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Accessory to Murder

Jessie Marcus
MYSTERY SHOPPER

INCLUDES
SHOPPING TIPS!

ELAINE
VIETS

Anthony and Agatha
Award-Winning Author of
High Heels Are Murder

ACCESSORY TO MURDER
by Elaine Viets

"I can't believe anyone would pay a thousand dollars for a scarf," Alyce Bohannon said.

"Excuse me," Josie Marcus said, "but aren't you the woman who spent a thousand bucks for kitchen knives?"

"Those weren't kitchen knives," Alyce said. "Those were carbon-steel blades from Williams-Sonoma. They were works of art."

"And this scarf isn't?" Josie said. "Look at that color: Halley blue. It's three-dimensional. Feel it. It's Italian silk. The weight is perfect. It drapes beautifully."

Josie loved Halley blue. It was deeper than sky blue and richer than the color made famous by Maxfield Par-rish. It was the blue of a bottomless lake. The color was magical with any skin tone from vanilla white to dark chocolate.

Josie held the scarf up to her face, reveling in its luxurious feel. Next to a Halley-blue scarf, her plain brown hair had glamorous red highlights and her brown eyes were deep and exotic. Her ordinary looks were her fortune, or at least her living. Josie was the ideal mystery shopper, able to melt into any mall. She couldn't wear a scarf that made her stand out.

She traced the swirling bird-and-bluebell design with a manicured finger. Like all good designs, it was simple yet sophisticated.

"Josie, quit fondling that scarf before security picks us up," Alyce said. "It's pretty. But I could buy one almost as good at Target for thirty bucks."

"I could buy a whole drawerful of knives there for the same price," Josie said.

Alyce winced. "OK, so I'm conventional. I like my art in a frame."

Josie held the blue and white scarf against Alyce's milk white skin. The fabulous scarf turned her eyes into sapphire smoke and her pale hair into platinum silk.

"When you wear something this beautiful," Josie said,
"you are the frame for the art."

"Honey, I'm the whole exhibition." Alyce looked down at her generous curves. "I'm not built to be a clotheshorse, Josie. I'm too practical to spend money on something that isn't useful."

"Nothing in Pretty Things is useful," Josie said.

"That's the whole point of this boutique. I wish I could afford this."

"You mean they don't give you a thousand bucks to spend here as a mystery shopper?"

"Not so loud," Josie said. "I'm supposed to be a *secret* shopper."

"We're housewives," Alyce said. "We're invisible."

Those skinny sales associates are too busy being hip to notice us."

"Don't worry. I'll get them," Josie said. "I have thirty dollars to spend here, and it's not going to be easy to find something."

"How about those gold earrings?" Alyce said.

"You have excellent taste. They're two hundred dollars," Josie said. "I may be able to buy a scarf ring for the scarf I can't afford. That's twenty-eight dollars."

"You know, she lives on our street," Alyce said.

"Who?" Josie said.

"Halley. Her house is trimmed in Halley blue. That color is a little loud for shutters."

"Let me buy that scarf ring, and we can get out of here and talk," Josie said.

Only one sales associate was free. SABER, her name tag said. She had dark red hair and an air of chic exhaustion. Saber ignored Josie and stared straight ahead.

Josie recognized her type. Saber was a Captive Prin-

cess. The Captive Princess knew the universe had made a terrible mistake. She wasn't a salesclerk. She was royalty, brought low. She did customers a favor by deigning to wait on them. They should be serving her. The Captive Princess took every opportunity to let the customers know they were inferior.

A lesser shopper would have begged, "Can anyone help me?"

Josie kept silent. She counted the minutes ticking off on her watch. One. Two. Three. At three minutes and fifty-two seconds, Saber finally said, "May I help you?"

"I'll take this," Josie said.

Saber picked up the inexpensive scarf ring with two fingers, as if it were a cockroach. "Anything else?" Saber was nearly paralyzed with ennui.

"This is enough." Josie smiled sweetly. She couldn't wait to write her report.

"You from New York?" Saber said.

"No," Josie said.

"I figured you didn't buy that here," she said with a nod toward Josie's garage-sale Escada. "St. Louis is too Dutch and dumb."

"That's not fair," Alyce burst out.

Josie was surprised. Alyce rarely spoke when she was mystery-shopping with Josie. But she was a fierce defender of St. Louis. She hated to admit her city had any flaws.

Saber stared at Alyce's blue silk pantsuit. "How old is that?" She didn't bother to hide her contempt.

"I buy classic styles," Alyce said. "It's five years old.

OK, six."

"Old enough to start school," Saber said. "Too old to wear. That's why Halley is moving her business to New York. St. Louisans have no style. New Yorkers understand fashion. This cow town doesn't."

Saber slouched into the back room and slammed the door.

"Thank you for shopping at Pretty Things," Josie said to the air.

Alyce stood there, openmouthed. "Did you hear what that little snip said?"

"There goes her score for personal service," Josie said.

"How can she say that about St. Louis?" Alyce said.

"Uh, I hate to agree with Saber, but nobody would call us a fashion capital."

"Some of the richest women in the world live here,"

Alyce said.

"And buy their clothes in New York and Paris," Josie said. "Where do your rich

friends get their clothes?

Chico's, Ann Taylor, and Talbots?"

"There's nothing wrong with those stores," Alyce said.

"They give good value."

"Absolutely," Josie said. "But they aren't cutting-edge. Find one high-style woman in this mall."

"Right at the end of that counter." Alyce was too polite to point, but she radiated well-bred triumph. Josie followed her gaze to a classic type, the lady who lunched.

The woman's ash-blond hair was lacquered into impossible swirls. Her patrician nose was so heavily powdered, Josie wondered if she was hiding the telltale veins of a tippler. Some of those lunches were very wet.

"That's a designer suit, isn't it?" Alyce said. "That lumpy pink, green, and yellow weave looks like oatmeal with sprinkles. She's wearing it with a mustard blouse.

Those colors are so bizarre, she has to be rich."

"Her suit is Chanel," Josie said. "The bag is Kate Spade."

"What about the scarf?" Alyce said.

"What scarf?" Josie said.

