

ELEANOR BOYLAN
Author of **WORKING MURDER**

A Clara Gamadge Mystery

MURDER OBSERVED

Clara's best friend is
jealous enough to kill—or be killed.

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welcome back Clara Gamadge....
She proves a
charming companion."

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MURDER



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Ivy Books

Published by Ballantine Books

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 89-28047

ISBN 0-8041-0812-9

This edition published by arrangement with Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: February 1993

1

"FOUR SPADES," SAID ANNA PITMAN, "AND SHE'S young enough to be his granddaughter."

I said: "By."

Eve Ryder said: "By. Is she attractive?"

Sara Orne said: "Are we playing bridge or discussing your ex-husband's love life?" She put down a good dummy and Anna looked cheered; a good dummy could cheer Anna out of the most Stygian gloom.

She said: "Sorry. I'll shut up. She's not only attractive, she's damn beautiful. Isn't she, Clara?"

I nodded and we played in silence for a few minutes. The May rain beat on my living room windows, and the traffic on East Sixty-third Street ground slower and horns grew louder. New York City was awash.

The women at my bridge table were as familiar as family, *were* family of sorts, going back to the days of gym bloomers, upper berths, and crushes on Ronald Colman. We were all widows, Anna the most recent. Before her marriage, she had been for almost twenty years a bitter divorcée who had never forgiven her first husband for ceasing to love her.

She said now, sweeping to a small slam: "It's a classic case of 'no fool like an old fool.' Clara will tell you."

"Clara will tell you," I stood up, "that you'll never get cabs in this downpour and Port Authority will be a zoo. We'd better quit. Anybody want a drink?"

Anna did and I did and Sara and Eve went into my bed-

room for their coats. Both lived in New Jersey and sensibly never drove their cars into Manhattan. Anna and I, residents here, were resigned nonowners of one.

Now Anna, probably sensing my irritation, made a great thing of collapsing the card table and straightening up.

“Leave it,” I said, handing her a scotch.

“You’re mad at me.”

“You should be mad at yourself.” I sat down and looked at her, still a slender, handsome woman in a good beige suit, hair coaxed to a good beige color.

I said: “No fool like an old fool? Forgive me, Anna, but you’re a case in point. So am I for letting you drag me into this.”

“She’s a scheming witch.”

“I liked her.”

“She knows Barry has money.”

I shrugged.

“Damn it, Clara, if it was your husband—”

“Or if it was yours! But it isn’t. Barry hasn’t been your husband in years. When will you let that man be?”

I was instantly sorry. Anna turned white and the hand that held her drink twitched, spilling half of it down her front. I got up feeling contrite and daubed at her with a paper napkin.

“Don’t bother.” She pushed my hand angrily away. “And forget I ever told you anything or asked for anything.”

I was used to Anna’s rages—all her friends were. In school they’d been tantrums. But I was unprepared for a woman of seventy to storm out of my house like a spoiled child. She pushed between Sara and Eve as they emerged from the bedroom, grabbed her fur coat, yanked open the door of my little elevator, and it shuddered down with her.

“What on earth . . . ?” Eve’s sweet, pudding face was dismayed.

Shrugging out of her coat Sara said: “Okay, Clara, what brought this on? Start with the girl who’s young enough to be Barry’s granddaughter.”

I walked to the window feeling remorseful. The rain was heavier than ever. "I should have kept my mouth shut. She'll get drenched out there. We don't all have canopies and door-men the way she does. Oh, Lord, look at her!"

Anna was splashing up and down waving at everything as if there were an empty cab between here and the East River.

I said: "I'm going down and get her."

"You are not." Sara pushed me into a chair and pinned me there with one of the long thin arms that had made her such a great basketball guard. "Let her stew. This is vintage Anna, you know that. She'll pile back up when she's wet enough. And I'll call Timmy. He just got his license and he'll adore coming to rescue us."

Eve and I exchanged glances. We knew this grandson of Sara's; rescue by a wild boar might be preferable. But Eve smiled like the good sport she was and dropped her coat beside Sara's.

"Sal's right. She'll be back."

"Demanding your hair dryer," said Sara, "and a hot toddy. What's eating her, Clara?"

