

The Whole She-Bang 2

A collection of Canadian crime stories

by Sisters in Crime: Canada

Edited by Janet Costello

Toronto Sisters in Crime, Publisher

© Copyright in the collection 2014 by Janet Costello

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, distributed, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright owners. The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet, or via any other means, without the permission of the publisher, is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the authors' rights is appreciated.

Toronto Sisters in Crime, Publisher

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the authors.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

The Whole She-Bang 2: stories by Sisters in Crime: Canada; edited by Janet Costello

ISBN 978-0-9880936-2-1

Detective and Mystery stories, Canadian (English) 2. Costello, Janet

Also issued as ISBN 978-0-9880936-4-5 (Trade-Paper)

Cover Art and Design by Antonia Gorton

Copyright Acknowledgements

“Contents Known” © Copyright 2014 by Heather MacDonald-Archer

“Christmas in Paradise” © Copyright 2014 by Lou Allin

“Plan D” © Copyright 2014 by Judy Penz Sheluk

“Jumping the Bags” © Copyright 2014 by Coleen Steele

“Written in the Snow” © Copyright 2014 by Cara Loverock

“The Goldstone House” © Copyright 2014 by Jill Downie

“First Impressions” © Copyright 2014 by Madona Skaff

“The Fifth Digit” © Copyright 2014 by Carol Newhouse

“Tourist Town” © Copyright 2014 by Steve Shrott

“Hammered” © Copyright 2014 by Helen Nelson

“Beyond the Locked Door” © Copyright 2014 by Trish Rees-Jones

“Revenge is a Treat” © Copyright 2014 by Linda Wiken

“No Honour Among Thieves” © Copyright 2014 by Lesley Mang

“Women’s Work” © Copyright 2014 by Melodie Campbell

“There Goes the Neighbourhood” © Copyright 2014 by Elizabeth Hosang

“Poetic Justice” © Copyright 2014 by Susan Daly

“Testimony” © Copyright 2014 by Madona Skaff

“Special Delivery” © Copyright 2014 by Linda Cahill

“Try It Before You Die” © Copyright 2014 by Elaine Ruth Mitchell

“Exercise Blues” © Copyright 2014 by Carol Newhouse

“The Dead of Winter” © Copyright 2014 by Miriam Clavir

“Forever Friends” © Copyright 2014 by Cara Loverock

“The End of the World” © Copyright 2014 by Catherine Astolfo

“Women Who Wear Red” © Copyright 2014 by Charlotte Morganti

Advance Praise for The Whole She-Bang 2

"Are the stories in this new collection by Sisters in Crime ingenious? Check. Well-written? Check. A delight, a surprise, and unputdownable, story after story? Check, check, and check. If ever there was an anthology worth checking out, this is it."

Scott Mackay, *Arthur Ellis Award* winner for best short mystery fiction

"The Whole She-Bang 2 is wonderful! With accomplished short stories that range from hilarious to gruesome to downright unsettling, this is a collection sure to appeal to any taste. It does Canada's female crime writers proud."

Louise Penny, *New York Times* Bestselling author

"Thoughtful, well-written and above all, entertaining, this collection of short stories by established and up-and-coming crime writers is as Canadian as a polite little murder on a winter's afternoon."

Elizabeth J. Duncan, award-winning author of the **Penny Brannigan** series.

Dedicated to Lou Allin, award-winning author, mentor and inspiration. Lou was wicked in wit and unfailingly generous - a true Sister in Crime.

We miss you.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to the members of the Toronto Chapter of Sisters in Crime. Your volunteer work, for more than twenty years, has provided inspiration, support and motivation for so many.

Thank you to Dorothy Birtalan, Linda Cahill, Melodie Campbell, Janet Costello, Deanna Dunn, Jeannette Harrison, Nathan Hartley, Rayna Jolley, Jude Keast, Lesley Mang, Marian Misterns, Helen Nelson, Jan Oddie, Trish Rees-Jones, Renate Simon, and Kay Stewart, all Sisters to this project. Your countless hours volunteered, accepting the stories, judging, proofreading, fact-checking, editing, providing legal help, formatting and marketing this anthology are very much appreciated.

Thank you to Antonia Gorton, cover artist extraordinaire, who stepped up to the plate with yet another seductive and eye-catching cover

Janet Costello

Both entries in The Whole She-Bang series have been edited by Janet Costello. She also edited Crime Scene, the Toronto Chapter newsletter, for six years. Janet became active in the mystery community when Bouchercon, the World Mystery Convention, was held in Toronto in 2004. In 2017, Janet, with co-chair Helen Nelson, will bring Bouchercon XLVIII to Toronto. The To-Be-Read pile in Janet's home, which is not contained just within the library, is a siren constantly calling to her. She tells herself that, in 2018, she will devour these piles in short order.

Table of Contents

[Introduction by Lesley Mang](#)
[Contents Known by H. MacDonald-Archer](#)
[Christmas in Paradise by Lou Allin](#)
[Plan D by Judy Penz Sheluk](#)
[Jumping the Bags by Coleen Steele](#)
[Written in the Snow by Ann R. Loverock](#)
[The Goldstone House by Jill Downie](#)
[First Impressions by Madona Skaff](#)
[The Fifth Digit by Carol Newhouse](#)
[Tourist Town by Steve Shrott](#)
[Hammered by Helen Nelson](#)
[Beyond the Locked Door by P.M. Jones](#)
[Revenge is a Treat by Linda Wiken](#)
[No Honour Among Thieves by Lesley Mang](#)
[Women's Work by Melodie Campbell](#)
[There Goes The Neighbourhood by Elizabeth Hosang](#)
[Poetic Justice by Susan Daly](#)
[Testimony by Madona Skaff](#)
[Special Delivery by Linda Cahill](#)
[Try It Before You Die by Elaine Ruth Mitchell](#)
[Exercise Blues by Carol Newhouse](#)
[The Dead Of Winter by Miriam Clavir](#)
[Forever Friends by Ann R. Loverock](#)
[The End of the World by Catherine Astolfo](#)
[Women Who Wear Red by Charlotte Morganti](#)

Introduction

by Lesley Mang

Chapter President, Sisters in Crime Toronto

Well, we've done it again! Just as Helen Nelson, our former president, promised. We had so much fun creating *The Whole She-Bang* that we just had to produce another anthology of our talented members' work. The rules we established for our first anthology were used here. Again, we did not establish a firm number to be included and the judging was blind. The judges were asked to select the stories they thought deserved to be published.