"She had a Halley-blue scarf in her hand a minute ago. She took it off the counter."

"Alyce, there were three scarves on that counter,"

Josie said. "I looked at one and put it back. You say she had the other. Now there are two. I bet she took it."

"Are you sure?"

"I think she stuffed it in her purse," Josie said.

"Tell someone. You're mystery-shopping this store."

"Don't have to. Security is already on the alert."

"Where?" Alyce said.

"See that woman pawing the evening shawls by the door? Her hair is too black to be a customer here. She does her own color. No high-style salon would let a woman over forty walk out with coal-black hair. It drains the color from her skin and makes it look yellow. Also, it's too short to be flattering for her face."

"Why not grow it longer?" Alyce asked.

"If it's short, suspects can't grab it. Besides, her shoes are lace-ups."

"So she likes comfortable shoes," Alyce said. "She's wearing a nice suit."

"It's secondhand, like mine. The hem's been let down.

She's probably an ex-cop. Her shoes tie so she can chase suspects. Slip-ons would slip off when she ran."

"She's letting Ms. Chanel get away," Alyce said. "The shoplifter is heading for the exit."

"Security is playing it smart to avoid a false arrest,"

Josie said. "The suspect has to be out of the store or she can say she meant to pay for the scarf. See the hard-faced blonde near the cash register? She's the other security person."

"How do you know this?" Alyce asked.

"Malls are my life," Josie said. "I can't tell you how many takedowns I've seen. Watch this one."

The two security women tailed Ms. Chanel out the door. Josie followed the trio

into the mall and took a seat on a marble bench near a planter. Between the leaves, she had a prime view of Ms. Chanel. Alyce sat beside her. "What—"

"Shhh," Josie said. "The show's started."

The black-haired security woman flashed her ID at Ms. Chanel. "I'm with Pretty Things Enterprises, ma'am," she said. "I'd like to ask you about the Halley scarf you have in your bag."

"I am sure you are mistaken." Ice encrusted each perfectly enunciated word.

"Please return to the store, ma'am, so we can clear this matter up."

"I do not wish to return," Ms. Chanel said. "You are forcibly detaining me. I shall call my attorney. I have the receipt here."

She pulled a receipt from her purse. Josie thought the blond security woman turned a shade paler. But the black-haired one studied the receipt, then gave a small smile. "Your receipt was issued at nine ten today at our Clayton location, ma'am. It's eleven fifteen at the Dorchester Mall. You're using an old receipt with a new scarf. Step inside, please, so we can discuss it."

"I'm sure it's a problem with your cash register," Ms.

Chanel said, but she didn't resist when security steered her inside the store and escorted her to a door behind a Japanese screen. The scene was conducted so quietly, the customers didn't notice.

"An old scam," Josie said. "Ms. Chanel buys an expensive item at one store in the chain, and keeps the receipt in her purse. Then she goes to another store and shoplifts the same item. If she's caught, she tries to convince security it's a mistake. If she gets away with it, she'll return it for cash at a third store in the chain, or sell it on eBay."

"Do you think she's a pro?" Alyce asked.

"No, a professional would have spotted security closing in and dumped the scarf or paid for it. She's an amateur trying to get a thrill and a five-finger discount.

I'll bet her mortified family will bail her out, and it won't be the first time they've had to deal with Mummy's hobby. She's pretty good, but security was alert."

Bass thumps from loud hip-hop vibrated down the corridor, drowning out the soft classical music on the mall's speakers.

Josie sighed. "I try to appreciate that music," she said.

"It's supposed to be modern poetry."

"Yeah, a lot of words rhyme with 'bitch,'" Alyce said.

"A store like the Gangsta Boyz Home is out of place at the Dorchester. Josie, you have to agree with that."

Three baggy-pantsed teens came out of the Gangsta Boyz Home and shoved their way through the mall crowd, leaving behind a trail of outraged glares.

"I'm sorry, but I don't want to shop with gangstas,"

Alyce said. "I don't feel safe. Jake would be furious if he knew I was at the Dorchester Mall. He made me promise I wouldn't go here anymore."

Statements like that made Josie glad she wasn't married. She didn't like making promises to a man—or sneaking around when she broke them.

"Jake's afraid you'll be attacked by the cane-and-walker crowd in Cissy's Tea Shoppe?"

"Don't be silly. Everyone knows crime is out of control at the Dorchester Mall, and it's the fault of the Gangsta Boyz Home. All the good stores are moving out. I don't

know why it's here."

"Because the Dorchester invited them. The mall put in a gangsta clothes store and a video arcade. Those businesses aren't for the tea shop crowd."

"But why?" Alyce said. "Our crowd is so well behaved."

"And so tightfisted," Josie said. "The women who shop here buy one cashmere sweater at Lord and Taylor and wear it twenty years. You can't keep a mall open with that kind of spending. The mall wanted a younger crowd who spend money on clothes, sneakers, and CDs."

"Instead, they brought in the people who shoplift them."

"Alyce!" Josie said.

"Well, it's true. Lucy Anne Hardesty's mother had her purse stolen when she left the tearoom. The young thug broke her elbow. Ruined her golf game. Another friend was held up in the Dorchester parking lot."

"I haven't seen anything about a crime wave in the papers," Josie said.

"Jake says that's because the Dorchester is a major advertiser in the *St. Louis City Gazette*. Jake says they're not going to report a rise in crime and risk the mall pulling its ads."

That was the other thing Josie hated about her married friends. The women quoted their husbands as if they didn't have a thought in their heads. Yet Josie knew Alyce had put Jake through law school.

"Jake says—"

"Hey! You! Stop!"

Josie saw one of the tough teenagers racing down the marble concourse, clutching something in his huge hands.

The security guard made a flying tackle and brought the kid down hard. They rolled on the floor, while another guard jumped on top of the young man. A third yelled,

"Call ."

"Those security guards are good," Alyce said.

"They're stupid," Josie said. "Subduing a suspect like that is the best way to get slapped with a lawsuit. The kid's bleeding. The guards used excessive force. What did he take, anyway?"

"A biography of Donald Rumsfeld," Alyce said.

