

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

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Chapter 1

THE MORNING the deceased came into my life I woke up with a start, the way I had when I was a kid. Lifting my head from the pillow, I squinted at pale June daylight leaking through the gap in the bedroom drapes. No doubt about it; I felt different.

Eager.

Ambitious.

Nearly as happy as my former self: Ginger Struve Barnes, mother of two, DIY enthusiast, and wife of Robert Ripley Barnes, the esteemed, green-eyed, and wickedly funny head of Bryn Derwyn Academy.

During the three years since my husband's fatal accident on an icy stretch of I-95, the words "eager," "ambitious," and "happy" seldom described my mood. Yet lately I have felt physically lighter—never mind that the bathroom scale disagreed. I've also caught myself saying "Yes" more often than "No," especially to invitations.

I've rejoined the world! I told Rip telepathically. *How about that?*

Go for it, babe, he replied, just as I knew he would.

To break the silence, at times I said these things out loud. Never in public though, so what was the harm?

I also talked to my dog. Soon after the accident, I discovered the muddy derelict digging for table scraps in the neighbor's compost pile. He wasn't wearing a collar, so I dutifully posted signs and even advertised for his owner. No one called; I had myself a new pet.

Fideaux responded as any physically and emotionally starved animal would, but surprise, surprise. I did, too. I slept better touching the rangy mutt's curly gray fur. On my worst nights he licked away my tears. If I sighed, he sighed. Whenever I began to feel sorry for myself, he rested his chin on my foot and worried about me.

"Up and at 'em," I woke him with a nudge on that lovely morning. "We have things to do, people to see."

He lumbered off the bed and stretched before trotting toward the kitchen door.

I poured kibble and freshened Fideaux's water before hustling back to get dressed. Since I'd be alone putting down peel-and-stick tiles at my newlywed daughter's house, I chose my oldest green t-shirt, the one that said "Alaska or Bust." And jeans, always jeans. I splashed my face, fluffed my short reddish hair.

"Ride in the car," I informed the dog the instant we finished breakfast.

The newlyweds had purchased a promising fixer-upper in a cozy, treed settlement nine miles by turnpike from where I live. Rush-hour traffic clogged the exit, but when I broke free of the entrance to an industrial park, it was only another three minutes to my destination, a yellow, three-story Victorian close to Chelsea's teaching job and Bobby's train commute.

The house sat shoulder to shoulder with its neighbors but possessed a lengthy backyard. Due to some missing fence Fideaux needed to be leashed and supervised back there, a time-consuming chore I preferred to get out of the way before starting the kitchen floor. Unfortunately, the morning's gray-white sky had lowered during my commute, and the air felt thick with drizzle.

While Fideaux dithered and sniffed, sniffed and dithered, I planned how to go about laying the floor tiles. Tidy up first, then make sure the old Formica was clean and sound. Snap a line to get a square start—for sure the old walls would be off; they always were...

Whump.

I jumped. Fideaux growled. Then we both gravitated toward the sound.

Someone had thrown a loaded garbage bag from the third floor of the somber gray Victorian to the left. It landed beyond a shallow cement patio and split, spewing clothes and bricks in a messy heap.

Bricks? I hoped no child had taken such a chance.

I raised up on tiptoes for a better look over the shrubbery-lined fence.

Yes, bricks.

“Hey!” I shouted up to the wide-open window.

No response. Just a gaping black rectangle, no screen, nothing and nobody visible beyond the opening.

Maybe the woman of the house had been cleaning out a closet, tossing her kids’ outgrown clothes, or purging her own unwanted dreck. Faced with carrying a loaded bag downstairs for disposal, I might have tried the three-story drop, too. Once anyway. If nobody was around.

And nobody was supposed to be around. The house in question was the last on the block, Chelsea and Bobby were both at work, and I was here merely by chance.

But bricks?

That was just plain creepy.

Chapter 2

CHELSEA BARNES *ALCOTT*, she still wasn’t used to her new name, tuned out her boss's voice and scanned the other faculty members dotting the auditorium. Sprawled across two seats like a teenager, the soccer coach appeared to be asleep. The Spanish teacher was filing her nails; and up front a new hire paid rapt attention, unaware of the rest of her colleagues zoning out behind her. Unless the information strayed too far from her own subject, which happened to be music, last year Chelsea had been that woman.

A sudden silence riveted the room. Hands on his hips, the head of school glared at his audience.

"Back in fifteen, people," he ordered.

So he'd noticed, Chelsea realized. Good for him.

She got moving, quick before he changed his mind. But where to go? What to do? She was torn between running for the coffee table and stepping outside to phone her mother. All the text message said was, "Please call."

Sighing with resignation, Chelsea headed for the door. After the morning's drizzle, the brightness of the quad came as a shock.

"Yes, Mom. Thanks, Mom. Go for it," she responded to Gin's detailed question. The new flooring *should* extend into the pantry at the top of the basement stairs. That would require more tile and a thick piece of plywood to bring the extra area up to level, but no problem. If Home Depot had had a bridal registry back when her parents married, Ginger Struve Barnes would have been on it.

