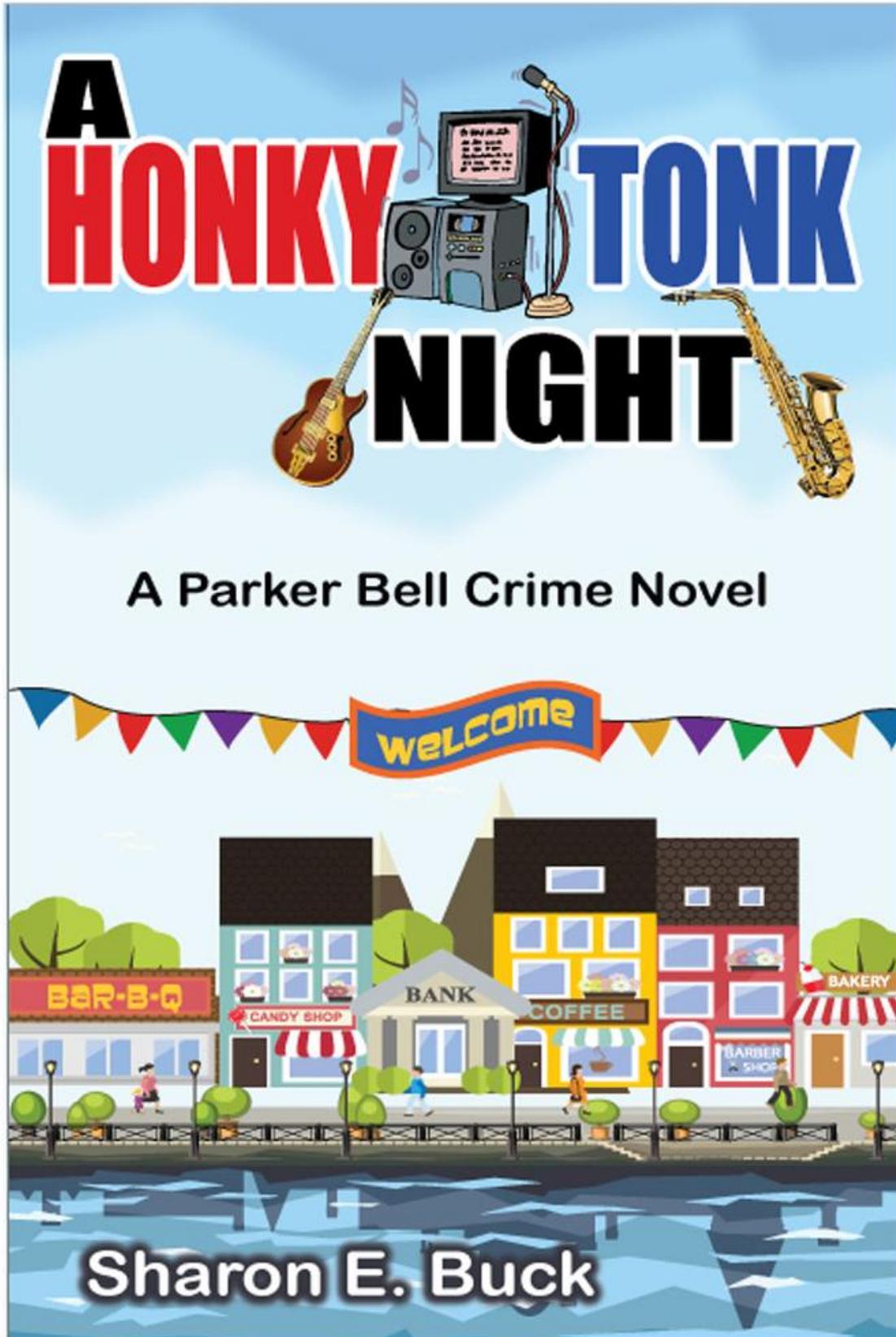


A Honky Tonk Night



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## Chapter 4

Two days later, I was on my way to Po'thole. My heart isn't going pitty-pat, my stomach isn't doing the tap dance of the seven fat ugly women, there's a travel mug full of coffee in my car cup container, and I am actually in a good mood. Darn it! The earth must have spun on its axis backwards.

I punched Gracie Blanche's number.

"Gracie Blanche speaking. How may I help you?"

"It's Parker."

"It's about time you called back."

"Tony knew I was coming back. I talked to him right after you told him to call me. Thanks for that."

She sniffed, "You'd think my close personal friend Parker Bell would have thought to call me and tell me that also, wouldn't you? But, nooo, apparently not.

"What do you want?" Gracie Blanche's tone was anything but friendly and to think the girl worked in customer service.

"I'll be back in town later today."

"You're not staying with me."

