And I don’t care about food as much as you do. I could just sit at home and wait for the club to get to my house. I’ll sip sherry and read thoughtful books and grieve over my failed plan to transform that pitiful book club into something great.”

“You’re not even a little curious how Jill and Blanche are going to interact with each other at a party? I thought you’d wanted to get to the bottom of their feud.”

Myrtle perked up. “It’s a one-sided feud, that’s the thing. Usually you’ve got two people upset with each other. But Jill seems just as pleased as punch when I bring up Blanche’s name.” She fiddled with the phone cord. “Okay, I’ll be there. But don’t be surprised if I leave early and go back home to wait for the dessert course.”

Myrtle hung up and sighed. She still hadn’t figured out exactly what she was going to do about these desserts she was supposed to cook for the progressive dinner. Myrtle wanted some fresh ideas and those old cookbooks of hers seemed really stale. She checked her watch. Shoot. The *Bradley Bugle*’s editor, Sloan, had scheduled a meeting with her and she was running behind.

Myrtle’s son Red had, over a year ago, gotten her hired to write a helpful hints column for the newspaper. He’d seemed to find it an appropriate activity for a retired English teacher with rather too much time on her hands. She’d been furious with Red at the time for meddling in her business. But she’d gotten so she liked writing the column, even if the tips that came in were fairly flaky. There were lots of superstitious people and old wives in Bradley, if their tips were anything to judge by.

Myrtle pushed open the old wooden door to the newsroom. The whole room smelled like ink, paper, and musty books. It was dimly lit and every corner was crammed with stacks of papers and photographs. It was, thought Myrtle with satisfaction, a wonderful place.

Sloan, a hefty man with an ever-expanding forehead and a busy demeanor, lifted his head as the door opened. “Miss Myrtle,” he said, standing quickly.

Myrtle wondered if Sloan would ever lose that deferential manner toward her. She’d taught him in middle school and he obviously clearly remembered the tongue-lashings she’d given him and Red both as they’d rolled spitballs, passed notes, and thrown balls of paper around the classroom. Sloan and Red were both in their forties and those days were long gone, but the memory, apparently, lived on. Plus the fact that Myrtle, even in her eighties, could straighten up to an intimidating six feet when she wanted to.

“Thanks for coming over,” said Sloan with one eye—as usual—on the clock. “I’m trying to expand

the paper's readership a little bit. Many people don't subscribe anymore."

Myrtle frowned. She thought everybody subscribed to the *Bradley Bugle*. How else would they know what was going on?

"And your helpful hints column has gotten pretty popular. I know we get more tips in a week than we have space to put in the paper. So I thought you could put the extras on the *Bradley Bugle's* blog."

"What? I didn't know the *Bugle* even had a blog."

"Well, we didn't until a few days ago. But I've been checking into it and it seems like a smart direction to take the paper in. The next generation is almost definitely going to be getting their news online. I can have a mobile version for folks to read it easier on their phones. And the blog will have little extras that we don't have space for or the money to print in the paper version."

Myrtle wasn't sure exactly how to blog. But being an octogenarian blogger was an idea that definitely had legs to it. The idea of conquering technology, at her age, gave her a warm, smug feeling.

"I was even thinking," said Sloan, warming up to his subject, "that we could run a story on that supper club you're in."

"The progressive dinner thing?" asked Myrtle with surprise. "That's news?"

"It might not be interesting for expensive *newsprint* news," explained Sloan. "But it's perfect for online. You can mention the names of all the people who were there, the food that was served. Take some pictures and upload them. And then all those people will go online to read about themselves. You know how people are in Bradley. So you could play up the angle, butter them all up a little bit. And I'll have links on the blog site to subscribe to the paper. I think I've even got some local advertisers interested."

Myrtle still wasn't sold on the news value of the impending supper club that she hadn't been excited about to begin with. "Wellll. I guess so. I'm still trying to work out what to cook for it. I'm hosting desserts at my house and I want to try something different."

Sloan brightened. "You know what you could do? Check out the food blogs. There are tons of sites with recipes—and they even do step-by-step pictures on how to cook them. I use them a lot, living by myself. What do I know about cooking?"