"Why would he steal a book when he could get it free at the library?"

"He isn't going to read it," Josie said. "He's going to take it to another store in the chain and try to get a refund. If he can't get cash, he'll use the store credit to buy a CD. Where are his friends?"

"I don't see them anywhere," Alyce said. "I guess they took off."

"Unless he was supposed to create a diversion for the real action," Josie said. She heard a popping sound.

"Is that a car backfiring inside the mall?" Alyce said.

"It's a gunshot," Josie said, and pushed Alyce down under the bench. Two young men with short dreads were running for the stairs.

"Help me!" A young woman with wide dark eyes, four eyebrow rings, and spiky pink hair staggered out of the athletic-shoe store three doors away. Her face was bleached with shock. She could talk only in short gasps.

"Two men. With dreads. They've got a gun. They held up our store."

Six shoppers with cell phones simultaneously punched in .

Josie ran to the young woman's side. Her name tag said COURTNEY.

"Are you OK, Courtney?"

"I'm fine," she said—but her teeth were chattering.

Josie picked a sweatshirt off a display rack and wrapped it around her. Josie saw blue smoke and smelled cordite.

"What happened? Did they try to shoot you?"

"They shot the cash register. Two guys in Crips clothes came in." Courtney stopped to catch her breath.

"The tall one had a Glock . It looked like the ones on TV. He said he'd shoot me if I didn't open the cash register. My hands were shaking so bad, I couldn't hit the keys. He pushed me aside and blasted the register.

He scooped up four hundred dollars. His friend grabbed three pairs of athletic shoes. They got away with a thousand dollars altogether."

"But you're not hurt," Josie said.

"No," Courtney said. "Except my ears are ringing.

Shit. I don't want to cry."

Josie gave her a handful of tissues, and she dabbed angrily at her face, smearing her dark eye makeup. "I've never had a gun pointed at me before."

Alyce poured a cup of coffee at the courtesy counter.

It was black as old motor oil. Courtney took a sip and made a face, but she drank it.

"I can't believe they'd hold up a mall shop in broad daylight," Alyce said.

"It's that freaking gangsta store," Courtney said. "I don't care if the manager did give me a raise. It's not worth it. Today's my last day." She tore off her name tag and threw it on the counter.

Mall security and uniformed cops rushed through the store door. Josie and Alyce faded out the side entrance.

They hadn't seen the holdup and didn't want to be questioned by the police.

"I need some coffee," Alyce said. "Let's go downstairs."

They stopped at a kiosk for double lattes, then plopped down on the wrought-iron chairs in the mall's indoor garden. A pink froth of flowers poured from terra-cotta pots. Sunlight streamed through the skylights in shimmering shafts. The fountain's soft patter soothed them.

"This is such a beautiful mall," Alyce said. "It's a shame I'll never come back."

"Why? Because you saw two thefts? That goes on at every mall in America."

"Not where I shop," Alyce said.

"Yes it does," Josie said. "One million Americans shoplift every day. They boost roughly twenty thousand dollars a minute. I know the gangsta kids looked scary, but what really happened? A white woman stole a thousand dollars and so did some black kids."

"No, you can't explain it away, Josie," Alyce said.

"An old woman who shoplifts a scarf and an armed robbery are not the same. That holdup was frightening.

Maybe I'm sheltered, but I like my life. I'll never come back here again, not even for you."

Josie shrugged. "OK, if that's how you feel."

"I do. My suburban neighbors can be crooks, but we don't shoot people in malls."

"You just hold them up on paper," Josie said.

"That isn't funny," Alyce said.

It wasn't. Soon, more gunshots would shatter their lives. Nothing would ever be the same for Alyce and Josie.

Josie could find her way blindfolded to the food court at any mall in America, but she was lost in a kitchen.

Alyce was a culinary artist. After a stressful morning at the Dorchester Mall, she'd retreated to her kitchen.

Every woman fought fear in her own way. Alyce sub-dued hers with a spatula. She'd cooked all weekend.

Alyce was in the kitchen when Josie stopped at noon Monday to see if her friend had recovered.

Josie's kitchen looked like the "before" photo in a home-improvement magazine. Alyce's was the triumphant "after." At the palatial Estates at Wood Winds in far West County, kitchens did not have porcelain sinks and Formica counters. Alyce's kitchen was paneled in linfold oak, like an English library. The fridge was so thoroughly disguised Josie couldn't find it. Somebody should have stuck WESTINGHOUSE on the paneling to give her a hint. Josie couldn't even figure out Alyce's toaster.

It looked like something launched by NASA.

Alyce was a flurry of movement at her black granite island, chopping, whipping, and whisking with arcane kitchenware. Josie watched, fascinated. She had no idea what half those tools were. They looked like they belonged in a dungeon.

"I thought I'd fix us a little brunch before the plumber arrives," Alyce said. "Would you like an artichoke-and-leek frittata?"

"If you make it, I'll like it," Josie said. She took a seat at the granite island, on the lee side of the slicers

and dicers. "Why are we waiting for the plumber? Is your toilet stopped up?"

"No, I need a pot filler," Alyce said.

"What's that?" Josie said.

"I'm having a tap installed over the stove to fill my big cooking pots. That way I won't have to haul them across the kitchen."

"You're joking," Josie said.

"I am not. Everyone has one."

"Not in Maplewood," Josie said. "We city women are made of sturdy stock. We cross vast kitchens carrying pots full of water."

"Slopping it everywhere," Alyce said.

"Of course. How else would I clean my kitchen floor?"

What's in this martini? It's red."

"It's a cranberry martini," Alyce said. "It's good for you. Something's worrying you, Josie. I mean, besides that awful business at the Dorchester Mall."

"That didn't bother me," Josie said. "Theft is a fact of life at the malls. But I admit, the armed robbery was a little extreme."

Josie lived in an old suburb on the edge of St. Louis.

It was safe by Josie's standards, but Maplewood had its share of crime. Still, she preferred her town's eclectic jumble to the lockstep perfection of Alyce's safer subdivision.

