

“The first step,” said Myrtle to her friend Miles, “is to stage a coup.”

Miles took off his wire rimmed glasses and rubbed his eyes. “A coup.”

Myrtle beamed as if at a prize student. “That’s it. The book club—as we know it—must be abolished.”

“You’re saying...now stop me if I’ve got this wrong...that you and I—the *new* members of the decades-old book club—will somehow commandeer it away from its current leadership, force it to restructure, and compel the members to read literature we deem worthy instead of beach books.”

“That,” said Myrtle, thumping *The Complete William Butler Yeats* triumphantly, “is exactly what I’m saying.”

Miles looked at his friend. She was really on a roll this time—she’d run her hand through her poofy white hair until it stood up on end like Einstein’s. She stood six feet tall, not at all bent or cowed by her considerable years.

“And you’re proposing that we do this *how*?”

“It’s a simple marketing principle. You’re a former businessman, you must understand it. Marketing, you know. Delivering what the people need.”

“Myrtle, I was an engineer, not a salesman.” Myrtle shrugged. Miles gave a sigh. “And we’re doing this *why*?”

Myrtle rolled her eyes. “You weren’t listening again. We’re doing this because book clubs should celebrate great literature. Literature, sharing a wonderful story, is what brings the world together. *Trixie Does Myrtle Beach* does not accomplish this goal.”

Miles leaned forward in his chair. “Are you saying the book club actually picked a book called—”

“No, no. I’m saying that’s the kind of tripe you might find on its reading list. And once we’ve started down that road...” She took a deep breath.

“The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the Centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

Miles glanced over at the *Yeats* collection. “Got it.” He straightened his glasses. “You believe that if we offer the book club serious reading alternatives, they’ll follow us in droves. That we’ll have taken it over. I’m just not sure it’s going to work out that way. It seems a little too easy.”

Myrtle snapped her fingers. “Good point. And I’ve got a terrific idea.”

Miles groaned.

“If things *don’t* go well, I need a plan B. I fully anticipate that everything will go according to plan, but if it doesn’t, then I’ll leave to go to the bathroom. And *you’ll* say, “I think Myrtle has a great idea.”

“And why,” asked Miles, pushing his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose, “would they care what I think?”

“Half those ninnies have set their cap for you, Miles. You’re the new widower on the block, you know. Anything you say will be taken as gospel.”

Miles looked doubtful at the appeal his steel-gray hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and seventy years held for the Bradley widows.

“Think of it Miles—you can still drive! You’re a hot commodity for aging widows, I promise you. Here’s our plan. I’ll listen in from the hall and when they’ve decided it’s a good idea, I’ll come back in and get it all organized!” Myrtle was practically rubbing her hands together in glee.

“Don’t count your chickens until they hatch,” said Miles. “You never know how things could turn out.”

“Nonsense. I predict we’ll make a smooth transition to being a club with honest literary discussions.”

“You know,” said Miles, “no one else seems unhappy with the book club. You—a retired English teacher—are the only one needing honest literary discussions.”

Myrtle shook her head impatiently. “Because they don’t know what they’re missing.”

“Have you told Red that you’re planning a literary coup?”

Myrtle just glowered at him.

“You haven’t because you know he’ll think you’re just stirring up trouble again. Remember Red’s motto? ‘Leave well enough alone.’”

“That’s only because my son is the police chief and wants me to live in stagnant misery so I can’t cause him any trouble. I want to wake up the town of Bradley! Take their blinders off and show them the possibilities! And Red is fixed on keeping me out of his hair. Did you know that he signed me up for some volunteer work this weekend? The cheek.”

“I’m assuming that’s why the army of gnomes resides in your front yard?”

Myrtle put her extensive collection of ceramic gnomes on display for Red’s viewing displeasure whenever he tried manipulating her. Lately, the gnomes had been on Myrtle’s front lawn more often than not.

“That’s exactly why the gnomes are out there. So he’s already well aware that I’m displeased with him. I don’t think he’ll have a problem in the world with some reorganizing on my part.”

“I don’t know, Myrtle. I can’t seem to shake this sinking feeling that our reorganization of the book club might have unexpected consequences.”

