

RITA MAE BROWN

& SNEAKY PIE BROWN

The Tail of the Tip-Off

A MRS. MURPHY
MYSTERY

THE
DELIGHTFUL
NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLER

Takes a Cat to Write the *Purr*-fect Mystery

The Tail of the Tip-Off

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Cast of Characters

Mary Minor Haristeen (Harry) The young postmistress of Crozet.

Mrs. Murphy Harry's inquisitive and intelligent gray tiger cat.

Tee Tucker Harry's faithful Welsh corgi.

Pewter Harry's shamelessly fat gray cat.

Susan Tucker Harry's best friend.

Fair Haristeen An equine veterinarian, and Harry's ex-husband.

BoomBoom Craycroft A tall, beautiful blonde who has always irritated Harry.

Miranda Hogendobber A virtuous and kindly widow who works with Harry at the post office.

Tracy Raz Miranda's former high-school sweetheart who reunited with her at their fiftieth reunion. Also a referee at UVA women's basketball games.

Reverend Herbert C. Jones The beloved pastor of St. Luke's Lutheran Church.

Cazenovia and *Elocution* Reverend Jones's two cats, whom he dotes on.

Big Marilyn (Big Mim) Sanburne The undisputed queen of Crozet society.

Little Mim Sanburne Big Mim's daughter who is still struggling for her own identity.

Tally Urquhart Older than dirt, she says what she thinks when she thinks it, even to her niece, Big Mim.

Coach Debbie Ryan The motivated leader of the UVA women's basketball team.

Andrew Argenbright Coach Ryan's assistant coach with the women's team.

Rick Shaw The overworked and understaffed Sheriff who prefers to play it by the book.

Cynthia Cooper The sheriff's deputy and Harry's good friend.

Tazio Chappars A young, brilliant architect, and a recent addition to the community. She's on the Parish Guild with Harry and BoomBoom at St. Luke's.

Brinkley A half-starved yellow lab who loves Tazio.

Matthew Crickenberger A powerful but generous businessman and contractor who also sits on the Parish Guild.

Fred Forrest The cantankerous and combative county building code inspector with a reputation for scrupulous, if sour, integrity.

Mychelle Burns Fred's assistant. She models her behavior, unfortunately, on Fred's.

H. H. Donaldson A fiercely competitive local contractor. Hot-tempered but good-hearted, yet he has a wandering eye.

Anne Donaldson H.H.'s long-suffering wife. Though wary, an intelligent woman and a good mother.

1

A gray sleety drizzle rattled against the handblown windowpanes in the rectory at St. Luke's Lutheran Church. As if in counterpoint, a fire crackled in the large but simple fireplace, the mantel adorned by a strip of dentil carving. The hands of that carver had turned to dust in 1797.

The members of the Parish Guild were seated in a semicircle around the fireplace, at a graceful coffee table in the middle. As anyone knows, serving on a board or a committee is a dubious honor. Most people recognize their duty in time to avoid it. However, the work must be done and some good folks bow their heads to the yoke.

Mary Minor Haristeen had succumbed to the thrill of being elected, of being considered responsible, by the congregation. This thrill thinned as the tangle of tasks presented themselves in meeting after meeting. She liked the physical problems better than the people problems. Fixing a fallen drainspout was within her compass of expertise. Fixing a

broken heart, offering succor to the ill, well, she was learning.

The good pastor of St. Luke's, the Reverend Herbert C. Jones, excelled at both the people problems and teaching. He gladly gave of himself to any board member, any parishioner. As he'd baptized Mrs. Haristeen, nicknamed Harry, he felt a special affection for the good-looking woman in her late thirties. It was an affection bounteously returned, for Harry loved the Rev, as she called him, with all her heart.

Although the guild was bickering at this exact moment, it'd be fair to say that every member loved the Reverend Jones. It would be also fair to say that most of them liked—if not loved—Harry. The one exception being BoomBoom Craycroft who sort of liked her and sort of didn't. The feeling was mutual.

Like large white confetti, papers rested on the coffee table along with mugs. The aroma of coffee and hot chocolate somewhat dissipated the tension.

"We just can't go off half-cocked here and authorize an expenditure of twelve thousand dollars." Tazio Chappars crossed her arms over her chest. She was an architect and a young, attractive woman of color, with an Italian mother and an African-American father.

"Well, we have to do something," Herb said in his resonant, hypnotic voice.

"Why?" Tazio, combative, shifted in her seat.

"Because the place looks like hell," Harry blurted out. "Sorry, Rev."

"Quite all right. It does." Herb laughed.