"Since when have I ever stayed with you, Gracie Blanche?!" I snipped back. "I'm staying at my house. Well, on my property. Guess I'll see you around." I punched the End button on my cell phone.

Missy didn't tell me anything about my new abode except that she was "pretty sure" I was going to like it. As long as it had air conditioning, I didn't care. Apparently, I was in denial.

Driving up the street and seeing a double-wide mobile home on my property caused me to burst into tears. Let me hasten to add, I cry once every four years for five minutes whether I need to or not. The word "cry" is not in my vocabulary.

I felt like my guts had been ripped out inch by inch. My house, while I never lived there after leaving Po'thole, was the last thing that semi-tied me to the semblance that parents weren't really dead. They were just at the grocery store and hadn't come home yet. It's amazing what our brains can use as an excuse.

That double-wide brought out sobs and heaving that I didn't know existed within my body. My brain completely shut down. My vehicle rolled into the driveway and I fell over in the front seat in the fetal position. I didn't know how long I had been laying there when Bill Weeble, the elderly next door neighbor who is the nosiest person I had ever met, tapped on my window.

I ignored him. The man couldn't hear jack poo-poo and talked in circles. The last person I wanted to talk to right now was him. Apparently that wasn't meant to be.

"Parker, Parker." He tapped again and slightly raised his voice from a raspy whisper to a subdued level. "Parker, Parker. Are you drunk and passed out?"

Yeah, like if I was drunk and passed out, why would I answer a stupid question like that?

"No. Leave me alone. I'm fine." I refuse to get up and engage in what Bill calls normal conversation. I call it talking in circles and going nowhere. It's kind of like sitting in a rocking chair, it's all motion. Three hours later, you're still in the same spot. Same thing talking to Bill.

Tap, tap, tap. "Parker, if you're drunk and dead in there, I'm going to go to the police."

"Bill," I shouted. "I'm fine, go away."

"Parker, I think you're dead. I'm going to call the police now."

I laid there for a few more seconds when it dawned on me that having the police here wasn't a good thing. I hauled myself up. Bill had the speed of a pregnant turtle. He had only walked eight feet when I jumped out of the car.

“Bill,” I shouted. Those so-called state-of-the-art hearing aids he had gotten from the Veterans Administration apparently had been purchased in bulk at a closeout-discount place in Southeast Asia somewhere because Bill sure couldn’t hear with them.

He didn’t respond. I tapped him on the shoulder. He jumped.

“Parker, I thought you were passed out drunk in your car.”

“Bill.” I was almost shouting at the top of my outdoor voice. “It’s a van. I don’t get drunk and I’m fine. You don’t need to call the police. I’m fine.”

“Then why were you laid out in your car? Did you know some folks came by here and put up that trashy trailer on your property?”

He puffed out his skinny, sunken in chest. Heck, maybe he was just taking a really deep breath. I couldn’t tell. “I tried to stop them but they ignored me.”

“It’s a van. You tried to stop them from putting up something on my property, Bill? Now why would that be?” I know better than to ask him questions but somehow I just can’t help myself.

“Because it’s a trailer and trailers have no business in our neighborhood.” He paused, “Besides which, it will bring down the value of our property.”

He waved his hand at me in a very dismissive fashion. “Only white trash live in these things and your mom and dad would have a fit if they knew you did this.”

While I knew my parents wouldn’t be happy, it was really crappy that he brought it up. I was not feeling warm, compassionate thoughts about Bill Weeble.

“Bill, it is a modular home, not a double-wide mobile home. It does have landscaping...”

He interrupted me, “It doesn’t have those pretty azalea bushes out front like your mom had.”

I gritted my teeth. “That’s true, Bill, but I don’t like azalea bushes and...”

Elizabeth Weeble poked her head out of the house. “YOU DON’T LIKE AZALEA BUSHES?! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?”

I'm sure that everyone in Po'thole now knows I'm back and I'm reasonably sure someone from the garden club will be prancing by my property any moment with tips on how to speed up the process of having fully blooming weed bushes aka azaleas in February although it was only October. The darn things are as ugly as home-made sin to me. They only bloom two weeks out of the year and the rest of the time give inspiration to the camouflage manufacturers. Oh, wait, the manufacturers haven't changed the color or pattern of camouflage in decades. Azaleas are just ugly and serve no useful purpose to mankind.

"Bill and Elizabeth, it's nice to see you're up and about. I'll catch up with you at another time." Being polite and courteous isn't one of my stronger gifts but I do try. I thought I came across as a polite neighbor but who knows what the Weebles thought?

Entering in the modular home, and, yes, it was a modular home and not a double-wide as I had first thought, Missy had done a great job in having it decorated and with furniture that suited my personality. Everything had that new smell. I had a coffee table to put my feet on. The air conditioning was cold, food and coffee was in the kitchen, the water worked, I was a happy camper. There was actually a land line for my computer and, bless Missy's heart, I had a new laptop on the countertop.

