



With Friends Like These.

An Amanda Pepper
Mystery

Gillian
Roberts

Anthony Award-winning
author of
*I'd Rather Be
in Philadelphia*

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AN AMANDA PEPPER MYSTERY

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With Friends Like These ...

ALSO BY GILLIAN ROBERTS

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CAUGHT DEAD IN PHILADELPHIA

PHILLY STAKES

I'D RATHER BE IN PHILADELPHIA

For Jean Naggar
—volumes of affection and
appreciation

With Friends Like These ...

One

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT. Honestly. Earlier, it had been a dim and stormy day. Demonstrating no originality, March had indeed come in like a lion—a wet, angry one who blew ill winds every which way.

And here I was, not home cuddling by the fire with whatever was available—a man, a cat, a book—but driving in the rain with my mother, wearing my sister’s panty hose and fulfilling social obligations that were not mine.

I clutched the steering wheel and thought about the difficulty of raising parents, particularly mine, particularly today.

My father had overreacted, overprotected, and overparented

me into this pickle. Generally speaking, my father is so quiet that any woman near him (namely my mother) gets the urge to scream, simply to compensate for the sound deficit. His favorite way of interacting with the women of his family is from behind the shelter of his newspaper.

All the same, this afternoon some late blooming swashbuckler hormone kicked into his system and he suffered an attack of galloping, completely unnecessary heroism. As a result he lost his mobility and I lost my Sunday night.

WE HAD ALL BEEN IN MY SISTER'S LIVING ROOM, enduring the sometimes elusive pleasures of a Long Parental Visit. Bea and Gilbert Pepper, a.k.a. Mom and Dad, had arrived four days earlier. Since then I'd been puzzling how to once and for all establish the concept that I was not willing to be a child for as long as Gilbert and Bea were willing to be parents—i.e., forever, i.e., right now.

It was hard pondering this delicate issue or anything else in the din of family. Everyone—except my father—talked at once, and the chatter was compounded by background music: my niece Karen's recording of Mother Goose done rap style. I remembered how unfond I had once been of the endless, enclosed hours of Sundays, and I remembered why.

I allocated twenty more minutes to this visit, by which time my exit wouldn't seem abrupt or overeager. The good thing about teaching English is that the bad thing about teaching English—endless papers to mark—provides a perpetual excuse to split.

Once I knew there was a definite reprieve ahead, I relaxed and tuned back into the conversation.

"I do hope the messenger delivered the gift in time," my mother was saying. "I've never done this before." She had read, in *People* magazine, of tributes arriving via messenger, and had decided that was the appropriate style when gifting a Somebody. Apparently, the host of the party she was attending tonight fit that category. "And not too soon," she continued. "What if it arrives before Lyle gets there? Would the hotel accept it?"

Everybody murmured reassurances, just as everybody had fifteen minutes earlier, the last time she'd worried over the matter. Only Karen, dancing to her barked-out rhymes, seemed unconcerned.

My Floridian parents had braved the last gasps of a Philadelphia winter to attend the fiftieth birthday party of a man they said was an old friend, but whose name I'd never heard. I don't keep close tabs on my parents' social life, but the invitation confused me, particularly since the birthday boy had sent them their airline tickets and was treating them—and all his other out-of-town guests—to rooms at the small hotel where the party would be held.

I was amazed by this stranger's largesse, so that now, when the conversation again veered toward the party, I poked around for more information. "Mom," I said, "explain why I've never heard of Lyle Zacharias."

"I told you," my mother said. "We've been out of touch for a long time."

About then my niece yelped. That's all it was, a minor blip, a five-year-old's reaction to bumping an unimportant body part on the coffee table.

But my father must have heard something primitive, a summons. He levitated, saying "Whooah!" or "Oh, woel!" and frantically, as if Karen were sinking into quicksand with only her teensy nose still poking out, he attempted to swing—without benefit of a vine—across the room to rescue his granddamsel in distress.

There were suddenly a lot of other sounds, too. Karen's infant brother, Alexander, keened. Their mother, my sister Beth, said, "Dad?" My mother said, "Gilbert! What on earth are you—" and even I stood and cried, futilely, "Watch out!" Only Karen, her bump forgotten, said nothing whatsoever. She was too busy boogying again.

Meanwhile, half of my father landed on one of her former musical selections and, almost immediately, his swash buckled. Down onto a pink plastic record went his right foot, skating

straight ahead. His left foot, however, stayed put, pending further instructions. The rest of him flailed and looked bewildered, like a cartoon character running on air over a chasm.

The family attempted a save, but by then he'd achieved a split Baryshnikov would envy. He made another, sadder and less heroic "Whooah" and collapsed, the rug-skating leg tilting where it should not.

IT'S AMAZING HOW MUCH TIME and plaster tape and medical staff it takes to set a fracture. As wet gray day slid into wetter, darker night, we hobbled back to Beth's house. The party my parents had flown hither to attend loomed.