"It's no joke, Josie. Those men pulled a gun on an innocent store clerk. Maybe you're used to that, but I'm not." Alyce was furiously cracking eggs into a bowl two at a time.

"I owe you an apology," Josie said. "I did some research. On Friday, we saw the Dorchester Mall die. That holdup was the beginning of the end. It's happened at other malls: They rent to a store that brings in the wrong clientele. Shoplifting, purse snatchings, and other crimes go up. The advertisers put pressure on the local papers to downplay the crime. That works for a while. Then something too big to cover up happens and the situation explodes."

Alyce broke another pair of eggs.

"How do you do that?" Josie said. "Not a single piece of shell. My eggs would come out extra crunchy."

"Thank you," Alyce said.

"For the eggs?" Josie asked.

"For taking me seriously about the Dorchester Mall.

For not making me feel like a sheltered housewife. But you still haven't answered my question. What's worrying you?"

"My mom. She's taken up smoking."

"Why?"

"Peer pressure," Josie said.

Alyce laughed. "Your mom is what? Sixty-five?"

"Sixty-eight," Josie said. "Jane gave up smoking after my father walked out on us, because she couldn't afford cigarettes. She needed every penny to raise me. Now that she's retired, she has a little spending money. Her friends all smoke, so she started again. She says she's not worried about cancer—she's too old to care."

"She has a point, Josie," Alyce said. "It's her life."

"It's a bad example for Amelia," Josie said. "Nine is a dangerous age. Some of the kids at her school are starting to smoke. She doesn't need to see her grandmother puffing away. Her school has zero tolerance for smoking. She could lose her scholarship and be expelled.

She—"

Josie stopped in midsentence and stared at Alyce. Her friend was packing curly greens into what looked like a fertilizer spreader. "What are you doing with that miniature farm equipment? The doohickey with the crank?"

"It's an herb mill," Alyce said, as if that explained it.

Josie guessed everyone had one of those, too. She wouldn't embarrass herself with more questions. "Here's the other problem with Mom smoking: She stinks."

"Josie!"

"I can't stand to be in her home. I'm there five minutes and I reek of cigarette smoke. It's in her carpets and her curtains. I have to wash my hair every time I see her. She lives upstairs, don't forget. The smoke seems to seep into everything in her flat. I've told her I hate it, but she waves away my protests like I don't count."

"What's the big deal?" Alyce was tearing the leaves off the baby artichokes and throwing them away. Alyce tossed everything but a thimble-sized hunk of the heart.

Josie thought it was a lot of work when she could buy nice big artichoke hearts in a jar for two bucks.

"It's her home," Alyce said, eviscerating another tiny artichoke. "If your mom reeks of smoke, she'll gross out Amelia. You won't have to worry about your daughter picking up a bad habit."

"Mom smokes in my home, too."

"Tell her no," Alyce said. "It's your right to ban smoking there." She dropped the infant artichokes into boiling water.

"That's the problem when your mother is also your landlord and your babysitter," Josie said. "She smokes while she watches Amelia in our flat. Mom swears she doesn't, but she sneaks cigarettes. I can smell them the moment I unlock the door. She opens the windows, so the place is stinky and freezing cold, and I'm paying to heat the outdoors."

"Sounds like what you used to do at school. Didn't you sneak ciggies in the girls' bathroom and blow the smoke out the window?"

Alyce dropped the boiled artichokes into a bowl of ice water. Josie wondered if the little things were confused.

"How did you know?" Josie asked. "We didn't go to school together."

"I know you, Josie. I bet you smoked to rebel. Maybe your mom is doing the same thing. The more you make a big deal out of it, the more she'll light up. Let her go.

It's a phase. Why did you quit smoking?"

Alyce patted the tortured artichokes dry with a towel, as if she'd just given them a bath.

"I discovered boys," Josie said. "I wanted more money to spend on clothes and makeup, so I quit the cigarettes. Ohmigod. What if Mom got a serious boy-friend? I mean, besides her bingo buddy, Jimmy Ryent.

He's harmless."

"See, it could be a lot worse," Alyce said. "Men are a much harder habit to break than cigarettes. More ex-

pensive, too. My friend Liz's mother spent a fortune on a face-lift, and that got her a man who cleaned out her bank account. Now all Liz will inherit is a mountain of debt." Alyce plugged an odd-shaped metal device into a lemon.

"What are you doing to that innocent lemon?" Josie said.

"It's a citrus trumpet," Alyce said. "It's the most efficient way to extract juice from lemons and limes. Just plug this in and squeeze, and the juice comes down the funnel spout. No waste. No seeds."

"It looks cruel," Josie said.

The discussion on citrus abuse was interrupted by the doorbell.

"That's the plumber," Alyce said, and jumped up to open the side door.

There was quite a package on her kitchen doorstep.

Josie took in the long legs, the tight jeans, and the soft blue denim shirt with the logo MIKE'S DOGTOWN PLUMBERS. The plumber's eyes were a clear gray-blue. The jaw was firm and square. Short brownish hair, *Miami Vice* stubble. Very nice, she thought.

"I'm Mike. I'm here for your plumbing," he said, and turned bright red. "I mean, you wanted a pot filler, ma'am?"

He looked at Josie and Alyce, not sure who to address. Josie bit her lip, trying not to giggle.

"Yes," Alyce said. Her pale complexion was pinker than usual. She patted the wall over the stove. "I want it here, if you can get to my pipes. I mean, my water pipes."

Josie snorted and tried to turn it into a cough.

Mike looked ready to bolt for the door. "Pipes. Right.

I'm sure you have good lines. I'll get my stuff in the truck and be back." He disappeared again.

"He can get to my pipes," Josie whispered. "I may need a pot filler after all."

"Quiet," Alyce hissed. She was rosy with embarrassment.

Mike returned with a gray toolbox and a wary expression.

"We're having a frittata," Alyce said. "Would you like a piece?"

Josie choked. Alyce kicked her.

"No thanks," Mike said. "I had lunch already. A Big Mac." He looked around the kitchen. "I guess you don't go to McDonald's."

"I do," Josie said. "I love the special sauce. I could coat my whole body with it." Where did that come from?

Mike's eyebrows shot up.