Our new anthology holds twenty-four stories. Some of the authors appeared in *The Whole She-Bang*, but we are really pleased to include many new names. It is evident that we have a deep well to draw from should we decide to produce another anthology.

Most of the stories are set in Canada, and it's very interesting to read how much the landscape impacts the lives of the characters we encounter. You'll read stories set in the Arctic, remote northern British Columbia, Jasper National Park, Vancouver Island, Northern Ontario and Ontario cottage country. In each of these stories, the setting is crucial to the telling of the story.

You'll also read stories set in small towns, big cities and urban neighbourhoods. In each case, location helps to shape the story.

Other stories have small, specific settings: a funeral home, a hospital room, a book store, a university, an arena. Again, the details of the setting are important.

The settings are vital, but there is so much more to savour in these stories. You'll meet some splendid characters. Among them you'll find a frightened young newspaper carrier, a reluctant thief, an upright bookstore owner, vengeful women, old and young, unhappy wives, unhappy employees, a famous poet, an observant female police officer, a clever P.I., a brave student, a seemingly simple-minded small town shopkeeper, a deluded stalker and an older woman looking for love. More than one perpetrator gets away with the crime, but some of them suffer for it. There are a couple of characters who plan murder, but then discover redeeming qualities in their intended victims.

The settings and the characters are important but the quality of the story telling is wonderful. We are treated to irony and humour in the plots and the characters. And there is almost always a satisfying resolution to the situation.

Congratulations to all of the authors for their fine stories. We hope this sample of your work leads to many readers in the future.

This anthology was produced in record time (under a year) by a team of volunteers who put in hundreds of hours collecting, judging, editing, proofreading, formatting and planning a marketing strategy. A very big thank you to all of them.

And a very big thank you to Sisters in Crime, a volunteer organization devoted to promoting the recognition of female writers of crime fiction, for inspiring this collection.

Contents Known

by **H. MacDonald-Archer**

H. MacDonald-Archer draws on almost forty years of experience as an editor, reporter and feature writer. As a journalist, she worked on a number of Thomson Newspapers, The Ottawa Journal and The Canadian Press before landing at The Toronto Star for 29 years. She is a member of the Toronto chapter of Sisters in Crime and Sisters in Crime International. She had two short stories published in a crime anthology, Nefarious North (August 2013). She holds an undergraduate degree in Celtic Studies from St. Michael's College, University of Toronto and an M.A. in early medieval church history, University of Guelph. She lives in Toronto with her husband.

Christopher Carlyle recognized the trunk the minute he saw it outside the back door to his shop. It was quite large and covered in thin, battered red leather that had once borne an intricate raised design of flowers, circles and tiny shapes. It closed with a large silver hasp that was evocative of Morocco or southern Spain. It had witnessed life, of that Christopher was quite sure, for its slashes, scratches and dents told a story of boats and train carriages, danger and excitement: if only it could talk.

Thank God it couldn't.

The first time the trunk had shown up, it was full of a brilliant little collection of eighteenth and nineteenth century tomes, some of them written by Dr. Johnson, Edmund Burke and Daniel Defoe. Nestled in its folds of scarlet silk lining were smooth leather-covered works by Dumas and Flaubert, Anne Radcliffe, Lady Morgan and Susan Ferrier, the pages trimmed in faded gilt. The trunk was purchased, contents unseen, at a large estate sale in Kent. All he was told, prior to the frantic bidding, was that it was full of books. But the sight of the trunk alone stole his heart and he was delighted when it was delivered the following day to his little Chiswick bookshop.

He sold the books, but kept the trunk. Well, why not? It was, in itself, a real treasure. It sat at the front of his shop for five years, used as a perch by the many perusers of fine old literature at Carlyle and Son Books, a musty, elongated shop tucked between a kebab take-away and a charity store. Even Gustav, his ancient orange cat, put its worn top to use in his final days, stretched out in the sun. Christopher found him late one afternoon, his limbs stiff, eyes closed in eternal contentment.

The trunk had left the shop exactly one year ago. Feeling relief and some joy, Christopher actually saw it carried off by the dustmen. "Nice old bit," one of them commented, stroking the soft leather sides, a nicotine-stained finger following the circles and designs. "If you like old stuff. A heavy bugger, though." The two men had wrestled the trunk up and into the lorry, Christopher at the back door, praying that the small lock securing the old hasp would hold.

And yet it was back, delivered by someone unknown and left at the rear of the shop. The hasp was broken and hung loosely and the red leather was peeled in a few places. Old wood peeked through rudely and marred the trunk's true beauty.

Christopher sat down abruptly on the back step when he found it, ashen, heart pounding. He poked the trunk with his toe, testing to see if it would move. Was it full or empty? He removed the pen from his breast pocket and looped it through the broken hasp to lift the heavy lid. He didn't even want to touch the damned thing now. The lid flipped back easily to reveal the scarlet silk, stained and musky. It was very empty.

First, Christopher exhaled noisily, feeling relief. Then a cold fear swept over him.

The Carlyles' bookstore had always been a busy one. Christopher and his late father, Owen, worked well together, their love of old books overcoming the polar differences in their personalities. Owen was a tubby old hippie with a huge white beard, long hair and a penchant for flashy clothes and leather gilets. He was noisy, robust and opinionated, and much given to smoking a reefer or two in the back, at the end of the day, while he read *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*—out loud, for God's sake—a glass of Glenmorangie in his hand.