I called Tony. He was out and would call me upon his return.

I realized Missy had been kind enough to have someone leave me a week's worth of the Po'thole Daily News. Not having anything else better to do, I caught up on all of the local happenings.

Scooter Travis being murdered and not having a clue as to motive or who did it captured a good portion of the paper's space for the past week. There was a lot of re-hashing of what Scooter was known for and some of the projects that he was working on including the plans for a casino.

I darn near dropped my teeth out of my head when I read that. Casino? What would a casino want with a rural, economically depressed, little town where the IQ barely rated over the mentally challenged level?

Of course, a casino would be perfect for the local economy and for laundering money. Cash is extremely hard to trace. But what was the connection with Scooter? According to Gracie Blanche, during one of her many “is he ever going to leave his wife” calls, Scooter was a capitalist from the get-go. He believed in God, apple pie, and a fat bank account, including one in the Cayman Islands that his latest wife didn’t know about but Gracie Blanche did.

Casino people would definitely not to knock off someone who was on their side and especially not a mayor who was pushing their agenda.

Tabitha, while very popular in town, only had one day’s worth of free publicity. Odd that a city commissioner had only one day’s coverage while a former mayor, allegedly crooked, got several days’ worth. Sad to know that it probably wouldn’t help any of her many worthwhile charities and causes. I felt an ache in my heart that I probably wasn’t the best friend Tabitha had because I wouldn’t move back to the town time forgot but I always returned her phone calls and we did talk about three or four times a year on the phone. What I really ached for was the knowing of one of my childhood friends was no longer here on earth, that I would never hear her laughter again.

It was a not so subtle reminder that I was getting older and that time is fleeting. Wait! I started to shake it out. I wasn’t that old and things happen. Why I came back here was still puzzling to me. It was like I was drawn to come back here and find out what happened to my friends.

Okay, it was bad enough that Bobby, Buddy, and Jack had been murdered when I was here the first time but I didn’t have a warm, fuzzy friendship with any of them. Scooter and Tabitha were a different story. I knew them well and in some small way I wanted to help find whoever had murdered them.

Oh, heck, who am I kidding? I did want to help find their murderers and why they were killed but I was also wondering if there might another book in it for me. The Murderous Little Town in the South had a nice ring to it.

I decided to go over to the house before the funeral tomorrow morning. Nothing looked out of place at Tabitha's house. I went to the back porch door and looked in. Newspapers and old magazines were scattered all over the floor. That looked normal. The back door was locked. I pounded on the door. No answer. Although Sox and Cutie Pie, the cats, were sitting on the kitchen countertop looking bored, that was also normal. I couldn't see anything out of place. Although I vaguely wondered what the cats were still doing in the house.

Tabitha's house looked just liked I remembered...magazines strewn all over the sofa, coffee table, and floor. Ironically, these were Architectural Digest, Better Homes & Garden, and the bible of all Southern women, Southern Living magazines. One would think she might have applied some of their decorating tips to her own home but apparently it was just better reading and thinking about it versus actually doing something.

The parlor room, better known as the formal living room to anyone under the age of fifty, was covered in a fine layer of dust and looked like it did the day Tabitha's mother had passed on over to the other side. The room was a shrine. Clear plastic furniture covers protected the fabric from the everyday dirt and grime of someone's clothes. I was so glad no one did this anymore.

Tony Bugs had told me on the phone that she had been shot in the parlor. This brought up a whole slew of questions. What was Misty Dawn doing in the parlor? Tabitha never went into that room. It was a shrine to her late mother. The room hadn't been changed, dusted, or vacuumed in probably thirty years. The sofa was still wrapped in vinyl and the lace doilies were on the sofa's armrests for Sunday company. This was an allergy sufferer's

worse nightmare. If Tabitha were found in that room, then she had definitely been murdered.

Tabitha also had a close personal relationship with Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson and I seriously doubted she would have ventured into that room without either one of them in her hand. If she had done that, then something was seriously wrong. Well, let me hasten to add, any death is seriously wrong but to have Tabitha in that shrine room to her mother something very unusual had to happen. Tabitha was petrified of ghosts and she was sure ghosts were in that room to protect her mother's ashes. Nope, Tabitha wouldn't have gone into that room willingly.

I walked outside and around to the front of the house. Standing on my tiptoes, I tried peering in through the windows. The blinds were closed. I couldn't see anything. I decided to go around to the side of the house. The blinds had been pulled up and the window was shattered.

From this angle I could see where she had been shot and fallen. The blood stain was clearly visible from the window. I imagined the last thing Tabitha did was to put her left hand around the little cross she always wore. Her mother had given it to her when she was thirteen.

The tears started to flow. I managed to get them wiped away as a police cruiser stopped in front of the house. I recognized the chief of police getting out of the car.