Hayden McIntyre, the town's general practitioner, was a fleshy man with an air of command if not a touch of arrogance. He slipped his pencil out from behind his ear and began scribbling on the budget papers, which had been

handed out at the beginning of the meeting. "Let's try this. I am not arguing replacing the carpet in the rectory. We've put this off for four years now. I remember hearing arguments pro and con when I first came on board. This is one of the loveliest, most graceful churches in the Piedmont and it should reflect that." An appreciative murmur accompanied this statement. "I've broken this down into three areas of immediate need. First the sacristy: must be done." He held up his hand as Tazio opened her mouth. "It must. I know what you're going to say."

"No you don't." Her hazel eyes brightened. "Well, okay, maybe you do. Pick up the carpet and sand the floors."

"Tazio, we've been over that. We can't do that because the floorboards are so thin they can't take it." Matthew Crickenberger, head of Charlottesville's largest construction firm, clapped his hands together softly for emphasis. "Those floorboards are chestnut. They've been doing their job since 1797 and frankly they're tired and we can't really replace them. If you think the bill for new carpeting is high, wait until you see the bill for chestnut flooring even if we could find it. Mountain Lumber up there off Route 29 might be able to scare some up and give us a preacher's price, but we're still talking about thousands and thousands of dollars. Chestnut is as rare as hen's teeth and we'd need a great deal of it." He glanced down at his notes. "Six thousand square feet if we were to replace everything now under carpet and this doesn't factor in the other areas currently in use but not quite ready for recarpeting."

Tazio exhaled, flopping back in her chair. She wanted everything just so but she didn't have to foot the bill. Still, it rankled to have a vision amputated because of a small pocketbook. Such was an architect's fate.

"Hayden, you had a plan?" Herb pushed the meeting

along. No one wanted to be late to the basketball game and this discussion was eating up time.

"Yes," he smiled, "what people see first is the sacristy. If we can't come to an arrangement among us, can we at least agree to go ahead with that? The cost would be about four thousand."

"If we are going to have the place ripped up, then let's just get it over with. We know we have to do this." BoomBoom, gorgeous as always, shimmered in her teal suede dress.

"I agree. We'll find the money someplace."

"We'd better find the money first or we'll have to answer to the congregation in the church, in the supermarket, and"—Matthew winked at Harry—"in the post office."

Harry, the postmistress, sheepishly smiled. "And you know my partner in crime, Miranda, is a member of the Church of the Holy Light, so she won't bail me out."

The little gathering laughed. Miranda Hogendobber, who was a good thirty years older than Harry, quoted Scriptures with more ease than the Reverend Jones and while she tolerated other faiths she felt the charismatic church to which she belonged truly had the best path to Jesus.

As the humans batted around the cost, the need, and the choice of color for the carpeting, Harry's three dear friends lurked in the hallway outside the large room.

Mrs. Murphy, a most intelligent tiger cat, listened to the intensifying sleet. Her sidekick, a large round gray cat named Pewter, was getting fidgety waiting for the meeting to end. Tucker, the corgi, patient and steady as only a good dog can be, was happy to be inside and not outside.

The Christ cats—as Herb's two cats were called by the other animals—had escorted Murphy, Pewter, and Tucker

around. They'd gossiped about every animal in the small Virginia town of Crozet, but as the meeting was entering its second hour, they'd finally exhausted that topic.

Cazenovia, the elder of the two cats, nestled down, her fluffy tail around her nose. A large calico, she had aged gracefully. The young foundling that Herb had taken in a few years ago, Elocution, had grown into a sleek pretty cat. A touch of Siamese in her, she never stopped talking.

"—*tuna breath!*" Elocution uttered this insult. "*How can you stand it?*"

"*She doesn't.*" Mrs. Murphy giggled.

They'd been discussing the blue jay who tormented Pewter. He also tormented Mrs. Murphy but with less enthusiasm, probably because he couldn't get a rise out of the tiger.

"*Oh, I will snap his neck like a toothpick someday. You take my word for it,*" Pewter promised.

"*How thrilling,*" Cazenovia purred.