But the punters loved Owen and even those who didn't care so much for old books came by the shop to talk, take in the atmosphere, to soak up Owen and his old-rocker-turned-bibliophile reputation. He was a bona fide sixties hell-raising reprobate who eschewed his Oxford education to join a band, fathering five children by five different women along the way. Only Christopher, the last child born to a woman Owen claimed was his one true love, stuck by his old man. His mother, a delicate flower of a woman, died of asthma when Christopher was four, leaving the child in the care of a man any normal person would consider a complete lunatic.

God knows what happened to the other offspring, one boy and three girls. Christopher never met them. He learned several years ago through a great aunt that at least two of the girls were in America—a place he'd rather be right now.

Always clean-cut, fussy, exacting and particular, Owen's last child couldn't have been more different than his father. He hated rock music, hated anything to do with the modern world. At the end of a day, he'd lock up the store, draw the blinds and turn up the classical music he started playing after Owen died.

There was no nasty end for Owen; he died in the storeroom, glass of whisky in hand, reading Samuel Johnson's *The Life of Ascham*. His funeral, for all the noise and bluster he created while alive, was a quiet affair, attended by Christopher and a few local shopkeepers. So much for fame and notoriety, thought Christopher. Not his way.

He carried on with the business for six months or so, barely able to do the buying and organizing of shelves and the filling of Internet orders. It became clear that he would have to hire someone to help him. He just couldn't do it all.

The employment centre, four doors up the street, was more than willing to help Christopher find a suitable assistant and sent a number of highly unsuitable candidates his way. Twenty-three applicants came to be interviewed, from a blue-haired Goth with

one-inch studs in his ears and a ring in his lower lip, to a morbidly obese woman who wanted to work and drink tea all day, yet keep her benefits at all costs. She couldn't lift books, she told him, couldn't climb the ladder to fetch them, either. And she never read books, anyway. "Is that okay?"

No, it wasn't.

On the day Christopher walked down the street to tell the centre to forget it, Sandra Keel, one of the employment counsellors at the back of the room, held up a slip of paper and waved it at him. "She's perfect," she hollered over the heads of her co-workers. Christopher reluctantly walked down the row of desks to the woman's cubicle and sat down.

Sandra looked at him with bright eyes and read the applicant's details. "She's perfect. She's got a degree in library science, has been in the country six months and has a work visa. She's been working as a maid at a hotel in Chelsea but wants the chance to use her education and get some experience."

Christopher scratched his ear. "Age? A new graduate?"

"Yes. She graduated last year. She's twenty-two. A very nice girl. I've met her twice. Should I send her along? Her English is very good and she's quite keen."

Christopher grimaced.

"Well, fergawdsake, at least she can read!" Sandra laughed.

"Yes, fine. Tell her to come along tomorrow after lunch. I'll give her the details and I'll let you know how it goes."

"Her name is Radka!" Sandra shouted at Christopher's retreating back. "Radka Boyonov!"

Christopher just raised a hand and kept going.

So that was how it started. Radka was tall, dark-haired and flamboyant. She spoke quickly and with an intensity that scared Christopher. She never took her eyes off someone when she was addressing them, all the while moving closer, and in the end, it was more a case of Radka hiring Christopher, instead of the other way around. "I will work every day needed. I'm not afraid of work. I work hard, you see. And I'm educated. You educated?"

"Cambridge." Christopher shuffled his feet during the interview, trying to avoid the woman perched on the red trunk. "Ahem. You are familiar with the Internet and purchasing books online? I have a lot of customers from abroad who order from me. We have to pack up the books and send them on. We also have to list them in the inventory. There's a lot of email communication between us and the customer. It's not just walk-in business we do here."

"Oh yes. I order all my books at university online. Much cheaper. Or I take from library. You like library?"

"Yes, there's one two blocks away, if you're interested."

"Okay then, I start tomorrow."

And Christopher, not the man his father was, simply said, "Fine."

Things went well for a month or so. Christopher learned she was very good with the online orders and keeping the listed inventory up-to-date. But she didn't seem to know a lot about books or publishers. She distracted customers with off-topic conversations to keep from them the fact she knew very little, and she frequently made promises of obtaining books Christopher knew he'd never be able to acquire.

More often than not, an interested buyer left baffled and upset. She sat and filed her nails and she made frequent calls on a cell phone in a language he didn't recognize. She became rude to him, talked back when asked to do something and was consistently late for work.

He spoke to her gently at first. He told her she mustn't do this, or that, as it was inappropriate and not fair to the customer. And if she didn't know something, she was to refer the customer to him, because he did know. She sulked and went into 'silent' mode whenever he pointed out these facts. But he was adamant things had to change the Thursday she arrived for work three hours late and offered no explanation. She simply threw down her bag, rolled her eyes and made her pot of tea.

She was livid with this latest rebuke and threw a fine Jonathan Swift volume across the room, knocking over a display. She screamed at him in English and fluent French, which took him by surprise, and flounced out the door, slamming it so hard the window cracked.

Christopher spent the afternoon on the phone trying to get a glazier to replace it. He was so upset he forgot to eat lunch and he forgot to check the email orders for the day. He was so upset he had to lock the front door on three occasions while he spent some time in the little toilet under the stairs at the back of the shop. Her behaviour left him shaking. How on earth did he end up hiring such a person? He'd have been better off with one of the undesirables he'd interviewed. At least he could have trained them. There was no training Radka; she knew it all. And she knew nothing.

Should he go back to Sandra at the centre? Ask about that degree Radka said she had? Or should he investigate himself? The latter would be better. He didn't want to disappoint Sandra, after all.