"When did you get back into town?" Tony displayed all of the charm of a displaced New Jerseyite, which he was.

"Oh, about thirty minutes ago."

Tony smiled, showing the dimple in his left cheek and twinkling puppy dog eyes. "You know, you still owe me a dinner."

Holy freaking cow! There was a city commissioner who had been murdered and the only thing Tony could think about was a forgotten dinner I had promised him the last time I was in Po'thole?!

“Um, yeah, okay. What about Tabitha though?”

He chuckled. “Well, I don’t expect her to go with us.”

Men!

I glared at him.

Tabitha had been facing the window, the blinds were up, and the glass had exploded inward because there was tons of it all over the area rug...along with the blood stains. The life of my friend splattered on a rug.

I have witnessed a number of crime scenes in my life and seen god knows how many crime scene photos, but my reaction was one I never anticipated. I burst into tears...again.

Tony Bugs turned and put his arms around me. I felt unexpected warmth and compassion from him. I literally melted into him...in a platonic way, of course. Deep sobs escaped from my normally you-can’t-make-me-feel-anything lips. I was vaguely aware that Tony had lead me into the house to the dining room and sat me down on a chair.

“Parker,” he said gently. “I am so sorry for your loss and I know you’re hurting right now but you do know I’m going to have to ask you some questions.”

I numbly nodded my head. There was a void inside my brain, everything had slowed down like a snake in winter...sluggish, vapid, and my body seemed to be totally separate from my brain.

I guess I must have fainted because the pungent, nauseating smell of an ammonia capsule was under my nose. Jerking my head away from the capsule, I heard someone say, “She’s coming around, Chief.”

“Parker, Parker, can you hear me?” Alas, instead of Fabio whispering in my ear and enticing me to run away with him in a steamy dream, it was the professional, detached voice of Chief Bugalia prodding me to come back to reality.

“What?” I snapped, sitting up so fast I touched noses with the EMT holding the ammonia capsule. He’s probably going to have nightmares for a while.

Scrambling up, probably not very ladylike – I had not been blessed with that Southern gene of ladylikeness much to my mother’s chagrin, I said, “Chief, here’s what I know.” I told him everything including Tabitha’s concern about her phone tapped and being followed.

Tony scratched his head. “Why didn’t she come to me about this?”

“What were you going to do about it, Tony? You don’t have enough officers to give her twenty-four hour protection. She couldn’t afford to pay your off-duty officers to watch her. What? What, pray tell, could you do about it?” Admittedly, my voice had risen and it was full of anger. Realistically, I knew he didn’t have an answer.

“Filing a report isn’t really going to help much anyway. You know that.” I was grumpy.

“Since you seem to have all the answers, do you know who did this?” Tony snapped.

After a few more minutes of terse verbal exchanges, I stomped out of the house and drove back to my new house. I couldn’t call it home because it wasn’t. Home had blown up the last time I was in Po’thole. This place was merely a poor substitution for home.

The coolness of the air conditioning put a dose of nice back into my attitude. Popping a top, Missy was thoughtful enough to have had a case of my favorite adult frothy liquid libation put in the refrigerator, I wondered what was going on in this tiny little town in Northeast Florida. There were now a total of five murders in less than twelve months. There had never been that many murders in one year since the town was established in 1821. Was there some new discharge being dumped into the once pristine but now contaminated St. Johns River that was affecting only certain members of Po’hole society? Much as I hoped that would be the simple answer, it didn’t make any sense.

The newspaper wasn’t going to provide all of the little details people talk about. Tony wasn’t going to share his findings, he was more interested in our going out to dinner. I strongly suspected I wouldn’t get any information from him during dinner either. Dewitt would be over the moon if he knew I was back in Po’thole. He was a last resort. The only two people I knew well enough anymore who probably had a good idea of what was going

was the vice mayor Shelley George and city commissioner Celesta Summers. Gracie Blanche didn't count because she was only interested in what was going on in her world and the Old Fashioned Antique Show and Sale during the Full Moon Crappie Festival.

Celesta is a short woman built like a small high school fullback and wears her curly, reddish, brownish, and grayish hair in a style reminiscent of the 1950's. You definitely want her on your side when it comes to a throw-down involving justice. A pit bull doesn't stand a chance against her.

"You have reached the Summers residence. We don't have caller id. If you would like a return phone call, leave your name and telephone number. I serve the people. God bless Po'thole!"

I laughed. That phone message is a new spin for politicians.

I left my name and telephone number. The next one to call is Shelley George. Shelley has been in local politics since the early seventies. She seems to be the only one on the city commission who is actually interested in trying to move Po'thole forward.

"You've reached vice mayor Shelley George. Leave me a message and I'll return it within the next twenty-four hours. Together we can make Po'thole a better place!"