My mother bit her lower lip and looked like the frantic heroine of a silent film. My father grinned wickedly. His pain-killered pupils were pinwheels. A whole new Daddy on dope. I told him he'd look sexy on crutches at the party.

My practical sister—who, being married, had a permanent companion, and who was therefore in no danger of being deputized as Mom's date—reacted immediately. "That little hotel might not have an elevator, Mandy! After all, it used to be a boardinghouse. How would Daddy get to his room?"

"We could call and find out." I was snappish, but only because I knew what was coming. I tried to stop it, but it was as effective as putting a hand up to stop a boulder rolling downhill. "And if there's no elevator, Mom and Dad can come back here tonight."

"Gilbert," my mother said. "Lyle wants you, not me, at his party. He wasn't part of my family."

Did that mean, then, that this Lyle person, this Somebody, was a secret part of my father's family? The black sheep? That sounded almost interesting. "Who *is* this man?" I asked again.

My father beamed. Sedated, he was more placidly impervious to female noises than ever. I couldn't believe my mother wanted to be accompanied by a space cadet, but the need for an escort has made lots of women drop their standards.

"He's a producer." My mother tossed the words my way. An answer, I realized. Lyle the mystery man was a producer.

My mother's attention was again wholly on my father. "Gilbert?" His answer was the downward flutter of his eyelids.

"Broadway?" The word *producer* is so mysterious. What does it mean? What does one do? If it's real, why isn't there a college major called Producing?

"Television." My mother woefully considered her comatose husband.

"What kind of—"

"*The Second Generation*." Beth looked sheepish. "It's on every afternoon. Something to do while I'm feeding the baby."

My mother eyed her older daughter with concern.

"Don't worry," Beth said. "Dr. Spock does not object to watching soaps while nursing."

I could almost see my mother scan the Dr. Spock data base in her brain. He'd been her guru, and the final authority during our growing years, and she still idolized him. But we weren't talking about pediatricians. We were talking about producers, and I steered my mother back to the topic.

"Years ago, Lyle had a show on Broadway," she said. "A great big hit. Then it became a TV series, and that's how he got into the field." She turned back to my father, who was awake, but just barely. "We really have to go. Everybody will be there," she said. "And I've already made all those tarts and messengered them."

That was it, I was sure. She'd done a jet-set thing as per *People* magazine, and she wanted—and deserved—the acclaim for both her baking and her au courant presentation. Tarts seemed poor reasons for dragging a semiconscious man on crutches to a party, but as I knew who his stand-in was likely to be, I said nothing.

"The queen of hearts, she made some tarts," Karen chanted. There were collective frowns as we were reminded of her nursery rhyme collection, and in fact, of the infamous pink record that had resulted in this impasse. Karen didn't notice. "All on a summer's day!" she continued. "The knave of hearts, he stole—"

"How can we accept plane tickets from the man and then not go to his party?" my mother asked.

"I didn't ask him to invite me." My father spoke slowly. "You're the one who insisted we accept, even though you didn't like him, either, after. . . ."

"You're too harsh," my mother said. "Be tolerant. Think about how much he's suffered. He's reaching out to us now."

She didn't deny my father's accusation that she disliked Lyle Zacharias. But her overabundant supply of guilt and do-goodness would demand that she celebrate the birth of a man she wasn't fond of, if she thought he'd suffered in some way.

"You go," my father urged.

"Alone?" My mother's jaw dangled. No date for a party?

I deliberately ignored the wide-eyed flares my sister was hurling in my direction. She escalated to a *psst* that I was forced to acknowledge. Behind my mother's back she mouthed, silently, a question. It didn't take long to decipher it, although I wished I hadn't.

She had pantomimed, "Do you have a date tonight?"

I didn't. I was supposed to. We had planned to go to the movies, like normal people. And afterward we were going to buy hoagies stuffed to the brim with saturated animal fats. And after that, who knew?

However, normal people aren't homicide cops, and neither are the folk who keep homicide cops busy. This morning, just before I toodled out to the suburbs for Sunday brunch, C. K. Mackenzie had called in his regrets. Our date was off because it was his turn on the wheel to be assigned, and a fingerless corpse had been found on a brick-littered lot up in The Badlands near Germantown Avenue. Recently, the city has tried quashing drug dealers by demolishing their lairs. The de-digitized corpse had been left on the rubble of a former crack house. Mackenzie would undoubtedly work well past a normal shift.

Philadelphia does not give its police compensatory time off. Instead it pays overtime, which is no time at all. This policy enlarges wallets, shrinks social lives, and allows significant others to experience only the *others* part. After nearly a year of nearly knowing Mackenzie, I was still much fonder of him than of his

job, and I still didn't know what to do about it, since the two appeared only in combination.