Christopher sat down at the computer just inside the back storeroom. He noticed that even hours later, the little teapot Radka kept constantly filled on the desk was still warm. He removed the lid and sniffed. It wasn't tea, he was sure. He pulled a clean mug from a desk drawer and poured in a little of the pot's contents, taking just a small taste. He was still cleaning up the mess he'd spit out when the bell above the shop door jingled and he had to rush out and tell a customer, a professor of music at the Royal Academy of Music, that he probably wouldn't be able to get the rare *Fragments Représentés Devant le Roi a Fontainebleau (Ballets. Librettos. Selections), Paris, 1754* his assistant had promised.

Radka didn't come back that Thursday and the shop was quiet after the professor left. Christopher, throwing his usual parsimony to the wind, looked up the phone number online and called the Old Bulgarian University. It took several transfers before

he got the proper department—quite usual for academia, he thought—and talked to a woman in alumni affairs about former students. Did she, by any chance, have listed, as a recent graduate, one Radka Boyonov?

He waited another ten minutes, assuring himself the cost was worth his peace of mind. “No, no. Not this past year,” the woman assured him. “No Boyonov at all. But five years ago, a Radka Boyonov did attend here.”

“Oh, well that’s fine, then,” Christopher said with relief. “You see, she’s working for me at my bookstore here in London and I had to be sure.”

There was a long moment of silence and Christopher thought the woman had hung up on him. “Sir, it is a familiar name to me, to be sure. But the woman working with you could not be our Radka Boyonov.”

“Why?”

“It is a well-known story here, very tragic. Radka Boyonov was murdered by a boyfriend here on campus two days before her graduation. She was to be a librarian. She was stabbed multiple times in front of other students in the little student café. It was horrendous, as you can imagine.”

Christopher felt faint. “Dear God.”

“You must look into this woman who calls herself this. There cannot be two Radka Boyonovs from this university who studied in our program. No. I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you.” He sounded weak. He felt weak. So who was this woman who had a dead woman’s name? Who passed herself off as something she clearly wasn’t? And would she dare to come back tomorrow?

She did. Radka Boyonov marched into the shop the next morning, placed a bag of croissants in front of Christopher as though nothing had happened and proceeded to get down to work. She said very little, was pleasant when they did exchange words and seemed more intent on doing the job and less on being obstreperous. She made three tiny pots of tea, however—Christopher kept track—and he was convinced she was keeping herself high on marijuana. Why hadn’t he noticed her tendency to become jolly so quickly, loud when it was inappropriate, to laugh when it wasn’t called for? He kept his distance—but had no reason to reprimand her again—until she’d gone for the day—for the weekend, actually.

Christopher’s habit on a Friday night was to go through all the orders from overseas customers—many in America or Canada—and to make sure the right books had been sent to the right customers. Many of the buyers were collectors, but many were academics who needed the books for research or for rare books libraries on their campuses. He sold books to some of the best universities in the world. It was a very lucrative part of his business. He went through the list more methodically than usual, matching names, order numbers and addresses.

It was a nightmare. The books had been mailed out, but she had sent every single book to the wrong person. She’d switched order numbers, names of books and entered the customers’ names incorrectly into the program he had set up. He was horrified.

Nothing like this had ever happened. And some of the books mailed to the wrong customers were worth thousands of pounds.

Christopher Carlyle wasn't used to this sort of thing. He liked an ordered life, things to be done well, a job to run smoothly. He headed for his little toilet under the stairs and spent the next half hour there. When he emerged, white and shaky, he calmly sat down at the computer and emailed every customer on the list. He explained that staff errors had been made and that he would personally see that the mistakes would be corrected. Would each customer who received the wrong book please return it? They would be reimbursed the cost. The correct books would then be sent as quickly as possible to the right customers. He was terribly sorry. He hoped this would not keep the customer from doing business with Carlyle and Son in the future. He was most respectfully theirs, and etcetera. He sat back in his chair, his face in his hands.

He didn't know much about women. He knew about the kind of women his father liked and who frequently visited the store before Owen's demise. He hadn't liked them one bit. They drank Owen's Glenmorangie, smoked, were loud and liked to party.

He did like Sandra at the employment centre. She was nice, kind and polite. She was a married woman, he knew, but if he had the chance, she was the kind of woman he'd like to get to know better. This Radka creature was like nothing he'd ever met. How he let himself be taken in he would never know. He felt humiliated and embarrassed. The bookshop was his life, part of his being and now it seemed sullied, his reputation threatened.

Should he call the police? Would she return Monday morning? No. He didn't want the police involved. He didn't want the other business people in the street, some of whom he'd caught watching Radka coming and going, to see the police there at the shop.

Would she come back? He believed so.

So just over a year ago, Christopher had spent an anxious weekend planning and plotting a way to deal with Radka, without her causing a scene or tearing his shop apart. She was more than capable of that, he felt sure. He'd be ready for her on Monday morning. He would deal with her quickly and she would leave without putting up an argument.

Christopher's plans went off without a hitch. Radka left the bookshop Monday evening and never returned. When Sandra asked, two days later, how things were going, he'd just shrugged and said, "She just up and quit. Left me in the lurch. And I'm terribly busy with orders at the moment."

"Oh, Christopher. I'm so, so sorry. And I thought, with her background, she'd be perfect for you. You just let me know when you're ready to find another person for the shop."

"Will do."

The only thing Christopher regretted about getting rid of Radka was the fact his red trunk went with her. Or rather, she went with the trunk. In the trunk, actually, wrapped up in a double canvas bag tied with a triple length of twine, along with the slim steel garrotte he used to dispatch her. It was so much easier than he had expected.

And life at the bookshop, after two months of horror, quickly returned to normal. Sandra sent him the incredibly talented and intelligent, stud-bedecked blue-haired Goth, an expert on rare books who worked quietly alongside Christopher, seeking out deals, obtaining fine books, keeping immaculate records, unafraid of working long hours because the shop was, after all, like being in heaven. Christopher was able to take more days away from the shop, venture into the countryside and purchase books at various auctions. He even bought a little van so he could ferry his purchases back to the shop himself.