Maybe it's just me being cynical and not living here anymore, but even for small town politics these phone messages seemed a little strange. Plus, this isn't even an election year.

I left a message on her voicemail also. Apparently I'm the only one in this part of the country who actually answers her phone.

As I am guzzling down my adult foamy liquid libation, "So what" started playing on my cell phone.

"Parker here."

"Hey, it's Celesta. What's going on?" Bam! No nonsense, straight to the point. I love that about Celesta. I explained everything that had happened up to this point.

"Darn! Excuse my cussing!" Nothing like a Southern Baptist swearing. "You know I liked Tabitha. I really did. So, do you think I'm next on the list?"

My ears stood at attention. “List? Celesta, what list? Wait! You don’t know her funeral is tomorrow?”

“Someone keeps taking my newspaper and I haven’t actually read it in a couple of days. Well, I’m assuming there’s probably a list of names and since anyone who knows me knows I’m against a casino coming in here, I’m assuming I’m next on the list. Probably Shelley too.”

She chuckled, “If the guys had a pair, they’d be on the list too; but, god forbid, they act like men.”

I rolled my eyes, although I didn’t disagree with her and was glad that she couldn’t see me rolling my eyes. “What makes you think Tabitha’s murder has anything to do with a casino?”

“Because that’s what’s on everyone’s mind right now.”

“Is it just the women on the city commission that are against the casino? Plus, I thought there are five of you on the commission and if Tabitha, you, and Shelley vote against the casino, then so what?”

“Yeah, but that’s the problem, Parker. We haven’t voted yet. If something happens to us, it’s very possible the casino may go through anyway.”

“Wait, wait! With Scooter and Tabitha being murdered, are you sure this is just about the casino or could it be something else?”

“Well, you know, for a small town we always have something coming up.” She was thinking, I can hear the wheels turning in her head. “Maybe it’s because some of the organizers of the Full Moon Crappie Festival want to move the beer tents down to the riverfront and some of us don’t.”

“How did Scooter vote on that?”

She laughed. “Oh, you know Scooter. He voted for it. He sits, well sat, on the board of directors for Bobby Derlicter’s Beer Barn.”

I knew I was going to regret but I had to ask anyway. “So why don’t you want the beer tents down by the riverfront?”

I heard Celesta’s teeth start to grind and the big inhale of air certainly indicted I may have unknowingly fallen into one of the seven deadly sins.

“I do not want any beer sold downtown. There are families that come to the festival and children do not need to be subjected to drunks and alcoholics.”

“You do realize that most festivals in the United States have beer at them and they rarely have a problem with drunk and disorderly patrons which is what you are suggesting, don’t you?” I waited on the explosion.

“We, the citizens of Po’thole who I serve honorably, do not want beer around our children.”

“What you really mean, Celesta, is that if you see any First Baptist folks down there having a beer, you think God is going to send them directly to hell and you don’t want that on your conscious.” I was almost giggling. Of course, having a beer in my hand that Celesta couldn’t see helped a great deal as well.

“Parker, you are really trying my patience! What do you want?”

“I want to know what is going on down here. You’ve had five people die in less than twelve months. All under suspicious circumstances and, surprisingly, this doesn’t seem to upset the sheriff or the chief of police very much. What the heck is going?”

Celesta was silent for a moment. “The library, back room in an hour.”

Still chewing on a mint to hide the possible delectable aroma of the beer I had consumed, I found Celesta in the back room. She had on a big floppy hat, sunglasses, and wearing a scarf that looked like it had been her mother’s...and her mother had been dead for years. This was not a stylish look. I could only assume she thought she was wearing a disguise and thought she would be unrecognizable. She was wrong.

“Trade places with me. I’m sitting with my back to the glass. If anybody tries to do anything, you just shoot them.”

I started to laugh. “Seriously, Celesta, you want me to shoot someone?”

Indignantly, she replied, “Yes, of course, I do. I would much rather you shoot and kill someone rather just watch me get killed. I would like to think you’d protect a friend.”

“I’m not carrying a gun and what makes you think someone wants you dead?”

She put her hand to her mouth in shock. “You’re not carrying a gun? What’s wrong with you?! I always carry one! Trade places with me. You’re pretty worthless sometimes, Parker!”

“Well, Celesta, better folks than you have told me that. Regardless, let’s get down to brass tacks. What the heck is going on here?”

We swopped places. Glancing continuously at the glass window behind me, Celesta filled me in on the very slight possibility of a casino coming into the city. Her concern, keeping in mind that she is “old” Po’thole, loves it the way it is, and therefore isn’t looking for any type of real growth inside the city, is that it will bring in “undesirables.”

I shall say we had a very healthy discussion on the potential income that a casino could bring into the city. We finally agreed to disagree with her having the last word. This brought us back to the beginning of the conversation.