"As a beauty aid," Josie added. "Not to eat."

Alyce had such a bad coughing fit that Josie had to pound her on the back. Mike tried to get her a glass of water, but he couldn't find the cabinet with the glasses in the acres of unmarked oak. By the time Alyce finished choking, Josie's ridiculous remark was forgotten.

"Can I get you any coffee? Soda? Bottled water?"

Alyce said. She took a step toward the stove and Mike backed toward the door. What was going on here? Why would two housewives scare a plumber? And why did they sound like a bad porn movie?

"No, I'm fine," Mike said. "Really. I just want to work."

"Then we'll let you do that," Alyce said brightly. "As soon as I get my buns out of the oven."

"Good," he said. "I mean, thanks."

Alyce might be rattled, but she was still a perfect host-ess. She cut the frittata in two and put each half on a plate with a generous helping of salad. Then she carried the plates into the sunny breakfast room. Josie studied her friend's odd gliding walk. Alyce seemed to float above the floor, and Josie could never figure out how she did that.

"How can I help?" Josie said.

"You can sit down and enjoy the view," Alyce said.

She was too polite to say Josie would only be in her way.

Josie sat. The sunny bay window overlooked the garden, planted for early December with ornamental cabbages. The table had yellow linen napkins and matching sweetheart roses in a cut-glass vase.

Alyce put a pot of coffee on the warmer and brought in the pitcher of leftover cranberry martinis, a basket of warm rolls, and butter curls. Then she came back with the kitchen-counter TV. Alyce never watched television during meals. Josie suspected she wanted to provide cover for their conversation. Alyce turned the TV on low, and they talked in half whispers.

"What's wrong with me?" Josie said. "I've never sounded so stupid."

"We have *Desperate Housewives* syndrome," Alyce said. "Ever since that TV show, any halfway-cute handyman gets hit on. It's especially difficult for plumbers, and this one is hot. These men are running scared. They're used to initiating the sex, not having women come on to them."

"He's cute, but I can't believe I said those things,"

Josie said. "I'm so embarrassed."

"You couldn't help yourself. You fell into the Susan role, the klutzy single one. I expected you to trip over a chair any moment. That blasted show has ruined our handymen. It used to be a woman could have a little fling with a repairman and it was no big deal. I didn't indulge, but some of my friends did. Now these guys have become sex objects. They're like rock stars, except they're useful. Women find them irresistible."

"No wonder he's scared. Should I—"

But Alyce was staring at the TV screen. It had a red *Breaking News* banner across the bottom. She grabbed the clicker and turned the sound up. The announcer was saying, "The West County woman was shot and killed in an apparent attempted carjacking at the Dorchester Mall.

Witnesses said a seventeen-year-old African-American male was the shooter. Police chased the suspect in the mall, where he was apprehended and taken into custody.

"The dead woman was identified as Halley Hardwicke, thirty, a designer—"

Alyce's fork clattered onto her plate. "That's my neighbor," she said. "Halley's dead."

"The scarf designer," Josie said, and upset her cranberry martini. Neither woman noticed the red liquid dripping on Alyce's floor.

Halley's photo flashed on the screen. She could have been Alyce's sister—her thinner, stylish sister. Halley's skin was pale as orchid petals. Her platinum hair was long and straight and set off by a scarf of infinite blue.

Halley. The woman who made silk scarves of heartbreaking beauty. She'd been shot down in a mall parking lot.

Suddenly, the world seemed much uglier.

The news of Halley's murder spread through Alyce's subdivision with the speed of sound. Cell phones chirped and computer keys clicked. Husbands were called out of do-not-disturb meetings. Wives opened vibrating phones in checkout lines, saw the

personal emergency codes, and took the calls at the cash register, a cardinal sin for polite suburbanites.

Josie and Alyce were still staring at the TV in stunned disbelief when the women of Wood Winds responded to the emergency. They ransacked their kitchens to whip up luscious cakes and hearty main dishes. Disasters this close to home could not be faced on empty stomachs.

Some women cooked special family meals, as if brewing a personal charm to protect their loved ones. The cooking wine came out for husbandly favorites, such as beef bourguignonne, and if the cook had a few slugs, well, she needed to steady her nerves.

Halley was dead. A member of the Wood Winds Christmas dance committee was murdered at the mall, shot during an innocent shopping trip. If golden, good-luck Halley could be killed, it could happen to any of them.

While some Wood Winds women felt the urge to protect their homes, others reached out to their neighbors.

One of them ran straight to Alyce's house. Alyce was stacking the luncheon plates in her kitchen, carefully stepping around Mike the plumber. Josie was mopping

up her spilled martini and trying not to stare at Mike's well-shaped rump wiggling under the sink.

The kitchen doorbell rang and a soft voice called,

"Alyce, are you home? It's me, Joanie."

"Who's she?" Josie whispered.

"My neighbor Joanie Protzel," Alyce said. "She has the place with the mansard roof, right next door to Halley's house. She may know something."

Alyce opened the door and Joanie bustled into the kitchen with two huge trays. She was so upset, she didn't even notice Mike.

Joanie was about thirty, one of those tiny women who could lift a sofa by one leg to vacuum underneath. She'd hauled in half a deli, but she didn't have one brown hair out of place.

"I just heard about Halley," Joanie said. "I couldn't sit home alone. I had to talk to someone. I brought over two shivah trays."

The mourning food took up the entire granite island.

"Joanie's family owns Protzel's Deli in Clayton,"

Alyce said.

"We're sending food to Halley's family, too," Joanie said. "This is just a nosh."

Some people say it with flowers. Joanie said it with food. She believed in comfort food—if you ate, she felt better. Josie didn't think she could eat anything after Alyce's frittata, but she took a small nibble of the corned beef. Then she took a big bite. Soon she'd downed several slabs of meat.

The turkey looked like it had been sliced off a real bird. Josie hated the processed junk that tasted like wet Kleenex. She helped herself to a small piece. Yum. Juicy.

She tried a little more. Then a lot more.

How can I eat like this when a woman has been murdered? Josie thought.

Because death makes you hungry for life, she decided.