Life was very good for Christopher and his new assistant, Ivan. Christopher was happy.

But that happiness was threatened by the empty trunk, its silk lining exposed to the sun, its exterior the worse for wear. Where had it been? Where was Radka's body?

Christopher just couldn't get up. He felt weak and his stomach was churning, even though he hadn't had breakfast yet. His assistant would be arriving for work soon. What on earth was he to do? Where could he put this trunk? Who knew about Radka? Who had taken her body? Worst of all, it now looked as if someone knew what he'd done to her.

Christopher got to his feet and was just about to shut the back door when a gruff greeting stopped him cold. He turned slowly to see a man in work clothes standing by the trunk. "You weren't here when I come by earlier."

"Oh?"

"How about this, huh? Remember it?" He pointed to the trunk.

Christopher didn't know what to do so he shook his head.

"Course you do. It was heavy as hell when we picked 'er up a year ago. Don't you remember? I loved 'er even then, I have to admit."

Christopher's head reeled. He was speechless.

"Listen, I loved 'er so much, I binned that lot of old books that were in that sack and I took 'er home. I loved 'er, but my wife couldn't abide the thing and the kids kept kickin' and nickin' 'er. So here she is. Kept 'er as good as I could. I've brought 'er back. Some of her red coverin' is scuffed, like ... but she ain't too bad, is she? Should have asked you if I could have it, but that's what dustmen do if we sees something nice thrown out."

Christopher stared at the man, a warm wave of relief flooding his entire being.

"Here, let me help you get 'er back inside."

Christmas in Paradise

by Lou Allin

Lou Allin was the author of the Belle Palmer mysteries set in Northern Ontario, and the RCMP Corporal Holly Martin series set on Vancouver Island. Lou also wrote That Dog Won't Hunt in Orca's Rapid Reads editions for adults with literacy issues, and in 2013 won Canada's Arthur Ellis Best Novella Award for Contingency Plan. She authored two stand-alones for Cengage, A Little Learning is a Murderous Thing and Man Corn Murders, set respectively in the Michigan Upper Peninsula and in Utah. A former BC-Yukon VP for the Crime Writers of Canada, she lived across from Washington State on the Juan de Fuca Strait with her border collies and mini-poodle. Lou passed away in July of 2014. This collection is dedicated to her.

Paul Fleischer lined the plastic honey bucket in the downstairs bathroom with two black garbage bags. Then he lugged in more crappy fir from the frosty deck and placed it by the large stove in the foyer. Beneath a tuque, long underwear, woolen pants, ski socks, and two sweaters, he was frozen to the bone. It was their first Christmas Eve on Vancouver Island.

“Welcome to Paradise,” the realtor, storekeepers and even the neighbours had said when they arrived from Edmonton and bought the house in sunny September. In cheaper Otter Point, west of Victoria, the attractive green and white Greek villa with a hot tub out front overlooked the Strait of Juan de Fuca where fishing boats bobbed and freighters lined the shipping lanes. The tropical banana plants, palm-like dracaenas and kiwi vines had seduced them faster than a pitcher of margaritas. The true isles of Ulysses rarely saw -7C.

From habit, when he had spied the massive woodstove, Paul ordered up two cords of dry Douglas fir. When the wood was delivered, they discovered they had a pile of logs three times the size it would have been back home. Then they trundled it by wheelbarrow into the massive woodhouse. “You promised that we’d never have to haul wood again,” Fran had said, massaging her lower back. “Just a bit for the *chill*.”

“It’s money in the bank. Probably last us for years,” Paul replied, chunking the last piece into place and wincing at a splinter. “And of course I left behind my work gloves. At a dollar a pound to move, that wasn’t smart. The snowblower, on the other hand, we will never need.”

When they went for a daily walk that autumn, their neighbour Les, a retired faller, often met them by his stone wall etched with the names of his three former dogs: Pinky, Rose, and Betsy. He gestured with his cigar. “Now your place always puzzled me. Build for spec, build cheap; build to live there, spare no expense. But that Todd, he smacked her up in a month, then moved in with his family. Got most of the materials for free. Used timber. Wholesale tiles. You’ll be colder than a brass monkey over there with those

fool baseboards. Wired some in backward. You'll find out fast enough. *Zap zap*. And 2x4 framing's a fool's savings. Heat's gonna flow out like a donkey's butt after a dose of castor oil."

A raucous Steller's jay on the hydro wires echoed his chuckles. They made an excuse to move on down the road to the turnaround. Where had he been hiding when they were looking at the place? Should they have canvassed the block for opinions? "Don't listen to him," Paul said. "Gossip's a hobby out here. Look at his place. Square and unimaginative. Probably a fixed-up cabin."

They had been coasting into a mild fall, almost blessing the tardy rains for resurrecting the brown grass, still unpacking and rearranging furniture at the end of November. Then one morning an eerie light wakened them. Silent as a nun slipping off to vespers, a foot of snow had fallen "where the rain forest meets the sea." And it didn't melt into a dew like the realtor's jolly promises. A four-day power outage pushed them back to the Stone Age, and they wondered why they had left Alberta.

In Edmonton they had built a house designed for -35C. 2x6 construction. R2000 insulation. A woodstove warmed the house like a bakery. They sweated inside, even in t-shirts. Power outages were rare, and short. Sure, they retired a bit young, at fifty-five, but Fran's second breakdown had made up their minds. English teaching wasn't like it used to be. She'd had the guts to fail students and paid the price.

In blissful optimism, they had left winter's tools behind for the new owner. The lanterns, the plow truck, two massive snowblowers, five shovels, two scoops, car scrapers, and an ice chipper for the driveway. Only the camp stove and flashlights rode along with the \$12,000 moving bill. Fran would write that children's book, and Paul would do volunteer work for seniors.