“What makes you think someone wants you dead, Celesta?”

“Shelley has received some very strange emails, as have I. Scooter received some too. I don’t know about Johnny “Ten Fingers”....”

“Wait! What is Johnny “Ten Fingers” doing as a city commissioner? I thought once he lost the election to Dewitt he was out of the picture.”

“Well, you know, he won a chunk of change when he went before the Florida Supreme Court on the election count with Dewitt. It turns out that he actually lives inside the city limits, he qualified to run at the last minute, and beat out Sammy Youell. There were rumors,” she wiggled her eyebrows, “that he used his, ah, influence for getting enough votes to win.”

I laughed, "I'll bet. So, let me guess, he wouldn't say anything anyway about getting threats because, after all, he gets threats all the time."

She nodded her head. "Yes, if you threaten Johnny "Ten Fingers" on anything, that's pretty much it. You never hear from that person ever again. Supposedly they move out of town but because it's on the north side, you know the cops just don't care and they're not going to do anything much about it.

"They have their own brand of justice over there, if you know what I mean." She nodded her head conspiratorially. "I think Tony Bugs has some sort of agreement with him too."

Unfortunately, nothing she said shocked me. I saw it everywhere, subtle but very effective forms of discrimination...the color of someone's skin, if someone was perceived poorer than the accuser, female. You pretty much didn't get much of a break on anything. Yet if you stood up for yourself, it could be a rough row to hoe.

"So, is Johnny "Ten Fingers" actually running Po'thole?" This could be a very scary thought. Forget the casino, running massive quantities of drugs through town and not having to worry about law enforcement interference was huge. If he had cut a deal with Dewitt, not likely because the man was already too stupid to understand what was going on in his county, or Tony Bugs, this could be bad. According to local scuttlebutt from when I was here the last time, Tony might have mafia connections in New Jersey and if he was looking the other way when Johnny "Ten Fingers" might be doing something illegal, it could appear that he was on the take. Unfortunately, many members of this small, sleepy Southern town on the beautiful St. Johns already strongly suspected that simply because Tony was from New Jersey.

Suddenly Celesta gasped. "I absolutely deplore those gals!" She was frantically pawing through her oversized handbag.

I whipped around and there, with their faces pressed up against the glass window and their tongues leaving unsanitary prints, were the Lady Gatorettes minus one.

Myrtle Sue, Flo, Rhonda Jean, Mary Jane and Misty Dawn, were five married hormonal women and had been friends since elementary school. They wreaked havoc everywhere they went. Believing that caffeine and sugar was an important daily ritual, they consumed more than their fair share. One or the other of them was always on a sugar roller coaster.

In all honesty, I was surprised to see them at the library. Other than being rabid Gator football fans and knowing all of the statistics by heart, I didn't know they were all that interested in the printed word and could read much less visit the library.

Here's the short rundown on these gals.

Myrtle Sue bragged that she had tracked her husband down during hunting season when he had "escaped"—her words—from the house without asking her permission. Southern boys during hunting season don't believe it's necessary to ask their wives for permission to go hunting or explain why they go off in the woods with other men to get sweaty, nasty, dirty, stinky, and still don't have a dead animal to show for what they were doing over the weekend.

Apparently, it was that time of the month for Myrtle Sue and she had come home from a particularly bad time at Wal-Mart and discovered that her husband, the erstwhile J.W., had gone off for the weekend with the boys and left her a note saying he would see her Monday morning before he went to work. And, oh, yes, could he have clean clothes to wear on Monday?

Myrtle Sue saw red. She vowed that J.W. wouldn't have clean clothes for the remainder of hunting season because he'd made the fatal error of not saying "I love you" on his note.

After becoming a graduate of the 90-day Myrtle Sue School of Doing Your Own Laundry, J.W. now leaves notes with a great big I Love You.

Flo is a tall, slim waitress with long blond hair who is now on her sixth husband and makes one mean strawberry pie. Flo's reason for having so many husbands was because not one of them appreciated and loved the Gators as much as she did.

“Humph,” she sniffed. “If my husband doesn’t have a clue as to who the quarterback is, what type of offense the Gators are running, and who the coaches are, then what good is he to me?”

She also only dates men when it is not football season and that probably explains why she’s never noticed that’s why they knew nothing about Gator football.

Mary Jane, a very attractive brunette way back when, went to Atlanta for a weekend with some out-of-town cousins upon graduating from high school and upon her return has never seemed quite right. There was much speculation that she had indulged in some cheap street pharmaceuticals and that was the reason why she's just never been quite right. No one knows for sure—she’s never explained—and her out-of-town cousins disavow knowledge of anything. They also have never visited her ever again.

