

## Chapter 1

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman in possession of a good boob job must be on the hunt for a husband. The known universe, in this case, is brassy, ritzy Boca Raton, Florida, a place where the personal power plays make those in Jane Austen's universe, or for that matter, the *Real Housewives of New Jersey*, look like amateur hour.

Our huntress is one Brigitta ("Gitta") Larsen O'Malley Castellano, a.k.a. the "Danish Dish." She's a twice-widowed former Miss Denmark and third-runner up for Miss Universe 1992. Our prey is one Kevin Reilly. More on him later. And your humble social chronicler of their little comedy of mis-manners is I, Harriet Horowitz, formerly a member of Gitta's tribe of Boca Babes, now a swamp-dwelling motorcycle maven.

But this story is not all about mating maneuvers, misunderstood men, and meddling mothers. It's about murder. Or so, at least, Gitta insisted when she called me in hysterics one fine October Sunday afternoon as I was polishing my Harley Hugger on the front porch of my log cabin in the Everglades west of Boca. I was enjoying the seventy-five degree, low-humidity air—a long-awaited respite from a languid hot summer that had culminated in a hurricane.

The caller ID on my cell read "The Oasis," so I knew it had to be Gitta. She had checked herself into that resort spa/drug rehab facility for the rich and famous two weeks previously. The reason: Gitta was a cokehead; Reilly was a cop. No, he hadn't busted her; they'd met when he caught the case of the murder of her second spouse, "Junior" Castellano, who was actually her senior by a good twenty-five years. Can you say "trophy wife?" If so, you've already got the inside line on what makes the Boca universe spin.

Now, however, Gitta was climbing down the marriage ladder in setting her sights on Reilly, whose salary as a Boca Raton P.D. detective was laughable by Boca Babe standards. But

Gitta had decided that after decades of molding herself to the desires of wealthy older men, she now wanted a relationship based on authenticity. And I guess you couldn't be authentic if you were addicted.

Hell, I should know—I too had been an addict. An addict to the Life of Luxury. Which ended when I blew away my rich but abusive husband, Bruce Barfknecht. In self-defense. Now, as far as I was concerned, you couldn't be more authentic than when dominating a five-hundred pound machine hurtling down an open road at eighty miles an hour. It's no coincidence that motorcycle experiences—whether riding or repair—have been compared to Zen. Both practices propel you into an alternate reality where you're in communion with . . . well, I don't know what, but something beyond yourself.

Gitta's call, however, snatched me out of my biker bliss and back to Boca bizarreness.

“Harriet!” she rasped. “Help me!”

“What's wrong, Gitta?” I asked with a good deal of wariness. Her coming to me for “help” couldn't bear any positive implications. I mean, it's not like we were BFFs or anything. Back in the day, we'd been compatriots in conspicuous consumption, spending our days in boutique shops and beauty salons. But leaving my Life of Luxury in the dust in order to recover from my addiction had meant leaving all my faux friends, like Gitta, too. For their part, they'd been all too happy to distance themselves from me—the woman who had very publicly shattered the illusion of Boca perfection that they worked so hard to maintain. It was only in the last few months that circumstances had led me and Gitta to re-establish our acquaintance.

And those circumstances were hardly happy ones. The last time Gitta had asked for my help—in finding Junior's killer—I'd been sucked into a moral sinkhole so deep I still struggled, at times, with the repercussions. So you can see why I was on my guard.

Which turned to outright disgust when Gitta whispered, “They’re killing people in here.”

I know paranoia when I hear it. Especially the cocaine-induced variety. Bruce had evidenced the same symptoms—right up until I grabbed the Magnum .44 he’d taken to carrying and shot him with it as he was about to pound me with his fists. Again.