As the nights grew colder and the sun surrendered to record levels of rain, they asked themselves how much insulation lay within the flimsy walls. "Chipped newspaper, for all we know," Fran said with a whimper, then scratched at her recurrent eczema. With its span of high windows to accommodate the hundred-thousand-dollar view and pink glass-brick inserts, the magical solarium grew chilly and unwelcoming, a mere repository for endless pieces of cardboard from the packing boxes. The ice palace in *Dr. Zhivago* was little better.

Now they had minimal heat, no water and no plumbing. The house, fast becoming a living entity on life support, operated on a shallow well with an electric pump. And where they could have flushed at home by gravity, given a bucket of melted snow, here a distribution pump to the field bed blocked the possibility. Darkness came early. They spent each day huddling around the woodstove and making quick and salty dinners out of instant mashed potatoes, gravy mix and a can of flaked turkey. Then they went to bed by six and stayed there until the sun came up. They did get to town on the second day when the plow came, but only for essentials and more antidepressants for Fran. "I have a reason to be depressed," she repeated as she doubled the dosage.

Les's generator stuttered into action at dawn and roared on like a diesel locomotive

for the next twelve hours, bracketing the short day. Her long silver-blond hair braided like a fairy child's, Fran pounded her pillow, then adjusted her ear plugs. Paul lay awake far into the night. He'd thought moving out west would shackle her depressive, post-menopausal demons. A fresh start in a new climate. "Honey," he said as he heard her sniff. "Do you want to buy a generator?"

"Even if we could find one, and I doubt we could, we don't have the money. And I don't care to play that game. Even if we did lose the freezer meat."

Paul felt his stomach tighten. With a thirty-five per cent increase in real estate prices that year, they'd had to cash in over \$200,000 in mutual funds to make up the difference in house costs. Come March, the taxes on those gains would be brutal. His pension was adequate, but hers wouldn't start until next year. Too humiliated to apply for a disability, she'd taken a stress leave from her job for the last two years at half pay.

On the third day, the coldest at -11C, Paul had visited the pump house. He hoped the pipes wouldn't freeze, because the system was cheap and illogical. Due to summer water shortages with the shallow well, the last owner had installed an ugly black plastic storage tank. Problem was, the unprotected lines snaked up and down the outside of the monster.

One of the five traps was sprung. "Caught another rat," he called to his wife, who was using a rake to chip at the hardened snow on the deck. "Cashew butter appeals to upscale west-coast rodents."

With no words, she brought out a plastic bag and handed it to him. He deposited the third Norway rat into the garbage pail. Females gave birth to sixty offspring a year. Rats had not been a problem in the frozen bush. He wondered if Les's peacock feed attracted them. Poisoning would be too dangerous with all the wells nearby.

They had barely recovered from the first outage when Christmas was upon them. Too dispirited and shell-shocked to buy even nominal presents, they made an effort to hunt up their artificial tree. The base was broken. "The movers again," Fran said with a bitter sigh. They had sent a report charging over \$2,500 in lost and damaged property, but it would be a long time before they recovered anything. With a broom, she propped it up. Then they decorated it with prized ornaments from their thirty-year marriage. "Remember this one?" she asked as she touched a plastic moose fishing through a piece of acrylic ice. Paul moved closer and put his arm around her. She sounded more like herself. Less medication? He plugged in the lights and a host of red and green bulbs lit up the room.

One lone parcel had arrived from friends back east. It sat there like a reproach, but the postage had been significant. Fly-fishing tackle for him. A book on growing roses for her. They managed a laugh despite themselves.

That night they took a walk, trying to admire their jeweled tree, despite its precarious lean. Their neighbour's house was decorated with thousands of lights, a sleigh on the lawn, and a five-foot Santa nodded by the front door, a tape loop as he waved his arms bleeping *ho ho ho*.

Les strode down the driveway, thumbs in his suspenders. “Hear the weather? Another storm from the Pacific. Could be a typhoon. That’s like a hurricane for youse. We had a doozie here in the sixties. Freda, they called her.”

“It’s Christmas Eve. Let’s hope for the best,” Paul said. His anger toward the man had eased when the power had returned, but it seemed like Les was goading them. He could feel Fran’s arm tightening around his.

“*Brumm brumm*. She’s all fired up and ready to go. Forewarned is forearmed, my old daddy used to say.” Les gave his cigar another pull, then spiraled it into the holly bush. “Oughta get one yourselves. Maybe a thousand and you can rig it yourself.”

“I don’t think so,” Paul said. “I’d want an electrician to wire it in...if I got one.”

“Haw!” Les said. “Cost the earth, that. What kinda work you say you did afore you retired?”

Paul answered, “College professor. History.”

“Tits on a bull.” Les grunted and turned up his drive. Through the kitchen window, they could see his wife Myrna at the stove, stirring a pot. Drifts of savory stew met their noses. They hadn’t bought any more meat. Pasta and rice had become safe staples. Maybe get a roast Boxing Day if all went well.

That night the power checked out at midnight as lights flew around the strait in demented fireworks. Their back door blew open, and Paul charged downstairs in his pajamas. The wind howled, tossing the blackberry bushes like tumbleweeds. Down the street four massive Douglas firs shook their savage curls and groaned. At least they didn’t have any large trees on the property, though he wasn’t confident about the cedar-shake roof. Was that Les’s peacock screaming? Or was it the wind? He slipped back into the warm bed, and they huddled together in the blackness, as significant as flies in a tornado.

“Maybe it’ll be just a short one,” Paul said in the dark of the morning. He saw Fran bite her lip, but at least she got out of bed and put on her headlamp before slipping into a robe. As long as she keeps moving, he thought, and talking...

