

ARRANGEMENTS

Opal knew as she waited for Effie to go play euchre down at the Friendship Centre that she might let it slip about the gravestone. Effie was dawdling on purpose. Plumped in her recliner with her bunioned feet up, she kept right on knitting, as if another pair of purple striped mittens would save the world. Her face, somehow both puffy and puckered, remained nonchalant. But it was the sight of Effie's fat little fingers that truly enraged Opal.

Effie'd had to have her wedding ring cut off a few years back, but she never would part with her husband. "Over my dead body will you ever get Chester," she was fond of telling Opal. "And don't think I don't know what'll happen the minute I pass on. You'll be right over here to comfort him with a macaroni casserole and that sex-in-a-pan thing."

Sex-in-a-pan was Opal's specialty, an easy, no-bake dessert made with toasted pecans, cream cheese, icing sugar, vanilla and chocolate puddings. Then she smothered the whole thing with a thick layer of whipped topping. Chester just loved it. He called it her sexy pants stuff. And Opal loved to make it for him. It was the least she could do. The poor man was stuck with Effie – he deserved a little sweetness in his life.

“Don't think I don't know,” Effie said again, settling deeper into her chair. She knit like lightning, but she never moved her beanbag body with any speed, unless she was going to Bingo. There she could win big: fifty, a hundred, a thousand bucks. For her seventy-seventh birthday, her grandchildren had presented her with a T-shirt proclaiming *Bingo Queen* across the enormous bosom.

But a fiver was the most Effie could make at cards. And since that was the one time Opal and Chester could be together – they were always partners – Effie usually did her best to sabotage them. Today was no different. She was asserting her rights over Chester by making Opal late. Opal was getting in a sizzle and Effie was slow as last February.

That's why Opal told her about the gravestone, even though she'd sworn she wouldn't. Effie was so blessed poky and Opal was so thoroughly fed up – she felt like she'd been waiting for Effie Briggs for fifty years.

Chester, bless the dear sweet man, had gone on ahead. He liked to walk. Effie went everywhere by car, usually driven by Opal. Chester had left half an hour ago, wearing a natty blue cardigan, pressed tan trousers and brand new

trainers. “Well, then,” he’d said, donning his Blue Jays cap as if it were a top hat, “be seeing you lovely ladies later.”

“Not if we see you first,” Effie called after him, “ya stupid old bugger!” She’d cackled with mirth, bringing on a fit of coughing so severe she had to set down her needles.

Opal had whacked her on the back, harder than necessary, and then gone to pour her a drink of water. Effie’s apartment was always stale and overheated, but in the kitchen the air seemed to lack any oxygen at all. Opal could smell every single salty greasy meal Effie had ever cooked for Chester. Given the chance, she herself would be far more careful of his cholesterol. Except of course for serving him, on special occasions, sex-in-a-pan.

“Do please get a move on, Effie,” she said now, “or I’ll go without you.”

Effie clicked her needles. Deliberate. Sly. “Oh, hang onto yer horses. Just let me finish this row.” She pointed to Chester’s recliner, which matched hers. “Sit.” But Opal didn’t, even though she knew how fine it would feel. She’d sat there many times. The worn brown vinyl was imprinted with Chester’s shape. It was almost as if she were sitting in his lap. But if she yielded, Effie would just keep on knitting. They’d be here all afternoon.

Opal pictured Chester already at the Friendship Centre, and the tables being filled, and the hands being dealt, and Chester deciding she wasn’t coming, and choosing someone else for his partner. Thanks to Effie, that had happened before. More than once. Well, she wouldn’t let that happen today. They had to leave right now. But Effie claimed knitting was her therapy, seeing as how she

had to put up with Chester all the blasted time. So she'd just keep going and going until she drove Opal mad.

“Effie Briggs, I swear you'd be late for your own funeral.”

Effie gave a choked, gasping cry and dropped a stitch. Since Chester's accident last autumn, she hated anyone, except herself, to speak of death. “Watch your tongue woman!” She glared at Opal, fumbled around with her wool. “Just because you're only seventy-five don't mean you got more time left than I do. You could go first, you know. Won't necessarily be me.”