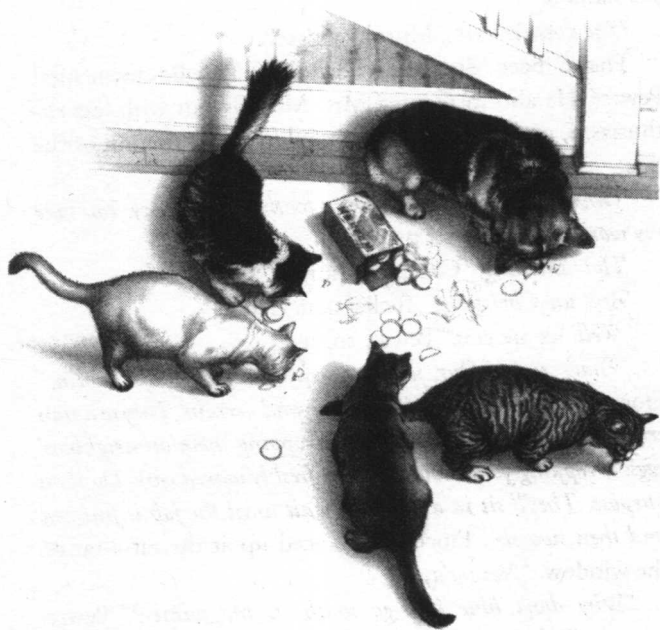
"*And un-Christian,*" Tucker chuckled.

"*Well, we are cats,*" Pewter sniffed.

"*That's right. Our job is to rid the world of vermin,*" Elocution agreed. "*Blue jays are beyond vermin. They're avian criminals. Picking up stones and dropping them on neighbors' eggs. Dropping you-know-what on freshly waxed cars. Do it on purpose. They'll sit in a tree and wait until the job is finished and then swoosh.*" Elocution glanced up at the rat-a-tat on the window. "*Not today.*"

"*Why don't blue jays go south in the winter?*" Pewter mused. "*Robins do.*"

"*Life in our barn is too good, that's why. Harry puts out birdhouses and gourds and then she plants South American maize for the ground birds, cowpeas, and bipolar lespedeza.*



6

The winter might be cold but she serves up all kinds of seeds for those dumb birds."

"Birds are descended from flying reptiles," Elocution announced with vigor. "That alone should warn us off."

"What in the world is going on in there?" Tucker listened as Matthew Crickenberger raised his voice about labor costs.

"Say, have I shown you how I can open the closet where Herb stores the communion wafers?" Elocution puffed out her chest.

"Elo, don't do that," Cazenovia warned.

"I'm just going to prove that I can do it."

"They'll believe you. They don't need a demonstration."

"I wouldn't mind," Pewter laconically replied.

"Thanks, Pewter." Cazenovia cast her a cold golden eye.

"Come on." Elocution, tail held high, bounded down the hall.

The others followed, Cazenovia bringing up the rear. "I know I'll get in trouble for this," the old girl grumbled.

Elocution skidded at the turn in the hall where it intersected with another hall traversing the width of the rectory, itself an old building constructed in 1834.

Pewter whispered to Mrs. Murphy, "I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry."

"I know, but you'd think the Rev would put a bowl of crunchies out somewhere. And I don't smell anything edible."

"Me neither," the mighty but small dog whispered, "and I have the best nose."

"Here." Elocution stopped in front of a closet under the stairwell that ascended to the second story. "You all stay here."

"Elocution, this really isn't necessary," Cazenovia sighed.

Ignoring her, the shiny cat hopped up the stairs then slipped halfway through the banisters. Lying on her side she

could reach the old-fashioned long key that protruded from the keyhole. She batted at it, then grabbed it with both paws, expertly turning the key until the lock popped.

"Oh, that is impressive." Pewter's eyes widened.

"The best part is, Herbie will flay Charlotte for leaving it unlocked." Elocution laughed.

Charlotte was Herb's secretary, second in command.

As the lock opened, Elocution gave a tug and Pewter, quick to assist, pulled at the bottom of the door with her paw. The door swung open revealing bottles of red wine and a shelf full of communion wafers in cracker boxes with cellophane wrappers. Elocution knocked one on the floor then squeezed her slender body all the way through the banisters, dropping to the floor. Within a second she'd sliced the cellophane off the box, and using one extended claw, she opened the tucked-in end.

The odor of wafers, not unlike water crackers, enticed Pewter.

"Elocution, I knew you were going to do this," Cazenovia fretted.

"Well, the box is open. We can't let it go to waste." The bad kitty grabbed a wafer and gobbled it down.

Temptation. Temptation. Pewter gave in.

Cazenovia suffered a moment. *"They're ruined now. The humans can't eat them."* She, too, flicked out wafers.

Tucker, being a canine after all, rarely worried about the propriety of eating anything. Her nose was already in the wafer box.

Mrs. Murphy allowed herself the luxury of a nibble. *"Kind of tasteless."*

"If you eat enough of them you get a bready taste, but they are bland." Cazenovia's statement revealed she'd been in the communion wafers more than once.