Myrtle squinted at her rooster wall clock. Where was that blasted Puddin? She was supposed to have been dusting Myrtle’s knickknacks hours ago. A phone call was in order. Myrtle steeled herself. Puddin never answered her calls—it was always her ancient husband, Dusty, Myrtle’s yard man. Always assuming Myrtle was calling for him, he answered her greeting with some variation of, “It’s too hot to mow!” Puddin wasn’t exactly enchanting to talk to, but it beat Dusty howling at her like an old basset hound.

Myrtle dialed their number. The phone rang five or six times then, “Hullo?” asked a gruff voice.

Myrtle sighed. “Dusty? It’s Mrs. Clover.”

There was a great yowl on the other end. “Too wet to mow, Miz Clover!”

“For heaven’s sake! It hasn’t rained for days, Dusty. And that little teaspoon of water that trickled down evaporated before it even hit the clay.”

“My blades’ll get clogged. It’ll empty smelly grass clods all over your yard, Miz Clover. And I saw them gnomes in your yard when I drove by. Them things is the dickens to cut around...”

“Never mind. I wasn’t calling for you, anyway. Your nonsense knocked me off track. May I speak to Puddin? She’s supposed to be cleaning my house now.”

Dusty hollered for Puddin and after a few minutes during which Myrtle wondered if she’d been hung up on, Puddin sullenly answered. Myrtle could imagine the dour expression on her face.

Before Myrtle could summon up a pleasant-enough voice to find out why Puddin was hanging out with Dusty instead of doing a mediocre job cleaning up Myrtle’s house, Puddin muttered, “Back’s thrown out, Miz Clover.”

Myrtle bit her tongue. She did not need to have her “help” quit on her before she’d lined someone else up. But how convenient. Puddin’s back always threw itself out whenever Puddin didn’t want to polish silver, scrub dishes, or work at all.

“I haven’t got time for your foolishness, Puddin. Book club is coming over tomorrow. Are you *sure* you just can’t take an ibuprofen?”

Puddin considered this. “Hmm. No. It’s thrown, all right.”

Apparently the conversation was over because Puddin said, “Have a good club,” and clunk! Myrtle heard a dial tone.

Myrtle pushed the receiver onto its base with unusual force. There was nothing to do but call in reinforcements. As irritating as Puddin’s defection was, it was probably for the best.

Puddin was just not going to do for this Very Special book club meeting. Puddin, in her current state of unhelpfulness, was entirely inappropriate for a book club cleaning.

Extreme times called for extreme measures. Myrtle needed a cleaning A-team. She picked up the phone. Blanche Clark should have a good housekeeping recommendation. Considering Blanche lived in a sprawling chateau, she must have at least one person helping her clean, if not a small army.

As she made her call, she noticed a scrawny-looking black cat peering at her through the window. She’d seen the cat before—it was clearly a stray. It ran off, but she swore it had an approving look on its face as she dialed Blanche’s phone number.

Jill, reflected Myrtle an hour later, was a top-notch cleaning sensation.

It was lucky, thought Myrtle as she watched Jill Caulfield’s energetic cleaning, that she’d been able to get a substitute in such short order. The idea of pushing

around dust and mopping her own floor had lost its appeal. But Jill was delighted at the opportunity and was certainly doing a great job. A member of Myrtle's book club, she seemed to have fallen on hard times. What was even nicer is that she lived right on Myrtle's street, just around the bend.

"Cleaning isn't *so* bad," said Jill as she expertly glossed Myrtle's end table with lemon oil until it shone. "I'm good at it. It's a steady job. It's good exercise."

"And," she continued as she buffed, "it's money in the bank." She briefly stopped her buffing and looked directly at Myrtle. "You know what I mean? Sometimes you just do what you have to do to survive in this world."

"Teaching preschool doesn't cover your bills, I'm guessing," said Myrtle, clucking.

"Not a bit. It helps, of course. But it's just not going to be enough for me and Cullen. And Cullen, with his disability and everything..." Here she paused and searched Myrtle's face for any signs of disbelief. "Well, he just can't work. And that does make things tough. But I'll never leave him, Miss Myrtle. Not ever."