I picked up my drink. "All right. But as soon as I tell you I'm going down there." We sat down and I realized this was going to sound as absurd as everything relating to poor Anna and Barry Lockwood, the nice man she had once been married to.

"Barry has decided to write a book about his grandfather and he's looking for a publisher. It seems Grandpa distinguished himself at the battle of Vicksburg."

They looked at me blankly.

"In the cavalry."

They continued to look at me blankly.

"The Civil War. You recall it?"

"Oh, brother." Sara closed her eyes.

"About a week ago he called me to ask for the name of Henry's publisher. He said that since Henry Gamadge's name was still respected as a writer and a scholar, perhaps as Hen-

ry's widow I could put in a good word for the account of Grandpa's glorious charge."

Sara groaned and Eve said: "Barry is really a dear guy. I always liked him. Didn't he retire from the army himself at some quite high rank?"

"Yes, colonel," I said, "and he *is* a dear guy." I got up and snapped on another light in the fast darkening room. "I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I must admit my heart sank."

"I'll bet it did." Sara took a cigarette from her pocket-book and Eve snatched it and threw it into the fireplace. Sara shrugged.

I went on: "I said I didn't think Henry's publishers were in the market for family reminiscences and why didn't Barry do what a lot of people do"—I was backing toward the window—"have his book run off on a good copier and distribute it to members of the family who were always glad— Thank God! She got a cab!"

Anna was gone. My relief was immense as I came back to my chair.

Sara said: "Barry probably took a dim view of a mere copier for the sacred annals."

"Yes, he sounded a little huffy and said he thought they deserved what he called 'real publication.' I started to say that Gramps's life might be a speck hard to place, when Barry *himself* came up with an idea I'd hesitated to suggest: he asked what I thought of a subsidy publisher."

"What's that?" asked Eve.

"A vanity press," said Sara. "Grandpas at Vicksburg are their specialty."

"You pay them to publish your book," I said.

Eve, the dear innocent, said: "What's so bad about that? Betty McBride paid to have her cookbook published. It's called *In Betty's Kitchen*. She gave me a copy."

"Me too," said Sara.

"Me too," I said. "Well, I told Barry I thought that was a great idea. A few days later Anna called me to say that

Barry was writing a book about his grandfather and had gotten in touch with her regarding some albums of family photographs which he couldn't find and had they gotten in with her stuff when they split up. They had—I'm sure Anna deliberately kept them—and she was only too glad of an excuse to go up to his house in Connecticut and give them to him. She found him sitting talking to a beautiful girl from a subsidy house called Byways Press and immediately went into a jealous snit. Poor Anna."

We were silent, all thinking, no doubt, of the systematic way in which Anna had, over the years, destroyed her husband's regard, the rivals she'd imagined—perhaps even created—the military posts across the world from which she'd fled in rage and returned in remorse, and finally the precipitous and promptly regretted divorce.

Sara said, rather bitterly: "It isn't as if she didn't have a perfectly nice husband after that. Glenn Pitman was okay."

Eve said, rather wistfully: "And he left her well off."

I said, rather callously: "And he was lucky to die before he could suffer Barry's fate. Although . . ." I looked at the streaming window. "I can't imagine Anna being jealous of Glenn. It was only Barry."

"Only and forever Barry," said Eve.

"Forever and ever Barry." Sara got up and walked to the window, taking another cigarette from her pocketbook and glaring defiantly back at Eve. "So when did you get to meet the siren from Byways Press, Clara?"

"Anna invited her to lunch under the pretext of having some material about Barry's family, and I was asked to come and size her up. The girl's name is Elisabeth—she calls herself Beth—and she's German and gorgeous. Early twenties. She's enrolled at Columbia in a summer graduate program in journalism and she has a room in student quarters somewhere up on Morningside Drive. Byways Press—I get the impression it's kind of a dinky outfit—has an office near there. Beth told me she'd offered them her services free

in order to—as she put it—‘improve her English skills.’ I think her English is pretty darn good, but she’s hot to improve it.”

“Brains, beauty, and youth,” murmured Sara.