He went into the bathroom. They could risk one flush, a luxury. How long before the next? Did they have enough garbage bags? At home they could have used the old outhouse. Their lakefront property was remote enough. This house was too civilized... and too barbaric.

Paul used newspaper crumples and cardboard to start a fire. The coals were dead. Fir didn’t last overnight like the boreal maple or oak. Then he took down the camp stove from the top of the laundry cabinet and set it up in the kitchen for Fran. He attached a propane canister and filled the kettle from the water cooler. He noted the two full five-gallon jugs on the floor.

“We can shift the fridge contents to the BBQ—just in case,” he said when she finally poured the coffee. They’d had an omelet last night. Cheese and eggs kept well enough without refrigeration. He stifled an ironic laugh. Ten feet from the woodstove on its cold ceramic floor, the whole house was a refrigerator.

“Wind’s still up, but it’s dropping,” Paul said as he surveyed the street. Except for the undulating lines and some stray plastic garbage cans, everything seemed undamaged. It was 5C. The lawn looked green even if the banana plants had turned brown and fallen over after the heavy snowfall.

Fran poured orange juice and set out bread to toast on racks on the woodstove. “Let’s try the battery radio. It’s nearly eight,” he said, and his heart lurched as he watched her programmed movements.

The local station gave the bad news. “Massive storm pummels island.” Over 150,000 people were without power, from Victoria up to Nanaimo and across to Vancouver. Race Rocks had recorded record 157 kph winds. Stanley Park was a giant’s game of pick-up sticks. The fabled West Coast Trail up to Port Renfrew had thousands of deadfalls, might be closed to tourists for a year. “I’m telling you, there were starfish in the trees,” a hiker reported after a reconnaissance of French Beach.

The BC Hydro line said only that a large number of calls prevented any local information and that many routes were closed. No bulletins would be issued until crews assessed the situation. Then the generator went on next door, and the dial tone went dead.

Paul’s hair felt greasy already. Another four or five days without a bath? Motels and B and B’s with power would be jammed for a hundred miles. The Salvation Army was feeding the elderly in downtown Sooke, using camp stoves. At Whiffen Spit at the harbour, houses had been demolished. Cars were crushed.

If it’s not on, he told himself, if it’s not on by four, we’ll drive to Victoria, take the ferry to Vancouver, go all the way to Calgary, for God’s sake. Anywhere we can get a room. Fran can’t take much more.

In the few hours of precious daylight, they walked to the turnaround. Two heavy firs had crashed across the power lines. Paul whistled at the enormity of the destruction, like a fascination with a train wreck. The trees were over five feet wide at the bases. Record rains in November had loosened their roots, allowing the wind to take the whole trees, not just the branches. Convergence of the twain. What had Hardy said about “twin halves of one august event?”

The road looked clear to the left. “Let’s take a drive,” Paul said.

But when they headed for town on the oceanside highway, they were stopped in seconds by roadblocks. An orange-vested man said through their window, “Gotta be a hundred trees down. Poles are snapped like toothpicks. Can’t even see some of the beach houses buried in branches. Good thing they’re summer cottages. No one hurt.”

Paul heard Fran give a small gasp. Now they couldn’t get more emergency supplies. What was in their cupboard? Why hadn’t they stocked up after the first storm? “What about Otter Point Road?” That was the only other artery.

“She’s blocked the same. Lines down all over. Power’s dead as a doornail. Good old boys got their chainsaws out at first light. Free wood.” Guttural roars from all directions far and near met their ears.

They drove home in silence. Cell phones never did work out here. If they needed an ambulance, what then? Light a signal fire? Wait for the air ambulance? Fran was dead silent as they pulled into the drive. Next door, Les was tossing fresh fir rounds from his pickup to his woodpile.

Supper that night was powdered-milk noodles along with a can of green beans and the last of the Hallowe'en candy. "I'll take care of the dinner. You rest," he said, and she made herself a nest on the pasha chair, bundled in blankets. She seemed to be humming a children's song. "We all fall down." She was examining her hands as if they had a mind of their own.

"Fran, stay under the covers. I can rig you a pallet by the wood stove, using the sofa cushions. How would that be?"

Her answer was to pull the blanket over her head. Was that laughter?

He splurged by using their drinking water to cook the pasta. The ditchwater's leeches had turned him away. Good enough for bathing, but suppose they had to drink it? Would ten minutes on the boil be enough?

His great-great-grandparents on a Bowmanville farm went to bed and got up with the sun and probably bathed in a tin washtub once a week, same as his father as a boy in Toronto. Life was simple and straightforward. Folks also died in childbirth and were lucky to live to sixty. Clinical depression sent them to the local asylum or to the barn with a rope.

And the generator droned on. He could see lights next door when it got dark at five. Paul called Fran to the window. "Look, television. The bastard. There's no antenna stuff anymore. Must be a DVD." He remembered that he was going to subscribe to the movie channels on their cable account as a belated Christmas present. Someone was singing over the din of the generator, "There's no place like home for the holidays."

"I hate that man. So smug." A runnel of tears had dried on her wan face. She mustered a small fist. "I'd like to kill him."

Paul hugged her to him. "Honey, you don't mean that." The smells of roast turkey met their nose. Les had a huge freezer.

On the fourth evening, they were reduced to eating instant rice, canned tuna and chestnuts she had bought for dressing. The bread had gone mouldy. Out came the powdered non-dairy creamer. "God knows what's in this," Paul said. "But we're probably so full of chemicals that it doesn't matter."

Fran refused to get out of bed the next morning. He brought her dry cereal with the last of the coffee.

"Think the road's finally open? The chainsaws have been quieter." He waited for a reply, tried to find the slightest expression of response.

She closed her eyes and turned her head to the wall. In the bathroom, as he cleaned his face with a wet wipe before scraping it with the razor, he noticed that her pill bottle was empty.