The coke might have left Gitta’s body since she’d been in rehab, but apparently her brain hadn’t gotten the memo. It was still operating in madness mode. Yet it had its own internal logic: if people were being killed at The Oasis, that would be a great reason for Gitta to get the hell out of there. And resume her habit. Which, honestly, I didn’t want to happen. Despite my distrust of her, I had to give her credit for wanting to change her life. And beyond that, I had discovered, over the past few years of my own recovery, that part of maintaining my own sanity meant helping others.

“Gitta,” I said, “I’m sure you’re safe. You’re where you need to be right now.”

“No!” she said with panicked urgency. “You have to believe me!”

“Why don’t you take a deep breath and, uh, get a massage or something?” I figured the place operated like an all-inclusive vacation. Minus the martinis and mai-tais, of course. “I’m sure you’ll feel better after that.”

“Nooo,” she wailed.

I sighed. The reassurance gambit wasn’t working. Maybe if I just heard her out, she would realize how ridiculous her suspicion was. “Okay, tell me about it,” I said.

“Not on the phone. They could be listening in. I’ve already said too much. You have to come over.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let me get back to you shortly,” I said, and hung up.

The devil on my left shoulder told me to blow her off; the angel on my right urged me to go. I needed a tie-breaker. I looked around the swamp for my companion, Lana. She's six feet of muscle and mouth. Her skin is habitually cracked and mud-caked. Her eyeballs bulge and one snaggletooth juts out over her upper lip.

No, she's not a butch women's basketball coach or a Catholic school nun. She's an American alligator.

I spotted her ridged back emerging from the mire. I informed her of my dilemma. She rolled onto her back, exposing her ghastly white underbelly to the warmth of the sun.

*Hello?* I said in my mind. *Are you listening? I need input here.*

She swished her tail, maneuvering herself out of the shadow of an overhanging cypress branch into a sunnier spot.

*Bullshit*, seemed to be the message. *You already know the right thing to do. You always do. You just go through this charade of consulting me, hoping I'll tell you what you want to hear and absolve you of responsibility. As a matter of fact, I've been meaning to discuss this with you. I'm starting to feel used.*

*Look*, I said, *can we have this "where is this relationship going" chat later? Just tell me what it is you think I know, already. Should I stay or should I go?*

She flipped back over and went out into the vast unknown of the River of Grass. I guess that was her signal for me to go too. *Crap.*

I called back the number Gitta had dialed from. She answered before the first ring was complete. "Harriet, thank God."

"When's a good time for me to come by?" I asked.

“This instant!” she hissed. That was the addictive mindset for you—the need for immediate gratification with no regard for other people.

“I’ll be there in a couple hours,” I said. In fact, the journey wouldn’t take more than an hour, but I didn’t want her to think I was at her beck and call.

Now, you might wonder why Gitta was seeking my help in the first place. After all, Reilly was a homicide cop—why not go to him? Well, for all I knew, she might have gone to him too. But this was not my first ride at the murder rodeo. I’m a private investigator, although my specialty is scams, not skeletons. I run a one-woman operation, ScamBusters. The Great Recession has had no negative impact on my business; South Florida is still Scam Central USA. The nature of the crime has simply shifted from deceptive derivatives and ninja (no income, no job or assets) loans to foreclosure fraud and bogus bankruptcy bailouts.

Despite my clear specialization, people keep coming to me with killings. I guess it’s like being a doctor. You might be a pediatric podiatrist, but that doesn’t stop people from asking your advice on their pathological prostates. They hear the “doctor” part but not the “specialist” part. So it is for the poor PI.

But why do I take these cases, you might ask? Is it an inability to just say no? In a word, yes. You see, it’s something deep inside me—my Inner Vigilante. Whenever I get a whiff of injustice, I have to set it right. And I’ve learned that doing so often requires action beyond the law, just as Dirty Harry, that rogue cop of ’70s movie fame, knew. Hence my moniker, “Dirty Harriet,” bestowed on me by the media following that little business of my husband’s demise.

Not that I believed the matter at hand was really murder, as I said. I’d ride out to The Oasis, placate Gitta’s paranoia, and be back home in time to enjoy the sunset over the swamp, my habitual glass of Hennessy in hand.