Apparently not realizing New York City is bigger than Atlanta, she moved there for a brief moment in time. She thought she was in love with the city that never sleeps at night, changed her mind after a year, and came back. She’s still a redneck but now has an educated palate. She also dates guys that she meets on the Internet. While the rest of the Lady Gorettes occasionally scold her for surfing for men on the Internet, they are all secretly envious of her.

Rhonda Jean is the trick play master. She knows every trick play that had been in a Gator game for the past thirty-five years. She also annoys the heck out of the coaches at Florida because she creates and sends in new trick plays every week during spring practice and the regular season. Rhonda Jean’s fervent wish is that one of her plays will be used during a televised game and the Gators will run in for a touchdown. So far it hasn’t happened.

Her husband, Big T, short for Thomas the Third, is pleased as a pig in mud and mighty proud of his wife every time she receives a letter from the coaches. He just knows that one day one of his wife's plays will be used and then they will both be national celebrities. That's the reason why Big T gave up chewing for dipping. Dipping didn't turn your teeth

as brown and he's very proud of his big smile. Also, he doesn't want to look like a big old Southern redneck on national TV. The bad news is, Big T poaches game and all the Fish & Game Commission people know him all too well.

Misty Dawn, the only Lady Gatorette not plastered up against the window is in their version of the Witness Protection Program. Misty Dawn is a good person to have on your side. Why she called me to tell me about Tabitha still has me puzzled.

She was so named because that's what the morning looked like the day she was born and her mother took that as a naming sign. She sends encouraging cards and notes to all of the football players who play in each game. She was tickled pink when one of the players mentioned on national TV that it was her cards and letters that helped him during the difficult ordeal of his brother being arrested for dog fighting.

Misty Dawn, unfortunately, isn't quite as dainty as what her name might indicate. She has the vocabulary of a cross-country truck driver. And, oh, yes, she has a very short fuse on a very hot temper. The woman carries grudges like Christians forgive sins.

It's too bad that Misty Dawn didn't joined the Navy. Swift, silent, and deadly, she would've made a natural Navy Seal. The only person she's never gotten mad at is her husband John Boy. She thinks he walks on water.

John Boy works construction and is afraid of no one; however, he absolutely quivers when she walks in the house with that death-to-the-world glint in her eye.

The one time he had not let her vent, she had gone out to the chicken house and they ended up eating chicken for a month. He was glad that the only thing she had killed was fifteen chickens. As he confided to J.W. one night over beer, he was mighty happy he didn't have pigs or cattle on his ranchette because Misty Dawn might've killed them, too.

Leaning back from the glass, the gals broke out in raucous laughter and started waving at me. Celesta by this time had drawn out her Lady Smith .38 gun. This made the Lady Gatorettes laugh even louder.

They charged into the room. I honestly thought Celesta was going to shoot one of them but instead she started to laugh also. A little nervously perhaps but she laughed. I, on the other hand, cringed because I knew it was me they wanted to talk to not Celesta. Although with her big ego I was pretty darn sure she was convinced they had come to see her. After all, she “represented the wishes of the people.” I was merely a turncoat who had left the beautiful, thriving metropolis of Po’thole.

They all turned to me and started jabbering up a storm. I had absolutely no clue what they were saying.

“Wait, wait, ladies!” I threw up my non-coffee drinking hand in a stop motion. “Ya’ll take a deep breath and then one, ONE, of you tell me what’s going on.”

“Misty Dawn couldn’t be here,” started Myrtle Sue.

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“But she did tell me she had called you.”

“What?!” exploded Celesta. “You didn’t tell me that, Parker!”

I shrugged.

The Lady Gorettes turned and stared, hard, at Celesta before turning back to me.

“Misty Dawn does have her good side and she does have a high moral sense of justice,” stated Myrtle Sue. Noticing my quizzical expression, she hurried on, “It might not be the same as yours or Celesta’s but she does have one.”

“Anyway, she did not kill Buddy, Bobby, or Happy Jack. She also did not kill Scooter or Tabitha. Tabitha was always nice to us.”

Celesta just couldn’t help herself and blurted out, “Tabitha thought all of you were looney tunes.”

Rhonda Jean whipped around, eyed Celesta like she might viewed the devil invading upon her territory, and said, “Mama always told me if you can’t say something nice, you shouldn’t open your mouth. Let me point out, we ALL voted for you and Tabitha. Not once did Tabitha ever say anything mean about us.

“Also, let me point out, you sure don’t have any problems with taking our money when you’re running for office and you need some of them purty signs put up.

“You might,” glared Rhonda Jean, “want to be nice to us.”

The other Lady Gatorettes nodded their heads up and down vigorously. Celesta did not grovel, back down, or otherwise acquiesce. In fact, the woman fueled the fire by saying, “I return your phone calls when no other city commissioner will and I...”

Jumping into the fray before parts of dead bodies started being flung around the room, I said, “Ladies, stop! Myrtle Sue, please finish telling me what’s going on.”