At noon, he was loading the stove. A beep sounded, and the power came on. Paul

waited, hesitantly, as if they were the centre of a cosmic joke. Surely if they tried anything, a bath, maybe, if the system still worked, the power gods would cut them off again. Half an hour later, he started emptying the pee buckets on the sheltered side of the house, doing dishes, making a grocery list and turning on the baseboards.

He took Fran some tea. Her eyelids fluttered open. "If you believe, clap your hands. Clap louder. Clap," she said over and over with a giggle that could have urged tears. The tea grew cold as he waited with her. The phone was on at last. He could call 911 for help. Let them figure out how to reach them. Air ambulance maybe.

The generator droned on like a rabid animal. Fran covered her ears and started shrieking.

"Doesn't he know that the power is back? Is he doing this on purpose? I'll fix him." Paul felt a pulse beat in his temple, and he clenched his fists until they hurt. "I'm going over there. Enough is enough. They never offered us anything. For all they know, we could be starving. Even an egg from his damned chickens was too much."

Grabbing a heavy maul from the woodhouse, he charged down the driveway, his hair matted, reeking of sweat. Dots of toilet paper marked his bloodied face, bitten by his soapless razor. Les's house was alive with lights, from the bobbing deer on the lawn to the giant pulsating star up top. The peacock in the shed screeched. The wind had stopped at last. He pounded on the door. To his right, the muffled generator was closed up in the garage under the living room. "The power's on, you... asshole. Turn off that damn machine, or I'll do it for you with this!"

He broke into the garage and smashed the generator to bits with the flat side of the maul. For good measure, he knocked down the fridge. It was full of individually packed meals. They had so much. Canned good and staples lined the shelves. Those, too, he knocked down. Just let the old man come in. Jail time would be worth it.

Strange that Les hadn't appeared. Was he drunk, too? Finally he shoved open the house door. Heavy fumes assaulted his nose as he entered the foyer and turned, holding onto the door jamb for support. His knees weakened, and his eyes watered in the acrid air. On a game show, the host posed the question: "In what novel by Charles Dickens does a young boy come to the aid of a convict?" *Great Expectations*, Paul whispered to himself. Les and Myrna lay slumped and silent on the sofa, their faces cherry red, their eyes wide and unseeing. It was stifling. And all the lamps were on. "Merry Christmas," the coloured lights in their window read. On the lawn, a bobbing Santa *ho ho ho'd*.

Plan D

by Judy Penz Sheluk

Judy Penz Sheluk's debut mystery novel, The Hanged Man's Noose, is scheduled for publication in July 2015 by Barking Rain Press (www.barkingrainpress.org). In her less mysterious pursuits, Judy works as a freelance writer, specializing in art, antiques and the residential housing industry; her articles have appeared regularly in dozens of U.S. and Canadian consumer and trade publications. She is currently the editor of Home BUILDER Magazine, and the senior editor for New England Antiques Journal. Judy is also a member of Sisters in Crime International, Toronto and Guppies, and Crime Writers of Canada.

Jenny wasn't sure when she first got the idea. Maybe it was the big ice storm back in the winter of 2012. One day there were icicles hanging from the eaves, glistening in the pale moonlit night like giant teardrops. The next day, as the temperature soared and the sun shone, the icicles had slowly melted, drip by drip, until they had vanished without a trace.

"Ted got laid off again," Jenny said. She was sitting in the Coffee Klatch Café with her sister, Stephanie.

Stephanie raised a well-groomed eyebrow, then shrugged. "I'm not surprised. Can't be a lot of demand for an appliance repairman's helper these days. We live in such a disposable society."

Jenny concentrated on her vanilla bean non-fat-extra-foam latte, took a sip, grimaced slightly at the too sweet taste. She'd have to remember to order half the syrup next time. They always overdid the syrup.

"So is Ted finally willing to admit it's time to get some retraining?" Stephanie asked. "Or would that take too much initiative on his part?"

"Ted has initiative; he's just had a string of bad luck," Jenny said, although she knew it wasn't true. She could picture her husband sprawled out on the battered brown sofa, a TV remote in his left hand, a scotch on the rocks in the other. When it came to watching television, Ted was ambidextrous. And ambitious. He could channel surf with the best of them.

"Maybe it's time for you to stop making excuses for him, Jenny, and start making him accountable. Lord knows he's been dead weight since the day you two got married. Retraining just might be the answer. Unless you have another plan."

Dead weight. That had to be a sign to confide in her sister.

"As a matter of fact," Jenny said, "I do."

Naturally, Jenny didn't implement her plan straight away. She was cautious if

nothing else, and besides, part of her still loved Ted. Still remembered the way things had been, in the beginning. Before the endless stream of minimum wage jobs and broken promises. There might even be a chance to save him, save their marriage, save her sanity.

There was also the added complication of Stephanie. Jenny made a mistake confiding in her that day at the Coffee Klatch Café. She misread the sign. She thought her sister would understand.

She hadn't. Instead she went all holier-than-thou on her. In the end, Jenny had assured Stephanie that she'd just been kidding around. "Icicles," she had said, forcing a laugh. "C'mon, Steph, what do you take me for?"

And yet, despite all of that, the idea continued to niggle at her. Niggled through the first daffodils of spring, and another two lost jobs, one "too junior" and one "too senior" for Ted's skill set. It niggled through the hot, sticky nights of summer—the air conditioning turned off to save on hydro—Ted lying snoring and slack-jawed by her side, a thin stream of drool finding its way down his stubbly chin and onto the freshly washed cotton sheets.

It kept on niggling right through the cool, crisp days of autumn, especially when Jenny found herself doing 99.9 per cent of the leaf raking while an apparently "allergic to leaf mould" Ted stayed indoors to watch football. What if, she thought, cramming another mound of leaves into the oversized paper yard waste bag, what if the icicle became an ice pick?

For the first time since she was a kid, Jenny looked forward to winter.