The three of us, with no great amount of those first two assets and none of the third, sat in depressed silence. Then I went on: “Anyway, Anna spent the whole lunch telling Beth that despite their divorce she and Barry were ‘still close’ and she’d be happy to sit in on any consultations. Then Beth’s boyfriend showed up, and he’s Austrian and equally gorgeous. The pair of them with their blond hair look like Sigmund and Sieglinde.”

“Who are they? Never mind—go on.” Sara stood at the window smoking.

“The boyfriend’s name is Dollfuss.”

“*What?*”

“That’s what I said. It seems he’s named for his grandfather’s hero, the chancellor of Austria back in the nineteen thirties.”

“Sure.” Sara snapped her fingers. “Hitler had him murdered. Dollfuss was a big hero-martyr to the Austrians. My God—she’s back!”

Sara was staring down into the street. We joined her, and I could hardly believe it. Anna had materialized on the sidewalk again, signaling futilely, fur coat hanging on her like a wet animal.

Eve said: “She must have been standing up against the building to try and stay dry.”

“That does it,” I said. “I’m going down and get her.”

I summoned my elevator, wanting to laugh, wanting to cry. Anna! Why did I remain fond of her? But I did. An especially devoted friend, fiercely loyal, wonderfully generous, she had often exhausted my patience but never my affection.

The downstairs hall was black as night. I switched on the light as I left the elevator and walked past the closed door of Henry Gamadge’s laboratory, thinking, as I did

every time, never more . . . I opened the front door and banged on the glass of the storm. I might as well have breathed on it for all I could be heard. I opened it a foot, received a faceful of rain, and yelled: "Anna! Get back in here this minute!"

She turned, then came sloshing back into the hall, bringing a torrent with her. She said: "And another thing. That—what's his name?—Dollfuss—of all the awful monikers—I can show you something that makes me think he's not on the level."

Typical. Anger forgotten. One-track mind working smoothly.

I said: "Will you kindly get back up—"

"Look at this." She pulled from the pocket of her coat's satin lining a long, ecru envelope, fattish, with several foreign stamps. The address, in a scrawled handwriting, was smeared, and the thing was limp and damp.

"What is it?" I felt my impatience returning.

"Something he didn't want me to see. When I got to Byways Press this morning—"

"Don't tell me you were there again, horning in."

"—and what a dump *that* place is—I should think Barry could have found better—and I wasn't 'horning in,' I was contributing some things from my scrapbook—well, when I got there Dollfuss was waiting for Beth and reading this." Anna shoved it back inside her pocket. "He slid it under a pile of stuff pretty quick but not before I saw the stamp and I said, 'Isn't that a German stamp? Do you have friends in Germany?' and he said—"

"Anna, will you shut up and march yourself—"

"—Oh, no, he was Austrian and he didn't know a single person in Germany. Then why was somebody in Germany writing him what looked like five or six typewritten pages? And why the dramatic denial? So I stole it."

I looked at her, aghast.

"I grabbed it when he went out to help Barry park his car. They came back with Beth and I said I had to go because I

had this lunch and bridge date at your place. I was going to read it in the cab but Beth offered to drive me here so I haven't had a chance to look at it, but when I get home—"

"Do you realize it's a crime to steal mail?"

"It isn't a crime to pick up a letter by mistake and then apologize and return it. Suppose this Dollfuss person has a record or something. I'm only doing it for Barry's sake. God, I'm cold." Anna shivered. "I guess you're right, I should go back up—Clara!" She stared through the streaming glass of the door. "There he is!"

"There who is?" I tried to follow her gaze.

"Dollfuss! I recognize that big old red Buick he drives." She pushed the door open, drenching me. "He's looking for a number—he's come to pick me up!"

"More likely come to pick his letter up," I said grimly.

"What letter?" Anna grinned at me through her ruined makeup, and I couldn't help laughing. I said:

"Well, close the door till the light changes and he gets here." Through the downpour I'd recognized, a few car lengths up, a handsome young face topped by yellow hair, craning out of a car window, scanning housefronts.

"Barry sent him," said Anna serenely. "Barry knew it would be hard to get a cab in this weather. How absolutely dear and wonderful of Barry."