Myrtle beamed. "Smart boy. Now *that's* a great idea." She bestowed on him one of her fondest looks, usually reserved for her grandson.

Sloan looked concerned that he might end up the unwilling recipient of a hug. He moved backward a few steps. "Well good. And thanks for the coverage on the progressive dinner. I think we're on to something really good."

After spending an hour studying food blogs, Myrtle was well and truly overwhelmed. She'd visited a couple of blogs before, but she'd had no clue that there were so many of them out there. And they all linked to each other, so when you went to one food blog, you discovered fifteen or twenty others that sounded good. She decided the food blog idea still sounded like a great source for recipes, but it wouldn't work out on such short notice. Myrtle walked over to the Piggly Wiggly, grabbed a couple of Key Lime pies and two dozen cupcakes and called herself done.

But she was still stuck cooking that side dish for Jill's part of the dinner, since she'd so short-sightedly volunteered to help out. Luckily, she cooked a mean three bean salad. She charged into the kitchen, full of confidence and good intentions.

Sadly, it did end up slightly overcooked, but that's because she was writing that darned blog post for Sloan and trying to figure out how to log on. He'd given her an instructions sheet to follow, but it wasn't as easy as he'd made out. The cheese on top of her casserole had gotten just a *little* bit singed. It was going to have to do, though—it was time for the dinner to start and she still had to hand off the side to Jill.

Myrtle wrapped the hot dish tightly in aluminum foil, carried it to Jill's house with her rooster oven mitts, and handed it off to the grateful Jill with relief. "See you in a few minutes, Miss Myrtle. I'm just putting the finishing touches on the baked beans. Y'all are so sweet to bring side dishes. Everybody has been so thoughtful."

"No problem, sweetie. And everything smells divine. See you in a few."

The problem with hosting a supper club, was that most of the houses on the street were modest in size. Oh the houses definitely had their strong points; after all, they were on the lake and each one on Myrtle's side of the street had a dock with a boat. But the houses themselves were older homes, built in the 1950s. Most were your basic three-bedroom, two bathroom ranches. Miles had only two bedrooms and one bathroom. Which, Myrtle thought as she visited with Miles, was absolutely fine. All the space in the *world* that a bachelor needed. Except when hosting a supper club of thirty people. And especially when you provided them with alcohol, as Miles had so thoughtfully done for the hors d'oeuvres and cocktail leg of their culinary journey.

A booming belly-laugh erupted just feet away from them. Miles looked startled. "What was that?" he breathed.

"Georgia Simpson," said Myrtle. She frowned. "I wonder what she's doing here. She's isn't a reader. She wouldn't have even been in book club. And it *looks* like she's been drinking. I mean *seriously* drinking. With effort."

"Tippy called all the hosts to tell us to add one more person to the guest list. Apparently someone was interested in a supper club, but not a book club. I guess it must have been Georgia."

"So now we've reached a new club low," growled Myrtle.

The woman threw back her head and laughed her booming laugh again.

"The epitome of genteel Bradley womanhood. Stinking drunk in acquaintances' houses," muttered Miles.

"Keep it up, Miles. Don't think she won't hit a guy who wears glasses."

Miles looked somewhat affronted at this attack on his manhood.

Georgia embodied the idea of a tough cookie, from her big hair that never moved even in high winds, to the tattoos covering her arms and legs. Her eyelashes were so heavily encrusted with mascara that her eyes stayed permanently at half-mast, giving her a kind of glowering look. She had plucked out most of her eyebrows, the better to draw in a pair in whatever theme her expression-of-the-day was in. Her hair was black on the bottom with a white-blond layer on the top. She was fond of wearing tee-shirts that sported rude sayings. Myrtle nudged Miles with her foot. "You're gaping."

"She looks like a guy I was in Vietnam with," murmured Miles in wonder as Georgia strutted over to them and grunted a greeting.

"You know what this party needs?" Georgia asked in a grating voice.

Miles stopped gaping and managed a look of polite interest.