She piled life-giving salami on rye.

"I never thought someone from this neighborhood could be carjacked," Alyce said. "We don't even lock our doors in Wood Winds."

"It didn't happen here," Joanie said. "It was at the Dorchester. We've all heard the stories about that mall."

My friend Kay's sister was mugged there in broad daylight. Kay won't go there, not even for the white sales."

"Jake doesn't want me shopping at the Dorchester, either," Alyce said.

Josie spread chopped chicken liver on citzel bread.

The rye bread rolled in cornmeal had an incredible crust.

It would be a shame to waste it.

"That's because Jake loves you," Joanie said.

Josie wondered why love meant saying no. She reached for more chicken liver and saw big holes in the deli platter. Josie hoped she wasn't responsible for them all. She was relieved to see Alyce demolishing a beef-stuffed kaiser roll as big as a hubcap.

"Have a little hand-sliced Nova," Joanie urged, heaping a poppy-seed bagel with cream cheese, capers, and half a pound of salmon. She handed it to Josie.

Josie ate the salmon. It was only polite.

"Jake says you wouldn't believe how bad the crime is at that mall," Alyce said. "He says there have been muggings, purse-snatchings, even rapes in the parking garage."

They put in more security cameras because of the crime.

Josie and I were mystery-shopping there Friday and we saw an armed robbery. Well, we saw the aftermath. That poor store manager was shaking like a leaf."

"You're a mystery shopper?" Joanie gave Josie a big smile. "I've always wanted to get paid for shopping."

"It's a lot more than shopping," Alyce said before Josie could answer. "It's hard work. Josie is part actress and part undercover cop. She really cares. She thinks women shoppers are laughed at."

"We don't get any respect." Joanie piled more salmon on a bagel for Alyce.

Alyce took it without hesitation. Murder killed all thoughts of dieting. Why be thin today if you were dead tomorrow? "Josie has all these disguises, so she can go into any store and look like a regular customer. Sometimes she wears tube tops and sometimes she dresses like us. Today, she looks like a trophy wife."

Josie was wearing her Fashion Victim outfit again.

"The job must pay well if you're wearing Escada,"

Joanie said.

"I got it at a garage sale," Josie mumbled through a mouthful of salmon.

"The shoes are torture," Alyce said. "Look at the pointy toes on those Pradas. The wigs are pretty uncomfortable, too, but that's her own hair today. You usually wear your blond wig with your Fashion Victim outfit."

Where is it?"

"I washed it and it was still wet this morning," Josie said. "I didn't have time to dry it."

"At least it's not that black thing," Alyce said. "I've worn some doozies on our trips."

"You go with her?" Joanie said.

Josie could almost feel the admiration radiating from the tiny woman.

"Sometimes, if she needs a partner. But I don't get paid," Alyce added quickly. Wood Winds wives must never look like they needed money.

"Alyce is my best disguise," Josie said. "Nobody sees two housewives."

"They don't even see one," Joanie said. "You'd think I was invisible in some of those stores."

"Someone must have waited on you. That's a nice necklace," Alyce said.

"It's from Chico's," Joanie said.

"I rest my case." Josie crunched a dill pickle.

"What's that mean?" Joanie said.

"We were talking about St. Louis fashion earlier today," Josie said. "I said that Alyce's friends shopped Chico's and Ann Taylor. They don't buy Halley's scarves."

"Not for a thousand dollars," Joanie said. "No, thank you. I'd rather spend that money on my family. I've always said Halley would be happier in New York."

For a moment, Joanie's small, heart-shaped face clouded and her brown velvet eyes filled with tears. "It's so pointless," she said. "The TV said the police have the killer in custody. A young man seventeen years old.

What did he get for his murder? Nothing. And Halley is dead. Beautiful, talented Halley."

Suddenly, Josie wasn't hungry. She put the remains of her sandwich back on her plate.

"That poor family," Alyce said. "Her little girl will grow up motherless. What's Cliff going to do without Halley?"

"The way I heard it," Joanie said, "he was going to do without her, anyway. They were splitting."

"No!" Alyce leaned in closer. So did Josie. The gossip was almost as delicious as the deli.

"Cliff and Halley fought," Joanie said. "Like cats and dogs. Alan and I could hear them, and you know our house sits on a big lot. They were shouting so loud.

The sound carried right through the yew hedge and the privacy fence."

"What were they fighting over?" Alyce said.

"Cliff didn't want the divorce," Joanie said. "He wanted couples counseling. Halley said no. She was sick of the suburbs. She was going to New York. I can't tell you how many nights they went round and round on that. Then they fought over their little girl. That fight was last night. They argued over who got custody."

"Halley wanted her daughter to live with her in New York?" Alyce said.

"No!" Joanie said. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

She could hardly say the words. "She didn't want Brittney at all."

"What mother would give up her child?" Alyce was shocked.

Me, on the wrong day, Josie almost said. When Amelia was instant-messaging her friends and had the radio blaring, Josie felt like handing her over to the first person who asked. She stuffed a forkful of coleslaw in her mouth just in time. Mothers in Wood Winds did not joke about their children.

"Halley said Brittney could stay with her father and go to school here," Joanie said. "She said St. Louis was more of a family city than New York."

"Well, that's true," Alyce said. "But couldn't she wait until Brittney was out of

high school? She's what—five now? It's not that long."

"Cliff said that and Halley went ballistic. She said she'd wasted enough of her life in this backwater. She couldn't stand St. Louis another minute. Halley was too talented to live here. We were nothing but a bunch of hicks."

"You're kidding," Alyce said. "She sat there and smiled during the dance committee meetings, and all that time she despised us."

"She said such cruel, unforgivable things," Joanie said.

"And her husband Cliff's a good guy. A little stodgy, but nice. He didn't deserve that. I just hope that little girl didn't hear her mother. It will scar her for life."

There was an awkward silence. They all knew if Joanie had heard Halley, so had her daughter.

"What did Cliff do when Halley said that?" Alyce finally said.

"Cliff went crazy. He started . . . bellowing. That's the only way I can describe it. He was like a mad bull. He called Halley terrible names. Then he threw something.