I finished polishing the spokes of my Hog and maneuvered the bike onto the customized airboat moored to the hitching post at the side of my porch. The vessel is a former tourist boat originally designed to carry a dozen people, retrofitted to accommodate me and my Hog, tied down with straps (just the Hog, not me).

I cast off the ropes, inserted plugs into my ears, topped them with noise-cancelling headphones, and turned on the engine. When it comes to motors, there's only one sound that speaks to me—the one-of-a-kind, offbeat rhythm of the Harley Davidson V-twin. Whereas a Hog is the roar of a wild tiger, the motor that spins the five-foot fan on the back of an airboat is the screech of ten thousand housecats in heat. Hence the ear protection.

When I engaged the gears, the boat glided away from my stilt-elevated log cabin. I looked back fondly at my home, a little . . . well, oasis in the watery wilderness. I've equipped the place with a generator and self-composting septic tank. Hauling in gas, water, and food once a week allows me complete self-sufficiency.

As I skimmed over the surface of the shallow water, the sawgrass parted before me and flocks of snowy egrets took flight. The sky was big and round out here. I'd once lived in a huge house with a small slice of sky; now I lived in a small house with a huge hunk of heaven. My freedom was inversely proportional to the size of my dwelling.

As I breathed in the smells of nature—the lake water, the pine trees and, okay, exhaust fumes—I felt my phone vibrate in my hip pocket. Damn, was Gitta calling again? What was it now? She couldn't get a massage on demand? Had the manicurists gone on strike?

I looked at the display. It wasn't Gitta. It was Lior. My . . . Krav Maga martial arts instructor. Except he was more than that now. Something had been building between us over the

past six months, and it had culminated in a near-consummation of our relationship during the height of the hurricane two months ago. However, homicidal interests had intervened.

Immediately thereafter, Lior had flown to his native Israel for what was supposed to be a quick wrap-up of some unfinished business. However, his stay had been extended for reasons unknown to me. Reasons that would probably remain unknown, since, as Lior had disclosed to me, he wasn't merely a personal trainer. That was just a cover for his real job—Interpol agent. Just when we had gotten closer, secrets had surfaced. Secrets that might bind us—or unravel us.

I turned off the boat's motor, removed my headgear, and answered the phone. "Hey." I wasn't the warm-and-fuzzy-greeting type.

"Hi, baby." His Hebrew-accented baritone sent electricity from my head to my . . . uh, toes. "Miss me?" he asked. The man had a certain arrogance. Not enough to qualify for asshole status, but annoying nonetheless.

Yeah, I missed his six-foot-four, rock-solid self. "Nope," I said. "You know me—loner to the core. Lana's all the company I need."

"That's too bad, seeing as I'll be home tomorrow evening. I guess you won't be glad to see me." I could just feel him smirk from across the Atlantic.

I froze. Tomorrow? Well, it wasn't like I had to rush to get my hair done, my legs waxed, and buy expensive-but-trashy lingerie. Those days were behind me. Okay, so I still favored lacy thongs and matching push-up bras—although as I approached forty (on Wednesday—three days away!), the latter were becoming a necessity rather than a luxury.

As far as the rest, I shaved every day and I had a hair routine—pulling my long, dark wavy locks into a ponytail. Took all of three seconds. So I was not about to make myself over for

a man. I'd already travelled the road from artifice to authenticity that Gitta was now embarking on. Which made me, I guess, kind of a mentor to her.

But still, the thought of seeing Lior again following our interrupted intimate encounter and his abrupt departure gave me pause. In truth, the past two months had allowed me to put off thinking about our relationship. Now it was in my face.

An osprey glided overhead, settling into a large nest atop a gumbo limbo tree.

"You arrive tomorrow?" I said. "Cool. Need a ride from the airport?"

"Sure. Straddling behind you with your hair in my face will be just what I need after a twelve-hour flight."