"I will never desert Mr. Micawber!" thought Myrtle, although Cullen Caulfield was no Mr. Micawber. His disability, well-known by all of Bradley, was his insatiable desire for alcohol.

Jill was now finished with the tables and, very sensibly adopting a top to bottom approach to cleaning, was cleaning the floors.

Myrtle said, "I'm just delighted you could help me out on such short notice. I'm too old to push around my own dust. I got your number from Blanche Clark. She'd been bragging on you during the last book club meeting, you know—how great you cleaned."

Jill suddenly became very focused on scrubbing a stubborn spot on the floor. "Is that right?"

"So," said Myrtle in a purring voice, "I was surprised to hear you weren't working for Blanche anymore. She gave me your number," (somewhat ungraciously), "but said y'all had gone your separate ways." Actually, Blanche had gotten so mad just talking about Jill that her voice trembled on the phone and she'd spat out Jill's name like she was trying to rid her mouth of something nasty. It was interesting enough to want to investigate.

"Business relationships don't *always* work out," said Jill in a careless voice. "But I'm sure ours will. Need me to come by next week?"

Myrtle opened her mouth to say that Puddin would be there next week. But then *something*...could it be the fresh clean pine scent? The gleaming tables? The attentive housekeeper in front of her?...changed her mind. "I do believe I *will* have you over next week."

That darned Puddin never cleaned like this. She didn't have a *passion* for cleaning. Myrtle quieted the voice in her head that reminded her that Puddin and

Dusty were a package deal—and *what* was she going to do without a yardman? Even a very *bad* yardman?

“If you’re okay here, Jill, I’m going to pop across the street to Elaine and Red’s house for a little visit.”

“I’ll be fine. I saw Elaine the other day, but haven’t seen Red for a while. How’s he doing?”

“Oh. He’s keeping the peace,” said Myrtle with a shrug. The annoying thing was Myrtle’s police chief son’s insistence on keeping *her* peaceful. He interfered. “I’m really going over to get some cuddle time in with my grandson, Jack. He’s got the cutest chubby legs...” and she pulled out a handy album to prove it.

To her credit, Jill appeared thrilled to coo over grandbaby pictures. In fact, Jill was quite disgustingly perfect in every way. Puddin’s sole redeeming quality was her quirkiness. Everything about Puddin was unknown: would she be in a chatty mood and yak at the kitchen table with you instead of cleaning? Would she have a nicotine fit and spend the entire morning smoking furiously outside? Would she show up for work at all?

Jill’s perfection was enough to make Myrtle pine for the wicked Puddin. Almost.

Myrtle grabbed her cane from next to the front door and tapped her way down the front walk. There were a few birds perching on the gnomes that scattered, chirping, as she approached. She paused for a moment to survey her handiwork. Lots of little gnome backs were facing her since, of course, they were all arranged to maximize Red’s viewing pleasure...and passing motorists’. She chuckled, but the laugh turned into a gasp when a dreaded voice behind her asked nasally, “Fighting with Red again, I see?”

It was Erma Sherman...her evil next door neighbor. Ordinarily, Myrtle carefully checked to make sure the coast was clear before venturing out her front door. Having her house restored to such an immaculate state had clearly made her giddy. As she saw Erma looming over her, arms outstretched for a determined hug, Myrtle reflected how fast one’s mood could plummet.

“Just trying to make a subtle point,” said Myrtle. Not that Erma would know the definition of the word *subtle*. “Red mistakenly thought it would be a good idea to volunteer me for the Kiwanis club pancake breakfast.” Red frequently displayed this shockingly poor judgment. It was an appalling characteristic for a police chief to have.

“How will Dusty cut the grass around the gnomes?” asked Erma, looking pointedly at the spires of grass brushing the gnomes’ bellies. “With a weed whacker?”

As if Dusty would own sophisticated yard equipment like weed whackers. “No, I guess he’ll just cut what he can reach.”

“How long are you planning to feud with Red?” asked Erma, frowning at Myrtle’s grass and at a particularly animated gnome who seemed to be gleefully imbibing a beverage.

“How long are you planning to allow your crabgrass to infest my yard?”

Erma gaped at Myrtle, then erupted with haw-haws of laughter. “Don’t you have that backwards, Myrtle? There’s a whole crop of crabgrass right there that looks like you’ve actually been fertilizing it.”