Glass, or china, I couldn't tell. We heard it break. Halley screamed, but this time, it was fear, not anger. I think she was afraid he'd hit her. We were going to call the police and report domestic violence when suddenly, they were absolutely quiet.

"A little later, we heard a door slam and a car start up. Cliff's Mercedes. He must have gone for a drive to cool off. Cliff didn't come back until three in the morning. He woke us up when he opened the garage door.

He left for work today at seven like always, but he slammed the door so hard the windows rattled. They didn't make up. I bet he never kissed her good-bye that morning. Her death has to be hard on him."

"I'd never guess they were breaking up," Alyce said.

"They always seemed happy. Cliff was so proud of her.

He bragged about her accomplishments. He was always smiling and hugging her. I never saw him angry."

"Cliff is one of those men who takes it and takes it

and then one day lets loose," Joanie said. "Last night, something broke and he let her have it."

"Can you blame him?" Alyce said.

"That carjacking was a terrible, terrible thing," Joanie said. "But it could have been worse."

"What could be worse than Halley's murder?" Josie said.

"If they'd had another fight, Cliff would have killed his wife. He was that angry. I'm not sure anyone could have stopped him," Joanie said. "Then where would that poor child be, with her mother dead and her father a killer?"

"Cliff would never kill his wife," Alyce said. "That doesn't happen here. This isn't the big city."

Josie felt her temper flare. She lived in the city of St.

Louis—or close enough. How come her neighbors could be criminals, but not Alyce's?

Easy, she told herself. Alyce is your best friend.

It was an unusual friendship. Josie knew that. Alyce was rich and she was poor. Alyce was married. Josie was a single mom with no sign of a husband. Alyce was a

full-time homemaker. Josie was a mystery shopper.

Alyce liked the calm safety of her suburb. Josie preferred the frenetic pace of the city.

They'd always enjoyed each other's differences, or so Josie thought.

It's the shock, Josie told herself. Alyce doesn't really think city people are violent, does she? A small worm of doubt burrowed into Josie's brain.

Alyce's phone rang before Josie could ask.

"It's Claire, over on Wood Winds Way," Alyce said to Josie and Joanie. "I'll just be a minute."

Joanie excused herself and went into the living room, where she made her own cell phone calls. Josie needed the time to cool down. She picked at the deli platter and tried not to eavesdrop. But above the crunch of kosher pickles and kaiser rolls, she could hear every word.

"It's dreadful, Claire," Alyce was saying. "It's too early for Cliff to have plans for a service. They can't have a funeral until there's an autopsy. Why? Because it's murder. I know she's beautiful, but they have to autopsy her. Please don't cry, Claire."

Alyce hung up. "Poor Claire," she said. "She was on the dance committee with Halley. She's taking her death very hard. A carjacking. This sort of thing doesn't happen."

Josie thought she heard the rest of that sentence: "to people like us." She made a show of checking her watch.

"Look at the time. I have to pick up Amelia at school.

Tell Joanie good-bye for me." She ran outside before the wrong words slipped out.

Back in her car, she fumed. Did Alyce really believe that money could protect her from crime?

As Josie backed out of the four-car garage, she could hear Alyce's phone ringing again. Probably another neighbor. The Wood Winds women were stunned by Halley's murder. Their reaction was more than the shock of sudden death. They could not believe one of their own could be carjacked. Mindless, brutish murder didn't happen to them. They'd spent a fortune to live in mansions with unlocked doors. Josie thought they'd bought false security. She didn't believe any place was safe, even with armed guards at the gates. She always locked her doors.

She drove past the cha[^]teaus, villas, and palaces of the Estates at Wood Winds, and waved good-bye to the pointless guard. It was a brilliant December day, with a heartbreaking blue sky. The lawns were still green in the mild winter. Wood Winds looked peaceful as a postcard.

Josie's mood seesawed between anger and shame.

How could you even think those things about Alyce?

she asked herself. When you needed help, Alyce was there, no questions asked, no lectures given. You have no business criticizing your best friend. The day you sent your daughter to the Barrington School for Boys and Girls, you planted one foot in Alyce's elegant, sheltered world.

The other remained firmly in Maplewood, land of lunch boxes and redbrick houses. Except these days, Maplewood was becoming trendy. How ironic was that? It was hard to decide which 'tude to use. Should I be blue-collar, upper-class, or hopelessly hip? Josie thought.

She pulled into the curving driveway of the Barrington School. Her little gray Honda was lost in a herd of Lincoln Navigators, Cadillac Escalades, and Hummers. She felt like a workhorse running with the thoroughbreds.

Josie wondered if she'd made the right decision to send Amelia here. She'd wanted the best for her daughter. When Amelia won a full scholarship to Barrington, Josie was thrilled, even though she still had a hard time affording the school. But did the richest mean the best?

You're giving your daughter opportunities you never had, Josie told herself. Then Amelia burst through the school doors like a dark-haired bomb, her backpack bumping behind her, and Josie's doubts vanished. Her daughter's socks were sliding into her shoes. Josie thought that might be genetic. When Amelia yanked the car door open, Josie saw her daughter's soft skin with the drizzle of freckles across her nose, like tiny drops of chocolate.

Amelia still had that sweet little-girl smell. Josie knew she'd turn into a surly teen soon. But for now, Josie could enjoy her. Amelia jumped into the car and Josie waited for the delicious perfume of—

"Cigarettes!" Josie said. "Amelia Marcus, have you been smoking?"

"No, Mom." Amelia's eyes were wide and innocent.

"You're lying."

"You're holding up traffic, Mom."

Josie looked in the rearview mirror. She had the driveway blocked. She waved sheepishly to a mother in an Escalade and got an insincere smile.

"Don't change the subject, Amelia." Josie pulled out onto the street and wondered what was the fastest way home. Traffic was heavy this afternoon.

"You left early for work this morning and Grandma fixed me breakfast," Amelia said. "She was smoking."

"That smell wouldn't last until two thirty in the afternoon."

"I swear I didn't pick up a cigarette, Mom."