“No,” Opal said, “not necessarily.” She smoothed her navy wool skirt, too heavy for the mild May day. Time to get out her spring clothes, maybe even go shopping for something new. Something bright and pretty and youthful.

“Could be Chester,” Effie said. Opal detected a note of glee. Wouldn't Effie just love it if Chester went first. “He's never been the same since that fall he had.”

“That's true,” Opal said. “He hasn't.”

She knew Effie blamed her – she blamed herself. But it wasn't the physical difference in Chester she worried about, it wasn't the way he acted so much more careful and frail now. It was the mental change she didn't care for. He'd always been a fearless, vital man, but the accident had left him wary. He was suddenly afraid of death. Which was why he'd been determined to choose a gravestone. Which Effie didn't know about.

Yet.

The day he had the accident, Chester had been over at Opal's, up on the ladder, cleaning out the eaves as he did every year. He enjoyed outdoor work, never could admit he was getting too old for it. And now that he and Effie had moved to a condo, he didn't have any of his own to do. So he proved himself still able at Opal's.

That's why she loved him. He wasn't a big plop like Effie. And he'd stuck around, unlike her own unspeakable husband, who'd never been able to live up to his responsibilities and disappeared years ago. He'd driven off into the night when their daughter was just a baby, leaving Opal to fend for herself and raise a child on her own.

Effie and Chester had lived around the block from Opal at the time, their backyards kitty-corner. They'd come to her rescue with a sensible plan. When Opal went back nursing to make ends meet, Effie babysat for her. Chester helped by taking over grass cutting, snow shoveling and home maintenance, the husband-type things.

Except for the sex, of course.

No matter how many hints Opal dropped, Chester never made any advances. He wasn't like that. Regardless of how he felt about her – and she knew he was attracted to her – he never once tried anything. The man had manners and honour and integrity. Opal was Effie's best friend, so he couldn't just do as he pleased. Opal respected him for having such strong morals, but longed for him physically all the same.

Chester had fallen off the ladder on a clear November morning, in full view of Opal. He'd begun work at the front of the house, where the massive Norway maple was always the last to let go, dropping its broad amber leaves right over the verandah. Opal was settled out there, comfy in a wicker rocker, a cup of tea in her hand, ready for the pleasure of watching Chester work. Ready for the thrill of his tall, slender body, still so agile and strong, and his knowing, graceful movements, as he looked after her house.

Even if she'd been holding the ladder she couldn't have saved him. She stood only five feet tall, slight and spindly as a twig. She'd been helpless as she heard the scraping sound, saw the ladder start to slide, saw it tilt and collapse, saw Chester hit the brick walkway, heard the sickening smack.

She flew to him. "Oh Chester," she moaned, kneeling beside him. "Oh my poor, dear Chester." Just for a moment she wished he could die right then and there, not exactly in her arms, she knew not to try to lift him, but on her sidewalk, with her faithful fingers stroking his forehead.

Then she rushed to call an ambulance. But she didn't call Effie.

Why worry her until they knew what the damage was? And anyway, Effie would want to be picked up and driven to the hospital, and Opal was determined to stay with Chester. His stretcher was wheeled right past Emergency into an examining room, and she left him only long enough to sign him in. Luckily his wallet with his health card was in his back pocket, so she didn't even have to call Effie for that.

Chester was in severe pain, Opal could tell from his pale, grim face, his stoic denial. She held his hand and his fingers clung to hers in a way she'd never felt before. It wasn't a loving squeeze like he sometimes gave her when Effie wasn't looking. It was a grip of utter terror.

When his eyes closed and his hand went slack, Opal was tempted to kiss him. She usually dared that only once a year, at the Friendship Centre's New Year's Eve cards party, when everyone was embracing everyone else anyway. And only ever on the cheek. Never, as she so wanted, on the lips. Should she allow herself now?

But a doctor suddenly appeared and made Opal wait outside while he examined Chester. When he was done he told her, "I'll order X-rays, but I think your husband has a couple of broken ribs, Mrs. Briggs. The treatment's simple, something for the pain and plenty of rest."