Barry, Barry, Barry. Utterly bedraggled, Anna looked a hundred but happy. I kissed her and pushed her sopping hair back and said: "I hope you haven't caught pneumonia. The minute you're home get in a hot tub and have a nice, big—"

"I'll call you, Clara."

The traffic moved and she was out the door, was on the sidewalk, was hurrying around the front of the big red car to reach the passenger seat, was down as the car lunged forward in a seemingly helpless skid, was under, and was dead.

The sounds were screams and sirens.

The sights were horrified faces in a wet, converging crowd and the blond young driver leaping out to pry his fender from a taxi to release the blood and mink mess beneath.

The sensations were of Sara's and Eve's arms around me and the rain continuing to fall in the manner of a person weeping uncontrollably.

2

MY ALARM CLOCK IS OLD AND UGLY, ALSO cheap—it cost five dollars twenty years ago—and it makes a sound like a demented buzz saw.

I sat up in bed feeling old and ugly, and if there had been anyone in the house to speak to I'd have sounded like a buzz saw; but there was no one, and I got myself into the kitchen to make coffee. My son Henry and his wife Tina would be here in an hour to go with me to Anna's service. They lived in Brooklyn Heights, practiced law in the same firm, and had been kind enough to take the day off for my sake.

My utter depression of the past two days was unabated. I looked out of the kitchen window at the budding acacia tree in my small yard, and for the first time in its brave old life it failed to give me pleasure. The morning sounds of traffic on Sixty-third Street, which I usually found companionable, now had an odious association.

The phone rang and I took the receiver from the wall and said hello.

"Clara Gamadge, are you out of your elderly mind?"

"Sadd!"

The one person on earth who could scold me and console me simultaneously, my venerable cousin and dear friend, Charles Saddlier, retired publisher, stubborn widower, curmudgeon extraordinary, militant convert to the state of Florida, and known to all who had ever known him as "Sadd."

He now went on with his customary restraint and delicacy: "Really, Clara, you must be in your dotage. Henry phoned

me to say you've conceived an 'idée fixe' on some old school chum whom you believe to have been deliberately run over and killed."

"She was, Sadd, she was!" I began to blubber. "Anna said to me just *seconds* before she—"

"Wait." I knew he was transferring the receiver to what he fondly called his "good ear." "Are we talking about Anna Lockwood, wife of that noble military man Barry—"

"She divorced Barry years ago," I said impatiently. "She married Glenn Pitman when—"

"I don't care who she married. Nobody would want to kill Anna unless it was open season on bores."

"Sadd, listen to me." I poured coffee with my free hand. "But before I say another word, thanks for this call. Long distance isn't cheap at this hour. How's Florida?"

"Florida is glorious in May, as you'd know if you'd just clear out of that preposterous city and move down. All right. So somebody murdered Anna—absurd thought of the week—but fill me in."

I did so, gratefully, purgatively, everything from the conversation at the bridge table and its unhappy conclusion, to the swiped letter, to the last ghastly minutes on the street. I ended: "And the letter was gone."

"Of course it was. Just stuck in her pocket like that? And the awful conditions of the weather and the accident? That letter is lying sodden at the bottom of the nearest drain to you on Sixty-third Street."

I said nothing, and he went on: "Have you told your other two bridge-playing friends what you believe?"

"No."

"Just Henry and Tina?"

"Yes."

"And the police have cleared the young man?"

"Completely. It was an 'unavoidable accident' and nobody is pressing charges. Glenn's money all goes to his daughter, and Anna's to Beaver Hill—she was a devoted alumna—she has no family so you see—"

"You realize you may be doing this young foreigner a frightful injustice?"

I looked at the clock. "You were a dear to call, Sadd. I'm not going to let you run up a big bill, and I have to dress. When will I see you again?"

"I may get to Anna's service."

"Hardly. That's in a few hours."

"I repeat."

I froze in the act of taking the receiver from my ear.

"Sadd!"

As the three of them walked through my door an hour later I felt almost lighthearted. Sadd's smile under a crisp white mustache, new since I'd last seen him, shone on me complacently. Tina, my petite, pretty daughter-in-law, who was thirty-odd—I never could remember her exact age because she looked twenty-odd—wore a crimson suede suit which delightfully set off her short, shiny black hair. I often looked at Tina's feathery topknot and groaned at the long white mane I wore coiled on top of my head at the long since request of my husband and now of my children.