For a moment I didn't know whether he was being sincere or sarcastic. But Lior wasn't the sarcastic type. That would be me.

He gave me the flight details. Then his voice got softer. "See you soon." And he was gone.

Gazing at my navigational monitor, I saw that the boat had drifted off course while I'd been preoccupied. I replaced my hearing protection, restarted the engine, and turned back toward the dock that was my destination. It was located on the far western edge of Boca, where the land ended and the no-man's-land began.

The transition from wilderness to civilization was abrupt. One moment I was surrounded by nothing but sawgrass and swamp, the next moment I broke through to the wooden pier and asphalt road beyond. I pulled beside the dock, tied up the vessel, and offloaded the Hog.

I donned my helmet and leathers. I might be a thrill-seeker, but I'm not foolhardy. Riding without protection was a death wish. If that's what I'd wanted, I would have just stayed with Bruce.



The 883-cc Sportster was just the right size for my five-foot-six frame. My boots rested solidly on the earth and my gloved hands gripped the handlebars at just below shoulder height. It was all ergonomically correct. I pulled in the clutch with my left hand, pushed the starter button with my right, and the tiger awoke.

I shifted into first by pushing down the lever with my left toe, slowly let out the clutch, and twisted the throttle with my right hand. Let me tell you, riding a Hog means being intimately involved with the machine—no auto pilot on these babies.

I took off down the straight two-lane bordered on both sides with canals and the occasional palm tree. There was no traffic out here, so I was able to cruise at a good clip. In motorcycle moments like this, it can feel like you're standing still while the world whizzes past you. It's an Einsteinian relativity thing.

However, that sensation stops when you hit the outskirts of town, and cars—or cages, as we bikers call them—crop up. Then you've got to be hyper vigilant for all the clueless kooks out there who could kill you.

So I slowed down as the Mediterranean-style McMansions of the Boca 'burbs came into view. I crossed Highway 441, where my office was located, and buzzed eastward, toward the Atlantic. Now the road was lined with perfectly manicured grass and hedges surrounding swanky subdivisions.

The Oasis was located in a former luxury condo complex that had been under construction when the housing bubble burst. Financing had evaporated, and the unfinished structure, with its rebar sticking up out of grey concrete block and its dirt lot overrun with rats, had been a blight on Boca for years. About a year ago, an out-of-town corporation bought the property and repurposed it as a drying-out hideaway for the likes of Lindsay Lohan. The client

list was, of course, top secret, but occasionally the *Inquisitor*, our very own hometown tabloid, got the scoop on an infamous inmate . . . er, patient, and splashed the “news” on the front page.

I pulled up to the guard house of the compound . . . I mean, complex. The rent-a-cop inside looked like a military reject. His blue uniform hung on his scrawny frame and his face was in need of a good acne cream. Guys like that probably shouldn’t be allowed to bear arms. He’d be no match for me and my snub-nose Magnum. The one I had license to carry concealed—and did, in my boot.

“Driver’s license, please, ma’am,” he said.

Now do you see my point? The kid was a danger to himself. Anyone who addresses any woman as “ma’am” puts himself in peril. It should always be “Miss,” even to a centenarian. And don’t call me testy just because I’ll be hitting the big four-oh next week.

I was about to produce my ID when some kind of warning bell went off in my head. On the outside chance that there was any truth to Gitta’s claims, maybe I should be circumspect. I handed over my alternate ID instead—the one identifying me as Hailey Holloway and listing a vacant lot as my address. The guy consulted his computer.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, you’re not on the visitors list,” he said.

“Oh.” I thought for a second. “Well, that’s because I’m not visiting anyone. I want to speak with someone about . . . uh, getting my sister into treatment.”

He looked me up and down. “Your sister. Right.”

I guess he’d heard that one before.

“Please go ahead to the front entrance and someone from the intake department will meet you and hook you up,” he said.

Hook me up? To what, exactly? An electroshock machine? Visions of Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* floated through my head.