There was, actually, quite a bare spot there that Erma’s weeds had made inroads with. She’d shoot that Dusty! She’d *dasked* him to aerate and seed.

Myrtle turned toward the street when she heard a gentle toot-toot of a car horn. It was her daughter-in-law Elaine, waving out her minivan window and looking sympathetically at her. There went her whole reason for being outside to begin with. “I’ve got to go in,” she gritted out between her teeth.

“But you were coming out for a reason, Myrtle. Can’t you remember what it is? Let’s see, you were heading out here, without your bag. You weren’t planning on going very far, were you? Let’s retrace your steps.” Erma also displayed sympathy, but it was a more salacious version that would likely be spread all over town: “Did you hear? Myrtle Clover has gone completely gaga! Couldn’t even remember why she’d left the house yesterday!” “Oh, what a shame!”

Myrtle spun around and thumped back up the walkway. “Have a good one, Myrtle. See you at book club tomorrow!” called Erma behind her.

Not if I see you first, thought Myrtle. She slipped quickly into her front door and leaned against it. Next time she’d be more careful when she ventured outside. She listened for the sound of Jill in the kitchen, but didn’t hear anything. No sounds of cleaning at all. Curious, she walked through the kitchen to the back of the house.

When she peered through her bedroom door, she saw the light on in the bathroom. She hadn’t meant Jill to waste any time cleaning in there since it was still pretty clean from the week before. She walked back to the bathroom.

There she saw Jill, face obscured by the medicine cabinet door. There were several bottles of pills on the sink and a couple of other bottles in her hand. Myrtle tiptoed back to the front of the house. Why was Jill rooting around in her medicines? Was she a prescription drug addict? No, Jill was too clear-headed, too detail-oriented with her cleaning. She seemed a lot less befuddled than Puddin did. Maybe she sold prescription drugs on the black market? There had been an article in the newspaper recently about drugs being sold on the internet at rock bottom prices. Could it be yet another way for Jill to make extra money?

Myrtle slipped out the front door and then noisily re-entered. By the time she’d thumped back into the kitchen, Jill was busily cleaning in there. “Elaine wasn’t home, so I’ll have to catch up with her later. Instead, I ran into Erma Sherman,” Myrtle couldn’t repress a shudder. “Otherwise known as the neighbor from hell.”

Jill laughed. “Is she that bad? I’ve always kind of liked her when I’ve seen her at book club, but I don’t have to live next to her. But I noticed she didn’t take care of her yard. I’m such a stickler about the yard, it would drive me nuts to have crabgrass creeping over the border.”

“You must be a good neighbor to have, then,” said Myrtle in a wistful voice. Aside from the possibility she’d sneak in your house and searching through your stuff, of course.

“Oh, I have a lot of fun with the house. The yard is one of my hobbies, I guess.”

When the heck did Jill Caulfield find time for a hobby? Between two jobs, volunteering at church, and trying to keep her husband out of trouble, she must be pretty busy.

“When I think about your yard, Jill, I think about all those Christmas lights you string up every year.” Myrtle was careful to smile. No need to have Jill realize that her Christmas extravaganza didn’t put Myrtle in the holiday spirit. In fact, Jill’s decorations made Myrtle quite Grinchy. How many times had she nearly been mowed down by a creeping car whose occupants were gorging their eyes on neon Santas and twelve foot nutcrackers with ominous grins? On top of that was the music—*Holly, Jolly Christmas* and some other annoying tunes on a loop blasting from speakers from November fifteenth through January fifth.

Jill smiled. “So many people have told me the same thing, Miss Myrtle. They look forward all year to our light and music show. It’s just not Christmas for them until they drive past our house, they say.”

“Do the lights and music go on all night?” Myrtle was scandalized. This was definitely cause to revise her thoughts on Jill’s suitability as a next-door neighbor. “I can’t see your house from here since it’s right around the bend in the road.”

“Only from five to midnight. Everyone is simply crazy over it. They’ve told me our display is such a blessing. Jill, they say, when the *Twelve Days of Christmas* starts playing, we get tears in our eyes.”