"Does this mean we're communicants?" Pewter paused.

"Yes," Mrs. Murphy answered. *"We're communicats."*

"What if I'm not a Lutheran? What if I'm a Muslim cat?"

"If you were a Muslim cat you wouldn't be living in Crozet." Tucker laughed.

"You don't know. This is America. We have everything," Pewter rejoined.

"Not in Crozet." Cazenovia wiped her mouth with her paw. *"You've got Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Catholics. More or less the same thing and I know Herb would have a fit, a total fit, if he knew I'd said that, but fortunately he doesn't know what I or any other cat in this universe has to say."* She took a deep breath. *"Then you've got the Baptists busily fighting among themselves these days and then the charismatic churches and that's it."*

"Let's open a Buddhist shrine. Shake 'em up a little." Elocution hiccuped. She'd eaten too many wafers too quickly.

"No. We build a huge statue of a cat with earrings like in ancient Egypt. Oh, I can hear the squeals now about paganism." Mrs. Murphy laughed as the others laughed with her.

Tucker swiveled her ears. *"Hey, gang, meeting's breaking up. Let's get out of here."*

"Help me push this back in the closet and close the door," Elocution said with urgency.

Cazenovia knocked the box in as though it were a hockey puck. Tucker, larger than the cats, pushed against the door. It closed in an instant. They scrambled out of there. Luckily for them, the doors to the meeting room weren't yet open. They made it back in the nick of time.

"—tomorrow afternoon," Matthew told Tazio.

"I'll be in the office."

"I know you're disappointed about the chestnut flooring but, well," Matthew shrugged.

"I guess I'm a perfectionist. That's what they say back at the office and on the sites, only they say it a lot more directly there." She smiled.

"You've got a lot on your plate, young lady." Hayden McIntyre joined them. "Your design for the new sports complex is just the most ingenious thing. Is that the right word?"

"As long as it's a good word." Tazio picked up her coat hanging in the hall.

"I know H.H. has none for me." Matthew shrugged.

"He'll get his shot." Hayden shrugged right back.

Tazio pointedly did not comment on the animosity between Matthew and H. H. Donaldson, head of a rival construction firm. The bad blood had been made worse when Matthew won the bid to construct Tazio's new stadium. She had hoped H.H. would win the bid because she especially liked him, but she could work just fine with Matthew.

Herb walked out with Harry and BoomBoom. "I sure appreciate you girls coming on over here. You're a welcome addition to the guild."

Both women had just begun their first terms, which lasted three years.

"I'm learning a lot," Harry said.

"Me, too."

"Look at these little angels." Harry knelt down to pet all the cats and Tucker.

"If she only knew." Elocution giggled.

"Don't be so smug," Cazenovia chided her. *"Humans don't know what we're talking about but they know smug."*

"I don't know what I'd do without those two." Herb smiled benevolently. "They help write the sermons, they keep an eye on the parishioners, they leave little pawprints on the furniture."

"I'm sure they've left them on the carpets, too." BoomBoom liked cats.

"Well, that they have but I can hardly blame them for wearing those carpets out. Fortunately we are a well-attended church, but it does put wear and tear on the building." Herb checked his watch. "Game's in an hour. You all going?"

"Yes," the two women said in unison.

"Well, I'll see you there. I'd better go through the building and shut some of the doors. On these cold nights it saves on the heat bill. Gotta save it where I can."

As he headed down the hall, Mrs. Murphy urged Harry, "*Come on, Mom, let's get out of here!*"

Cazenovia and Elocution hurried into the meeting room, flopping themselves on the sofa with a great show of non-chalance. Too great a show.

"See you, Rev," Harry called out as she tossed on her coat, opening the door for her pets and BoomBoom.

"*Whew,*" Pewter breathed as she stepped outside into the nasty weather.

2

The soon-to-be-replaced basketball stadium loomed out of the sea of asphalt like a giant white clam. That such unparalleled ugliness could be part of the University of Virginia, one of the most beautiful sites in America, was a dismal curiosity. Good thing that Mr. Jefferson was dead, for if he caught sight of the Clam he'd perish on the spot.

Harry had a new wool blanket, which she fluffed up on the seat of her old truck with another older blanket for the cats and dog to snuggle in. The three friends would curl up together, burrowing in the blankets and keeping one another toasty, but not before they complained.

"*I hate this!*" Mrs. Murphy's eyes narrowed as Harry sprinted through the sleet to the stadium.

"*I'd rather be here than there. I can stand the stomping and hollering. It's that buzzer.*" Pewter completed two circles then lay down.

Tucker, ears forward, listened as people laughed in the