"Port-a-johns. You coulda had a couple put into your backyard, you know. Nice place, but one bathroom?"

Miles nodded eagerly in agreement. Myrtle rolled her eyes. "Miles lives by himself, Georgia. Why would he need more than one bathroom?"

But Georgia was already walking away. "Got to find a bathroom."

Myrtle looked after her, thoughtfully. "That's the best mood I've seen Georgia in for a while. Parties must agree with her."

"You *know* this person?" asked Miles. He had an awe-struck note in his voice. "You—the Charles Dickens and William Butler Yeats fan. You know this Georgia creature."

Myrtle looked at him as though he were addled. "Of course, Miles. I taught her."

“Taught her!”

“Miles, when you’re as old as I am and taught for as long as I did, you’ve taught everybody in the town between the ages of thirty-five and sixty.”

Jill quickly joined the line behind them, peering around Myrtle at Georgia’s retreating back. This was interesting—*Jill* actually avoiding someone.

Myrtle hoped Miles didn’t have anything in his medicine cabinet that he wanted to keep private.

“Dear God,” breathed Miles, “there goes the party.”

Myrtle craned her neck to see the front door. The inaptly-named Tiny, his looming figure filling the door frame, looked apprehensively into the room.

“What is *he* doing here?” wondered Myrtle. “He’s no book club member. Or book club spouse. I’m not actually sure he’s a reader at all.”

“He’s probably looking for a mate,” said Miles. He gloomily took a swig of his cocktail. “Now that he’s single again he’s out on the town looking for a new wife to torment.”

“Was he *ever* tiny?” mused Myrtle. “I can’t actually remember a time that he was.”

Tiny, by this time, had crammed his bulk into Miles’ living room. He’d managed to squeeze his six-foot seven, three hundred pound frame into an uncomfortable-looking, shiny suit. And, somehow, forgotten his socks.

“Maybe it’s his *brain* that’s tiny?” murmured Miles.

“I’m surprised at you, Miles. That wasn’t very nice.”

“If *he* were nice, I wouldn’t have said it.”

“He always seems to smell like gasoline,” mused Myrtle.

“Maybe after he’s finished doing yard work he splashes a little on. Gasoline is just about as expensive as cologne these days, after all.”

They watched as Tiny plowed through to the cocktail table. Miles watched him with glum eyes. “If we were going to have a gatecrasher, why couldn’t it be someone else?”

Proving him right, Tiny immediately launched into an argument with Simon Caulfield and Georgia, who’d returned to the group—“There ain’t nothing *wrong* with hunting, Simon.”

“Guns are dangerous things,” said Simon in an uptight voice, “I wouldn’t dream of having one in my house. If you’re a parent, which you are, you should be more responsible.”

Tiny looked at Simon blankly at the mention of offspring. Then he recollected, “Oh. Well, he’s eighteen, you know. No bitty guy...”

Miles groaned. “This evening is a disaster. I’ve got Tiny Kirk partycrashing and starting argument and I’m not big enough to kick him out. I’ve got Georgia Simpson staggering around in search of portable toilets.” He gestured at Georgia, who had a hand on Tiny’s bulging arm for support. Or *amour*. Or both. “And who knows,” he spluttered, “what might happen next.”

Jill dialed a number on her cell phone and frowned. A shadow passed over her face. “He’s not picking up.”

“Who?” asked Myrtle.

“Cullen.” Jill gave a martyred sigh. “He needs to stir the barbeque in the crock pot. Maybe he’s fallen asleep. He’s had a rough day today. I guess I’ll have to go over and do it myself. Miles, it was great. I’ll see you over at my place in a little while.”

But before she could hurry away, Jill’s sister, Willow floated up to the group in her flowing, hippy garb with an intense look on her pale face. She put out a hand and grasped Jill’s arm in a tight grip. “Did you say you were going home?” Willow demanded. Myrtle was sure she’d heard Jill and was just determined to make a point.

Jill said shortly, “Yes, I’m going home. No, Cullen didn’t pick up the phone. Yes, I’ve got to stir the meat and make sure everything is ready for guests. Anything else you wanted to ask?” She juttled out

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