The guard logged my information and handed my card back to me. The ornate wrought iron gate swung open, allowing me entry into the asylum.

A lush green lawn spread out before me, lined with flower beds. Don't ask me what kind. I know Hogs, not horticulture.

A short, wiry man—a Haitian, I judged from his broad face and mahogany skin—stood holding a hose attached to a plastic tank atop the bed of a small truck. He was spraying the lawn with a green liquid. In Boca, lawns were always green, though not necessarily naturally.

I parked the Hog in the lot filled with Benzes and Lexuses (Lexi?). I took off my helmet, propped it on the backrest, and stashed my leather chaps and jacket in the saddlebags.

Then I looked at the fortress . . . er, facility. The building was a three-story structure designed in a Moorish style, with horseshoe arches, rounded domes, and mosaic-tiled walls. It was *Arabian Nights for Addicts*.

No one was in sight. Bypassing the front double doors and resisting the urge to say, “Open Sesame,” I walked around the side of the building and called Gitta on my cell.

“Harriet! Where are you?” she whispered.

“Outside the building.”

I heard a gush of expelled air as she breathed out. “Oh, what a relief. But wait. You can't come inside. I don't want them to know about you.”

“Already got that covered. Can you come out?”

“Yes. I'll meet you out back. There's a maze there.”

A maze? What the hell did that mean? But she had already hung up.

I walked along the side of the building, passing a large, three-tiered fountain, its water splashing melodically. Around it, a half-dozen middle-aged men led by a younger one, all clad in loose attire, moved their limbs in slow motion. T'ai Chi. They call that a martial art? Their snail's pace made me want to spring some Krav Maga action on them. Show them what real combat is all about.

Behind the building, another vast lawn stretched to the Intracoastal Waterway, where gentle waves shimmered in the sun. Near the edge was an Olympic-size pool. A few women who should have realized their bikini days were over splashed around, led by a perky instructor doing water aerobics. They call that exercise? It's child's play. I expected them to start calling out "Marco" and "Polo" any minute.

To the side of the pool I saw a long hedge that was over six feet tall. In the middle of it was a trellised opening with a small iron gate. I walked over. A metal sign by the gate read:

*Meditation Maze*

*Walking labyrinths have been used since ancient times to enhance serenity and spirituality. Modern science has shown that mazes evoke the relaxation response, leading to improved blood pressure, breathing rate, chronic pain, insomnia, and fertility.*

*Enter and Peace Be With You.*

With all those promises, they should have called it the Miracle Maze.

I opened the gate and entered. In front of me was another hedge, equally tall. The two shrub walls bordered a pathway leading in both directions. I stepped aside and breathed in the scent of freshly-cut foliage. I listened to the gentle water sounds coming from the pool and fountain. Damned if I wasn't starting to relax.

Then the gate opened. A tall, slender woman with long blonde hair entered, wearing white linen palazzo pants and a matching sleeveless top. Gitta.

She looked furtively to her left and right. When she saw me she hustled over, grabbed my bare arm with one hand, and dug in her French-manicured silk-wrap nails. With her other hand, she pushed her oversize Armani sunglasses atop her head as she looked down at me.

Her pupils were dilated. Due to adrenaline, I figured. She was in fight-or-flight mode. However, her eyes, as well as her nostrils, had lost their former redness. And her complexion seemed to have more natural color. Despite whatever she thought was going on at the Oasis, it looked to me like a few days of detox had done her good.

“Come on, let’s walk,” she said, breathless. “Nobody can overhear us out here.” She linked one arm in mine and propelled me along the gravel path, stumbling in her cork-soled platform sandals. Her Boca Babe fashion sensibilities remained intact, impractical though they were. Quite a contrast to my own daily uniform of all-black body-hugging stretch jeans and tank top.

We reached the end of the path, where the outside hedge formed a corner. We turned around the end of the inside hedge and headed in the opposite direction.