Josie looked at her daughter. That statement was too carefully worded. The kid could be a lawyer. "But you were with someone who did, and she gave you a puff while she held it. You've been hanging around with Zoe, and she's smoking."

Amelia's eyes bugged and she said, "How—?" then stopped. Score one for Mom.

"I can read you like a book," Josie said. It's what I did at your age, she thought. What was the old parental curse? Someday, you'll have a daughter just like you. At least it helped Josie stay one step ahead. For now, anyway.

Zoe was the bane of Josie's existence. The kid was nine going on thirty-nine. She was the first one in Amelia's class to wear makeup and high heels. She was also the class sex instructor, dispensing wildly inaccurate information mixed with enough authentic detail to scare any parent.

"What have I told you about Zoe?" Josie said. The line of cars at the stop sign was backed up for more than a mile. They wouldn't get home until midnight.

"Oh, Moom." Amelia rolled her eyes, one of Josie's least favorite habits.

"Amelia, we've talked about smoking. It causes cancer. It can kill you."

"Zoe says that's never been proven. She showed us that on the Web."

"Only an idiot believes that," Josie said.

"You think Grandma's an idiot?"

The conversation had veered into dangerous territory.

Josie took a deep breath, counted to three, and tried to tiptoe around that land mine. "Grandma is sixty-eight.

She's made a decision about her health that I disagree with, but she's an adult and aware of the consequences.

You have your whole life ahead of you."

"But it's my life."

"When you have your own house, then you can live any way you want," Josie said. "But as long as you're under my roof—" Was she really saying this? She sounded like her mother.

"It's Grandma's roof," Amelia said.

"It's my home under Grandma's roof."

Traffic was hopelessly snarled. Josie craned her neck, but couldn't see a thing. There must be an accident at the intersection. She saw a wide driveway on the left, then a long stretch of woods. It was now or never if she was going to get out of this mess. Josie made an abrupt U-turn. Her daughter did the same thing.

"What's a lesbian do?" Amelia asked.

Josie slammed on the brakes and the car behind her hit the horn. Amelia often asked embarrassing questions in the car, so she wouldn't have to look at her mom.

Josie stalled for time. She tried to remember the advice from the parenting magazines: Don't give your child too much information, but don't tell her anything inaccurate or misleading. It sounded so simple when she read it. It was different when she was trapped in a little car with a big question. It would be just like her smart little girl to ask an awkward question to distract Josie from the hot topic of smoking.

"Uh, a lesbian is a person, I mean, a woman who likes women," Josie said.

"Yeah, I know that, Mom. But what does she do? Zoe has a lesbian lawn service. She says all dykes are into lawn care."

"Amelia, don't use that word. That's a ridiculous statement. Lesbians can be anything—doctors, lawyers . . ."

She ran out of occupations, and looked around wildly for inspiration. She found it outside her car window.

"Truck drivers."

So much for stereotyping.

"How do you know if you're a lesbian?" Amelia said.

Where was this going? What if she gave the wrong answer and warped her child forever? Amelia could wind up on some shrink's couch because Josie said the wrong thing. Did her daughter have feelings for another girl?

Ohmigod. What if she fell for Zoe? It would be just like that precocious little creep to experiment with lesbian sex. Should Josie give the "you can have feelings for another woman, but not be gay" speech? Or the "I'll love you no matter who you choose to be" speech? She decided to keep her mouth shut until she knew more.

"How do you know you're a lesbian?" Josie bought time by repeating the question. Her mother used to do that, too. "Well, if you're a lesbian, you like to be with women more than men."

"Are you a lesbian?" Amelia said.

"What!" Josie's heart slammed against her ribs.

"You're with Alyce all the time."

"That's different. Alyce is my best friend. But that's all. We're just friends."

Terrific. Now I sound like an actress in some tacky tabloid, Josie thought. It was a chilly December afternoon, but a big drop of sweat plopped on her sweater.

Her palms were wet. She was panicking. Take a deep breath and answer calmly. Amelia is only nine. Kids get strange ideas.

"A woman can have a female friend and not be gay,"

Josie said.

"You don't go out with guys anymore, Mom," Amelia said. "Not for a long time."

Had it really been so long? Josie remembered her last hot night with Josh and blushed. If her daughter knew about that, she wouldn't worry about Josie's sexual orientation. But Josh had hurt her so badly, she'd banished him from her bed. Too bad she couldn't lock him out of her bruised heart. There was still a place for Josh, alongside her failed romance with Amelia's father. It hurt so bad to think about Josh, she couldn't even drive past the coffeehouse where he worked.

"Things didn't work out with Josh," Josie said. "I decided it was better to wait awhile, so I didn't make another bad decision. But I'll go out again."

When I get over him. In twenty or thirty years. Maybe I can have bingo dates, like my mom. Maybe Mom and I can double-date.

"Grandma says Alyce's husband, Jake, is an arrogant son of a bugger," Amelia said.

"Amelia!" For once, Josie agreed with her mother,

although she couldn't say that. Jake was an arrogant SOB. How did they jump to the subject of arrogant men? Did this have something to do with Josie's failed love life or was it part of the lesbian question? Josie could not follow the twists and turns of the nine-year-old mind. Amelia was amazingly adult one moment, and a little girl the next.

The silence was nearly as long as the line of cars creeping along Manchester Road. They were in the heart of Maplewood. Josie could almost walk to their flat on Phelan Street from here. She wanted to abandon her car in the traffic and run home.

Normally, she enjoyed this part of the drive. Downtown Maplewood looked like a scene from a vintage movie. She expected to see Jimmy Stewart having dinner in a restaurant or shopping for an engagement ring for Donna Reed in the Paramount Jewelers. Then the couple would go hand in hand to the model-train store and the spice shop.

Of course, normally, she wasn't trapped in a car with her daughter, answering scary questions about sex.

"Grandma said it," Amelia said. "I heard her talking on the phone with her friend Verna."

"You shouldn't listen to your grandmother's conversation."

"I couldn't help it, Mom. She was right next to me on the couch."

"You should have left the room to give Grandma some privacy."

"But we were watching *Code Lyoko*."

Amelia couldn't miss an episode of the hottest kid cartoon. She'd be a social outcast.