Especially Sherry Angevine next door, guessed Myrtle. “So you string all these lights and speakers and things up yourself? Doesn’t Cullen help you?” That dog.

Jill suddenly glowed with an almost spiritual, evangelistic radiance. “Not with his disability. He couldn’t, could he? No, I’m *honored* to put them up for him. Really. Then he has a Merry Christmas and doesn’t have to worry about the decorating.”

She clearly loved this Jill-the-Martyr act. Myrtle said, “Would you like some sweet tea, Jill? I think I need something sugary to bolster me after my encounter with my next door monster.”

“No thanks, Miss Myrtle. I’m getting ready to finish up. I’ll see myself out, okay? And then I’ll be back tomorrow for the club meeting. Did you read the book?” Myrtle looked at Jill blankly. “*Jennifer’s Promise*? Remember?”

Myrtle's skin prickled with irritation at the thought of subjecting herself to *Jennifer's Promise*. "No. No, I didn't get around to it, Jill."

"Well, don't worry about it, dear. These books get so complicated. I only read the first few pages, myself. I wish they'd choose a really quick read—you know?"

Clearly Jill was not going to be on the side of great literature during the book club coup. Myrtle took her tea into the living room to think a little more about Jill. She wouldn't just have been in her medicine cabinet for an aspirin. No, she was after something. Not that she'd found it there. The cabinet was crammed with ancient amoxicillin bottles, dated over-the-counters, some blood pressure meds, and an old bottle of witch hazel.

Was Jill's snooping the reason Blanche Clark fired her? Did Jill discover something about Blanche that made it impossible for her to keep her on?

When book club morning dawned, Myrtle climbed out of bed with high hopes. Minutes later, she was already devising what novels might be a good introduction into the world of books. Because, Myrtle thought, the stuff that the book club had been focusing on definitely couldn't qualify as books.

Milton *might* be a little ambitious for the group, she admitted as she boiled grits and threw in a liberal amount of butter into the spitting, spattering mixture. Dickens would be an easy adjustment. Everyone was familiar with his books anyway and it would be a popular place to start. Yes, maybe *David Copperfield* instead of *Paradise Lost*. Milton's masterpiece was too richly worded—book club might get ill on the richness of the imagery after starving themselves on beach rot for years.

Hours later at the meeting, though, Myrtle had given up hope of proposing Dickens as a book club selection. The coup was not going well. Everything had actually started out just fine with the ladies trickling into Myrtle's living room like little lambs and lining up sweetly for their muffins, cookies, and iced tea. Both Blanche Clark and Jill Caulfield were there and successfully keeping apart from each other. The entire book club membership was actually very well represented, considering it was late summer and prime traveling time. There were about fifteen ladies in Myrtle's living room and kitchen.

Miles stood next to Myrtle's fireplace, looking uneasy. He clutched a copy of *Absalom! Absalom!* and fingered the knick-knacks on the mantle. Myrtle had cleverly designed new end tables by several of the chairs by stacking large books from her personal library on top of each other. Each book was a masterpiece, of course. "What a fun idea, Myrtle!" chirped one of the ladies. Myrtle beamed. If the members were *surrounded* with excellent literature, Myrtle knew they wouldn't be able to resist.

Finally Tippy Chambers, the well-heeled club president, called the meeting to order. After the minutes to the last meeting were read (Tippy being a stickler for Parliamentary Procedure, even for a book club), She asked if there were any new business. Myrtle straightened in her chair, then rose carefully to her feet. She noticed

that, like a seesaw, when she stood up, Miles sank down into a chair. He looked pasty white and a bit of perspiration trickled down the side of his head. How *had* he survived the dog eat dog world of business?

Myrtle cleared her throat and used her best retired-teacher voice. Even after all these years of retirement, it still had a weighty pitch that carried to the corners of the room. The right kind of voice to make an important announcement.

“I’ve been thinking,” she intoned, “about ways to improve our book club. What has brought us together is our mutual love for literature.” There were nods of agreement and Myrtle soldiered on, taking a deep breath.

“But I don’t think that the books we’re been focusing on,” here she lifted up a copy of *Jennifer’s Promise* in illustration, “are worthy recipients of our leisure time. I think,” Myrtle said sternly, “that our time could be better spent.”