“So what’s going on?” I asked.

“Two patients have died in the last week.” She pulled me closer. “The staff is trying to keep it hush-hush, but everyone knows about it. Some people say the victims were suffocated, other people think they were poisoned. Whatever, something evil is going on here.”

“Maybe they were natural deaths,” I said. “I mean, think about it. This place might have all the trappings of a spa, but basically it’s a hospital for sick people. Some deaths must be inevitable.”

She looked at me, wide-eyed in horror.

“Tragic,” I said. “But inevitable.”

“Then why would the staff be so secretive about it?”

“Gee, Gitta, I don’t know . . . uh, maybe, like, for PR purposes? How would it look if the *Inquisitor* ran a headline like ‘Midnight at The Oasis: Murder and Mayhem in Ritzy Rehab’?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“You know, like all the major league sports teams might cancel their contracts for treating their players here. That would be a significant loss of revenue.”

“Oh, yes. I see.”

Of course. When anything was spelled out in dollars and cents, Boca Babes understood perfectly.

We reached a fork in the path. We could continue straight ahead, or make a right turn.

“Which way do you think leads to greater peace?” I asked.

“What?”

“Never mind.” I pulled her to the right. “Okay, so who are these patients who died?”

“I don’t know their names, but they were a boy and a girl in the adolescent unit.” Her nails dug into my arm again. “Anyone could be next. Like me!”

I stopped walking and faced her. “Gitta, I hate to break the news to you, but you are not an adolescent. Your *children* are adolescents, for God’s sake.” If I recalled correctly, her, Lars, was about seventeen and her middle one, Margitta, was a few years younger. Her youngest was a girl, but damned if I could remember her name and age. As far as I was concerned, all kids were basically indistinguishable and to be avoided until they reached the age of reason. Which would be about thirty.

Anyway, Gitta seemed to think that she hadn't aged since her beauty pageant days.

Another sign that she was delusional.

"Have you talked to Reilly about this?" I asked.

"No. He'd think I was crazy."

Duh. "And I wouldn't?"

"Well, maybe you do, but that doesn't matter."

"Say what?"

She stopped and placed a hand on a hip. "I am trying to start a lasting relationship with Kevin," she said, looking at me. "How far do you think it would go if he believed I was a nutcase?"

A nutcase or a cokehead—I didn't know which Reilly would prefer. But I kept my mouth shut.

"As for you," she continued, "we've know each other over ten years. I'm not trying to start anything with you. So I don't care what you think of me."

Here's the thing about Gitta: she's often actually logical—in a very convoluted way.

She resumed walking, and I strode alongside. We reached another crossroads and veered to the left.

"If you're so scared," I said, "why don't you just leave? It's not like you're a prisoner here."

"It's Kevin, again. He'd be disappointed."

I was about to lecture her that she had to commit to sobriety for herself, not for any man. But she surprised me by beating me to the punch.

“Actually, it’s more than Kevin,” she said. “It’s me. I want to get better. I can see that cocaine . . . well, it will kill me one day.”

She had that right. It had killed Bruce. Well, *I* had killed Bruce, but only after he threatened me in a coke-induced craze. One way or another, the drugs always got you in the end.

“But you could check into another facility,” I said.

“Not around here. I want to stay close to my kids. They can visit me here every day, and we can participate in the family therapy program together.” She gingerly wiped a tear from an eyelash, careful not to smear her mascara. “My drug use has affected them, I can see that now. Like how they’ve covered for me, or flushed my stash down the toilet. I should never have put them in that position.”

I had to admit I admired her insight and resolve. But I didn’t see how I could help. Besides, the deaths were probably natural, as I’d said.

We rounded another corner.

Gitta let out an ear-splitting scream.

On the path ahead of us a pair of white Nikes pointed to the sky. They were attached to a pair of baggy jeans. A hand rested on an empty plastic Coke bottle.

It was a teenage boy. With a pair of hedge clippers sticking up out of his chest.