Opal couldn't speak. The doctor had said *husband*. He had called her *Mrs. Briggs*. Wouldn't Effie have a spell? The doctor didn't know that Opal was just a poor old tagalong Chester did for. She didn't bother to correct him.

Opal couldn't help smiling, remembering that. And how, after she'd called Effie and heard her howl with rage at being left out, she'd gone home to make sex-in-a-pan, to comfort Chester and speed his recovery.

"What's so dang funny?" Effie wanted to know now.

"Nothing," Opal said. "Just please hurry up."

Effie finally tucked her work into her knitting bag. She pulled out a finished mitten and said, "Made this one earlier. Could you put it away for me?"

“And then you’ll be ready?”

“Pretty much.”

Effie kept the finished mittens in a suitcase under her bed. Entering the bedroom, Opal saw Chester’s slippers, maroon corduroy, on the floor, his comb and brush on the dresser, his plaid pyjamas flung over the closet door. A longing swept her, causing pain so urgent she thought she might be having a heart attack.

She put a hand on the bed to steady herself. Chester’s bed. Chester and Effie’s bed. Covered with a shiny floral spread, the gaudiest thing, which Effie had bought on sale at some outlet mall. Chester deserved something far more elegant and refined, with matching sheets and shams and bedskirt, like Opal had at home.

She let herself sit down. Ever so lightly she touched Chester’s book and reading glasses on the night table. Effie wouldn’t be caught dead reading, but Chester loved books. He even wrote a weekly column on books of special interest to seniors for the local paper.

And then Opal couldn’t help swinging her legs up onto the bed and lying back. She rested her head on Chester’s pillow. She closed her eyes and let out one wistful, yearning breath. Her love for Chester had kept her from ever being interested in any other man. And sometimes lately she wished she hadn’t let that happen. She wished she’d tried to meet someone who was available, instead of clinging to this safe but unsatisfying arrangement with Effie and Chester.

Then she rummaged under the bed to put the mitten away. By the time the Legion Christmas Bazaar rolled around next November, the suitcase would be full, and Effie would call Opal to come pick it up and take it over there.

“Let’s go then,” Opal called out, hurrying back to the living room.

But Effie was still in her chair. Sound asleep. She’d pulled up a ratty old afghan and dropped off, her permed white head lolling back, her dentured mouth hanging wide open, disgorging great gurgling snores. Opal wanted to punch her.

“C’mon!” She shook Effie’s doughy arm.

Effie startled awake. “What? Which?” she muttered. “What time is it?”

“It’s two o’clock already,” Opal cried. “Get up, you stupid old bat!”

“Oh shucks, way too late then.” Effie shifted her bulk, reached down into the side pocket of her chair for a new skein of yarn. “They’ll have started without us, no use to go now.”

“You crazy old cow!” Opal spit out the words and stomped a foot. “You big old slab of rotten baloney!”

“Easy there gal,” Effie said. “Here, hands up, help me wind this.”

Opal took the skein on her hands while Effie wound the yarn into a ball. Then, “How’s Darla?” she asked with fake innocence. Effie and her oldest daughter had been at odds since Chester’s accident, when Darla had insisted her parents prepay their funerals and buy a family plot in the cemetery.

Effie made a sound like a riled up horse makes, blowing out air. “That cheap ninny! Just like you, can’t wait to see me dead and buried. Came around

last week wanting us to sign papers, powerful attorney or some such nonsense, and Chester, that stupid old bugger, he done it. Not me! I ain't signing nothing!"

"Dear, dear," Opal said as Effie pulled the last of the wool from her fingers. She fluffed at her hennaed hair, freshly set that morning for cards.

Cards with Chester.

"Well," she said, "Chester was certainly pleased with the gravestone."

"The what?" Effie lost hold of the ball of yarn and it bounced across the floor, nimbly unwinding itself. Her lummox of a tabby cat, Pumpkin, leapt after it. "The what?" Effie repeated, her voice a sharp croak. Pumpkin pounced on the wool, batting it about, creating a tangled mess of purple like varicose veins on the beige broadloom.