I said: "Fabulous new suit, Tina."

"What about mine?" said my son.

"Your what?"

"Suit."

"It can't be new."

"Sure it is."

Henry Gamadge Junior, like his father, was incapable of looking pressed. As I took their coats, he said: "Was I not wonderful to think of inviting Sadd up?"

"Was I not wonderful to come?" Sadd kissed me. "Actually, I have a duty visit to pay on Kathy and my appallingly spoiled grandchildren in Toronto. Might as well make a stop here. Besides, as I said to Henry, your mother can't be allowed to have one of her cuckoo-cuckoo seizures without me." He looked in the mirror over the mantel, then at me. "How do you like my mustache, Clara?"

"Love it. Very sexy."

"That's what a fifteen-year-old neighbor said. Both ends of the spectrum approving, I'll keep it."

Tina said: "Do we have time for coffee?"

"No, but we do for a Bloody Mary," said Sadd and headed for the kitchen.

I piled their coats on the sofa and then kissed my son, who had sat down in a chair over the back of which he used to climb to reach his father's shoulders.

I said: "I can't tell you what this means to me, dear. For you and Tina to take a whole day . . ."

He touched my hand. "Glad to do it, Mom. And Sadd's right—you can't be allowed to have one of your 'seizures' without us."

Tina, standing at the window, said: "It was from here that Sara and Eve saw it happen?"

"Sara did." I joined her. "Eve was in the bathroom."

"Bird's-eye view of tragedy." Tina took my arm. "I'm afraid it'll be a while before you can look out of this window without feeling awful."

From his chair Henry said: "Sara didn't see what you—you think you saw?"

"She said she saw the car skid."

"Of course she did." Sadd emerged from the kitchen with a tray. "Because that's all there was to see. Now then—Bloody Mary for me, same for Clara. Henry's driving, so leftover coffee for him and Tina." He put the tray on the coffee table and came to the window. "Clara, why can't you just go along with what Sara saw?"

"Because I saw his wheels and I saw his face and I know he took the letter."

Nobody said whose wheels or which face or what letter because I'd been weeping and fuming about those wheels and that face and that letter for two days.

Sadd said: "So he looked scared. You'd look scared too if you were skidding."

"He wasn't scared. And he wasn't skidding. He was gunning."

They looked at me with a kind of patient horror.

Henry said: "Poor neurotic Anna makes a remark about his not being 'on the level' and shows you a piece of mail that could have been from his mother. That's all you have to go on?"

"That and his face."

"That face!" Sadd rolled his eyes. "It's beginning to take shape in my mind as the face of a fiend."

"Actually, he's very handsome," I said.

They'd stopped looking at me and were looking at each other. I took a sip of my Bloody Mary and realized it would be a mistake to finish it. I put it on the mantel and took my coat from a chair. My depression had returned, and with it nervousness as I felt a paper protruding from the coat pocket. I pulled it out and said: "I want to read you this. Tell me if it sounds corny."

"What is it?" Tina moved from the window.

I swallowed. "Barry asked me to write what he called 'a few words of tribute.' I'm to read it when Anna's ashes are spread."

Sadd said: "For God's sake, why you?"

"I guess there's no one else." My nervousness was turning into embarrassment. "Anna had no children, no living relatives, her stepdaughter may or may not be there, and her ex-husband can hardly do it. I think it was kind of him to think of it at all." I stuffed the thing back in the pocket and ended miserably: "I guess I was her closest friend."

Henry stood up. "Read it to us in the car. We'd better roll if we're going to make Connecticut by noon."

Getting out of Manhattan on that weekday mid-morning was the usual exasperating struggle. We crept and inched and crawled and stalled and Sadd kept asking what he was doing here and Henry swore. In the backseat Tina and I discussed little Henry's progress in the second grade, but none of us seemed to want to talk much at all, and we rode mostly in silence till we emerged with a general sigh of relief onto the Saw Mill River Parkway. Now progress became