“Tabitha had gotten word to Misty Dawn that she needed to talk to her.”

Flo popped up with, “Tabitha wanted us to be her protection squad.”

“Flo! How could you!”

“Flo, hush your mouth!”

“Flo, I’m gonna....”

I vaguely wondered why the library didn’t put a Keurig in each room. I needed some coffee.

“Okay, enough! Myrtle Sue, finish your story before I get up and walk out of here.”

“Parker, some of the city commissioners have been getting death threats.” She looked over at Celesta. “Tony Bugs told us we had better stop doing that or he was going to lock us up during football season and wouldn’t let us watch Gator football!”

They all wailed in unison. I swear it sounded just like a wolf pack. “Nooooo, nooooo, nooooo!”

“Then Dimwit, ah, Dewitt, told us the same thing and, Parker, we didn’t do it. We’re being framed!” Tears were flowing down their cheeks like a faucet had been turned on.

Oh, I could easily understand why Tony Bugs and Dewitt had told them that but what neither of them didn’t understand was that the Lady Gatorettes would escape from their pitiful jails within two nanoseconds if they were locked up during Gator football season.

That new construction both of them wanted done on their respective jails? Done. The Lady Gatorettes would simply find a way to ramrod through the concrete blocks so they could see their beloved Gator games on time. And trust me when I say it would be done in less than two hours.

The combined IQ on both of these law enforcement officers was starting to edge close to that of a turkey.

“Okay, okay. You do understand why someone might think you had something to do with all of these murders don’t you?”

A chorus of Nos erupted from them and they all looked at each other like a calf looks at a new gate. They didn’t have a clue. I was really longing for Atlanta now. It must be something in the water that makes the residents of Po’thole dumber than dirt.

“Um, ya’ll do realize you create havoc everywhere you go, right?” I tried another tactic.

“Things just happen to us, Parker. Weird things, you know that.”

Celesta snorted. I rolled my eyes.

“Really? You’re taking absolutely no responsibility for any of your actions, you’re playing the victim role, and you expect me to believe that. Come on now!” I stood up. I was going back to Atlanta. The devil could hang onto what was or was not happening in this crappy little town. I was going home.

“Misty Dawn thinks she knows who killed Bobby, Buddy, and Happy Jack.”

I was halfway out the door. “Great! Go tell Tony Bugs or Dewitt. I’m going back to Atlanta.”

Then, “Joe D., Parker, Joe D. killed them.”

I almost sank to the floor right there. The world that was looking brighter and brighter because I was going back to Atlanta suddenly dimmed and I felt like I had been sucked through a black hole in the universe.

“Wh...what?”

“Misty Dawn thinks Joe D. killed them. Think about it, he’s run off and hasn’t been seen since all of the murders. No one has heard from him.”

Much as I hated to admit it, and I certainly wasn’t going to with this group of women, the thought had crossed my mind as well.

Joe D. Savannah, my first love boyfriend, was the owner of We Make Money, CPAs. While he always professed his undying love for me, he couldn’t keep his pants zipped up and had been married numerous times. He did come visit me in Atlanta between wives for “a high school reunion.” There was a very special spot in my heart for Joe D.

“Have you heard from him, Parker?”

I shook my head no. I was still trying to process that Joe D. might have had a part in three murders.

“Do you think he had anything to do with Scooter or Tabitha?” I didn’t realize the words had inadvertently materialized and escaped out of my mouth.

The Lady Gatoettes looked at each other and shrugged. Celesta banged her hand on the table. “Let’s go find that son-of-a-gun and throw away the key.”

As the remaining four Lady Gatoettes and a city commissioner rushed out the door to find and crush a circumstantial suspect in three maybe five murders, it suddenly occurred to me that I might be the only sane one in the group. My therapist was going to have a field day with that.

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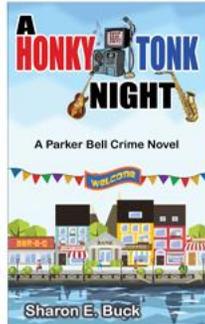
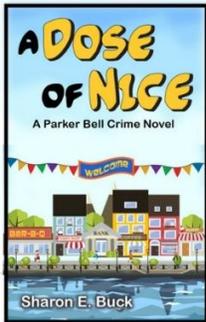
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## About Sharon E. Buck

Sharon Buck writes clean, funny, cozy mystery books. She resides in northeast Florida although she is somewhat concerned she may have to move suddenly if people in her hometown realize that her Parker Bell series is loosely (very loosely, according to her attorney) based on them. When Sharon isn't doing her favorite thing...writing...she enjoys walking her little rescue dogs, traveling, reading books, and cracking her friends up with funny stories and her wicked sense of humor. See more of Sharon at [SharonEBuck.com](http://SharonEBuck.com).