"Oh sorry, didn't he tell you?" Opal said, casual as anything. "They put it up last week, as soon as the weather was nice enough. We went over to see it on Wednesday, when you were at Bingo."

"But we never chose no tombstone!"

Opal clucked her tongue. "Oh Effie, you are getting just a tad forgetful, dear. Remember last fall, after Chester's accident, and Darla wanted you to make arrangements and all, and he asked you to pick out a stone, and you wouldn't have anything to do with it, and so I took him. I'm sure we mentioned it."

"You took Chester to pick a tombstone? Behind my back?"

Opal had to pinch herself to keep from smiling. "Oh don't you remember, Effie? You refused to go, you wouldn't miss Bingo." She and Chester had said

they were going to the mall because it was senior's day at Zellers, and Chester wanted a new clock-radio.

But instead they'd gone down to Hedley Memorials on Main Street. Chester knew just what he wanted – it hadn't taken any time at all. They'd even made it to Zellers afterwards.

“Would you like to go and see it, Effie?” Opal watched Pumpkin give the ball of yarn one last whap before curling up by the lava lamp. “Why, since we've missed cards, we could go right now.”

“I ain't going nowhere with the likes of you Opal Carr, never again.”

“Effie, Effie, don't be so harsh. It's a lovely stone, just what Chester wanted, shiny black granite, and shaped like a book, you know, with the pages open ...”

“That stupid old bugger chose black? Oh, for the love of the Lord! I wanted a pink tombstone, with flowers all around, like.”

“You did? As I recall you wouldn't even discuss it, and somebody had to take charge. Somebody had to make arrangements.”

What Effie had said was that she couldn't abide the thought of her gravestone being in place before she even died. It was just too morbid. And she especially hated when a person's name and birth date were already carved, just waiting for death to come and fill in the blank.

“Chester wanted everything looked after,” Opal went on. “He wanted to see his gravestone in place, to put his mind at ease. And as I said, it's just lovely, with your birth dates carved and all, Chester's is on the one page, and yours on the

other.” She refrained from mentioning how, when he’d taken her out to the cemetery to see it in place, she’d pretended to write with her finger on the smooth granite that day’s date as the time of Effie’s passing. “And underneath, Effie, it says: Rest in Peace.”

“I will not rest in bloody peace! I wanted *Bingo Queen!*” Effie was so worked up now she started to cough, harder than before, a deep hacking sound that Opal both hoped and feared might signal Effie’s imminent demise. But Effie pushed herself up out of her chair and lunged at Opal’s throat. “You busybody bitch! I wanted my tombstone to say *Bingo Queen!*”

Opal sidestepped out of her way as Effie sank back into her chair. “But why didn’t you ever say?” She made her face look sorry, her voice sound contrite. She drew strength from the memory of that day in the cemetery.

With crocuses and daffodils blooming all around, and a balmy breeze blowing, Chester had slipped his arms around her. It was the most intimate moment they’d ever shared, even better than dancing together at his daughter Darla’s wedding or kissing on New Year’s Eve. “I don’t believe in an afterlife,” he’d said, pulling her even closer. “You, Opal, are my heaven. Heaven on earth.” Then he’d kissed her firmly on the lips and let her go, hiking briskly back to his car.

Opal had just stood there, taking her time tracing the engraving on the stone. She knew it was childish to pretend to write in Effie’s death there. It wouldn’t change anything. She was never going to be Chester’s wife, and in the end, Effie would be the one buried beside him.

“I really had no idea you cared,” she said now. “But I’m afraid it can’t be fixed.” She knelt to pat Pumpkin, looked up at Effie with innocence. “If you’ll pardon the expression, it’s carved in stone!”

Effie lurched, trying to get up again, but this time she couldn’t manage. “I’ll never forgive ya!” Another fit of coughing shook her before she ordered, “Get out!”

“Gladly.” Opal headed for the door. Would she be reduced to creeping back, eventually, on some pretense or other, just to see Chester? And after that, would Effie’s rage about the gravestone begin to shrivel until Opal was forgiven? Would the three of them carry on as before?

“And don’t never bring that sex-in-a-pan stuff for Chester again!”

“We’ll see,” Opal said, and left.