A glance at her watch. Enough time for coffee, unless...

"By the way, who lives on your left facing the street?" Gin inquired.

"Mrs. Zumstein," Chelsea answered cautiously. "She's about a hundred and two. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. You know me."

"You're not going to adopt my whole neighborhood, are you?" She loved her mother; but Mrs. Zumstein would be a mere cheese straw to Gin, and a skimpy one at that. Before the last tile was in place, Bryn Derwyn Academy's Hostess Emeritas would make a meal of the entire neighborhood, and Chelsea and Bobby would end up feeling like newlyweds on reality TV.

"Of course not!" Gin proclaimed.

Other faculty members who had opted for fresh air were easing their way back into the building, so Chelsea ended the call.

Yet her heebie-jeebies lingered, and she thought she knew why. In her haste to prevent Ms. Fix-it from adding Mrs. Zumstein to her collection of eccentric friends, she'd opened her mouth and put the idea in her mother's head.

"Pink elephants," she muttered as she bypassed the coffee urn. "I'll never learn."

GRATEFUL FOR Chelsea's go-ahead, I bought a four by eight foot piece of five-eighths inch plywood, dragged it into the backyard, and settled it onto two overturned trash cans. By then sunshine had dried the grass, so I felt fairly confident I wouldn't electrocute myself using an electric saw.

Coming from Mrs. Zumstein's direction, the explosions—crack, pop...*pop*—occurred just after my first cut.

I yelled. Then I carefully lowered the circular saw to the ground before I dropped it. A smell that could well have been gunpowder wafted over the fence.

What now? Bolt inside to call 9-1-1? The three pops had been followed by nothing. No thumps or wild shrieking, no rapid footsteps. Other than the noise and the smell, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. This was the suburbs, after all, not Philadelphia. You can live your whole life here without ever hearing a gun go off.

I tiptoed over to the fence and crouched beneath the shrubbery.

After listening to silence for a few minutes, I gave up and returned to work.

Yet my mind refused to leave the troubling incident alone. Who was this Zumstein woman, and what was she up to? Bricks in a bag were one thing, but the pops were another. Not quite loud enough to rattle a windowpane, they were about what you'd expect from a handgun muffled by something.

The notion flashed me back to some experiences best forgotten, sudden deaths that skirted way too close to home. After several years of minding my own concerns, was I being sucked into yet another domestic intrigue?

Preposterous! I hadn't encountered a crime in ages and probably wasn't encountering one now. Like a bored kid on a rainy day, my mischievous brain was probably toying with me.

You're not going to adopt my whole neighborhood, are you?

Chelsea's admonition firmly in place, I finished the cuts I had measured, then wrestled the awkward piece of plywood back inside to the pantry.

When I tried to drop it in place, the right side stuck twelve inches off the floor.

"If at first you don't succeed," I muttered while I struggled to dislodge the heavy plywood.

Outside, the stink that either was or wasn't gunpowder seemed even stronger than before. Had I missed more shots while I was inside?

I left the four by eight on my makeshift sawhorses and sneaked back for another look over the fence.

Three wooden steps led directly from the kitchen to the cement patio the trash bag had so narrowly missed. Venturing as close as I dared, I noted the household objects littering the area below the door—an hibachi full of rusty water, a pot, a broken doll, a pair of moldy men's shoes, a crooked lamp, a watering can, and a tangle of coat hangers. No sign of the dropped trash bag or its disturbing contents.

Falling bricks were one thing, but the sound of gunfire was another.

"Hello!" I called over the fence. "Everybody all right in there?" If a large, scary villain appeared, at least I had a hammer and saw at my disposal and two sneakered feet ready to run.

I waited a moment then shouted louder. "Mrs. Zumstein! Are you alright?"

No answer. Perhaps the old lady had been doing something that made sense only to her and preferred to be left alone. Or, like the squeaks and creaks of any house, maybe it took time to get used to the normal sounds of a neighborhood.

I listened for a few more minutes; but when nothing stirred, I returned to my project.

Two more tries and I managed to make the plywood fit. A gap near the corner of the cellar steps had to be filled with a scrap of wood and some caulk, a miscalculation I might not have made had my focus been better; but when the tile was in place, the mistake wouldn't show.

An hour later the pantry area was ready to go. I opened a Diet Coke and, with my back to the refrigerator, slid my sweaty, dirty self to the floor. I had just taken the first cold sip when the trill of my cell phone made me jump.

"You're still coming, aren't you?" barked my best friend, Didi.

"To what?" I asked, wiping up spilled soda with my shirt tail.

"Dinner, of course. I knew you'd forget."

"Did not," I fibbed. "I just lost track of time. What time is it anyway?"

"Four-thirty. You're supposed to be here at five."

"Can Fideaux come, too?"

A pause. "If he must."

"On my way," I fibbed again. Then I hung up and ran for the stairs.