But the point was, I didn't have what anyone might call a date tonight. As if she had overheard my brain synapses, my mother turned. "Mandy!" she said with an air of discovery. Sometimes I look at my mother and see myself, gently distorted as in, perhaps, a kindly fun-house mirror. She is smaller, rounder, her features not truly mine, but definitely their source. We both have precisely the same auburn hue on our heads, although now hers is mostly chemical. She achieved the match by holding up swatches of my hair—my head still attached—to every box of chestnut, auburn, brown, and red dye in the pharmacy.

Unassisted nature made our eyes the same confused green, which a seriously yuppified acquaintance described as the color of overhandled money. But whatever their tint, there is a horrific optimistic innocence in my mother's eyes that I hope is missing in mine.

"No," I said firmly. "I have things I absolutely must—tomorrow is a workday and I have papers and—"

"It'll be fun."

"Not for me. I'll drive you there, I'll pick you up, but I really don't want to go to—"

"A once in a lifetime chance."

"For what, Mom? Please."

"Show people. Household names."

In my household the names were Amanda and Macavity Pepper, and I already knew them. I shook my head. I'm adulation-challenged. I lack the celebrity-gawking gene, the part of the DNA that makes people line sidewalks and stage doors in hopes of glimpsing a famous face. I don't even understand the urge. And even if I were into such behavior, in this case the household name produced a soap opera I'd never seen. The potential thrill quotient was absent.

"Just for dinner," my mother said. "Okay? We won't even stay late. Who knows? Maybe you'll even meet somebody. Those actors can be very handsome, you know."

I envisioned my mother scanning the room for potential son-in-laws, then climbing on a chair and auctioning off her single daughter-overstock to the highest bidder. The closer I crept to thirty-one—and I was now only days away—the more panic-stricken she became. “Please, Mom!” A whine I thought I’d outgrown along with my training bra was back in my voice. I reminded myself that I was a mature woman with a mind and life of my own.

My mother raised her eyebrows. “I only meant you might meet a man who spends his time with people who are still alive, unlike your policeman friend.” She laughed warmly, maternally, slyly.

Like I said, she was getting desperate. “I don’t know Lyle Zacharias,” I said. “I never heard of him before today. Whatever your ties to him might be, he’s not connected to me in any—”

“Cindy was Lyle Zacharias’s first wife.”

I looked at my sister. She looked at me. We both looked at my mother. My father, on the other hand, looked away.

“Who,” Beth and I said in unison, “is Cindy?”

“*Cindy*.” My mother spoke loudly, as if our incomprehension was a hearing problem. “Of course you’ve heard of her. She was your father’s foster sister.”

Repetition of the name made it seem dimly familiar, part of ancient hazy childhood impressions, but nothing more.

“You even met her. They lived in New York and we didn’t see them much, but you did meet her.”

“You’ve never talked about her,” I said with awe. Bea Pepper, the Scheherazade of family gossip, she who trolled all lines for a nibble twenty-four hours a day, the village chronicler of Philadelphia, had remained silent about a foster sister of her husband’s?

“I’m sure we were invited tonight because we’d be the only people there who knew Cindy and that time in his life. A tragic time.” She sighed and stopped looming over my father and, instead, sank onto Beth’s chintz-covered love seat. “Right, Gilbert?” My father appeared to be visiting outer space, and to be having a good time there.

My mother put her hands up. "He doesn't like to talk about it." Whenever she is truly upset with my father, she speaks of him only in pronouns. "Lyle kept a gun in his house. For protection. They lived in New York, after all. We told him it was a bad idea, dangerous. Then one day—it's so horrible—Cindy's little girl found it and killed her mother with it."

"Accidentally." My father's blissful obliviousness had been replaced by a perturbed expression. Cindy was making it through the drug barrier. "They have laws some places for that now. He'd go to jail nowadays for leaving a gun where a three-year-old child could find it." He shook his head, still appalled.

"When did all of this happen?" Beth asked.

My mother began her infamous circular computations. "Let's see, it was just after Uncle Lewis's seventy-fifth birthday, so when would that be? He and Aunt Gloria had a big anniversary party—their silver—the same day as your first birthday, Mandy, and I remember he married late in life, he was a famous bachelor around town, which means that by then he must have been—"

"For heaven's sake!" my father said. "Cindy died nearly twenty years ago."

When I was ten or eleven. How could I have missed an accidental homicide in my own family? What else could have occupied my attention back then when puberty hadn't even kicked in? Beth looked equally baffled.

"Well, it happened in New York in their home," my mother said. "You barely knew her, anyway. She never lived near us. Besides, you were away at the shore at the time, visiting Grandma. What was the point of going out of our way to tell you terrible news about somebody you didn't even know? Parents are supposed to protect their children from bad things when they can. That's what we did."

I appreciated the sentiment, but I nonetheless felt uncomfortable. Family secrets jutted like hard-edged foreign objects under the smooth skin of our lives.

"What happened to his little girl?" Beth asked softly.

"Betsy?" my mother said. "She wasn't Lyle's, biologically."