There was a small pause. Then Erma Sherman piped up, bobbing her head emphatically. “You know, I was thinking the same thing, Myrtle.” Myrtle doubted it. “The books we’re picking only take a little bit of the meeting to review.”

There was a chorus of agreement.

Myrtle said quickly, “So what I was thinking...” she bent to reach for a handy volume of Charles Dickens.

Erma jumped in again from the floor. Why did Tippy’s Parliamentary order nonsense never occur when it needed to? “So why don’t we change the club?” she demanded loudly. She was warming up to the subject and seemed to be on a roll. “Instead of reading books, we could turn it into a...supper club!”

There were oohs of agreement and stomach rumblings among the ladies. Even Tippy was caught up in the fervor. “We could,” she suggested, “make it a progressive dinner supper club. You know—one house for the drinks and appetizers, another for soups and salads, a third for the main course, and dessert at the end.”

Now the room was buzzing. “That way it wouldn’t be too much for just one person!” said Jill Caulfield.

“Our husbands could even participate in it,” said Blanche.

Erma proudly surveyed the room, which had become electrified with her idea. Myrtle stood there, open-mouthed, clutching Dickens. Miles looked torn between amusement and horror. What would he care? thought Myrtle viciously. He was a foodie just as much as a reader. It would work out well for him no matter what.

It was time to abort this plan and head into Emergency Plan B. Myrtle rose abruptly and walked toward the hall. She looked behind her. Her entire library was animated with discussion and Miles just soaked it all in.

Myrtle cleared her throat. But Miles was absorbed in watching Erma. He had a revolted expression on his face as she blathered on, off-topic as usual, about her cousin who shot deer and stored the carcasses, whole, in a huge freezer in his garage. Myrtle again cleared her throat and walked, exaggeratedly, toward the bathroom. No response from Miles.

“I *think*,” said Myrtle in her former-schoolteacher voice, which had the power to silence the room, “I will go to the bathroom!” She glared at Miles, who looked flustered.

Tippy looked concerned. “Are you sick, Myrtle?”

“No. I just think I’ll go to the bathroom.”

“Well,” said Tippy in a puzzled tone, “of course. Anyone is free to visit the restroom at any time.”

The room remained quiet until Myrtle was out of sight. Then Erma said, “No wonder she’s feeling sick! She’s the worst cook in the history of the world. She probably ate some of her own chicken salad sandwiches.” Erma pointed to indicate the full and untouched platter of sandwiches.

“Good point,” said Tippy in a low voice. “Does anyone know if Myrtle made the chicken salad or bought it?”

Myrtle listened, fuming, in the hall. “Although her chicken salad is *excellent*, I know for a fact that she ran low on time and purchased this batch,” Miles said. His voice sounded pained.

Myrtle peeped around the side of the door. The women looked at Miles curiously as there was suddenly a run on the chicken salad sandwiches.

“And while we’re talking about Myrtle,” said Miles, in was apparently a desperate attempt to wrestle the wayward conversation back on track, “I think she had an excellent idea.”

“I do too,” said Tippy warmly. “It was so clever of her to think up a supper club. She was absolutely right that book club was getting stale.”

Myrtle gritted her teeth.

“I meant her suggestion that the book club start reading some different kinds of books.” Miles tugged at his collar.

“Was that her idea?” Tippy sounded dubious. “Well, her supper club idea is much sounder.”

“Now if we can only convince her not to cook!” said Erma. She gave a sneering laugh.

Jill Caulfield said, “I’ve got a great recipe for pulled pork for the slow cooker. How about if I cook the main course for our first supper club?”

The room was soon buzzing again with ideas for how the supper club would run, who would provide what, and who would host the various courses. Sullenly, Myrtle came back in and sat down with the others. She drummed her fingers on her copy of *The Sound and the Fury* as Tippy efficiently organized the details of the supper club. Miles offered to host the hors d’oeuvres and drinks. There was a clamoring over different recipes and whether they should have a theme for each event.

Myrtle replayed the last few minutes in her head. Everything had gone wrong when Erma had piped up. She instinctively seemed to know what to do to mess up Myrtle’s plans.

Myrtle straightened up in her chair. She wouldn't let it happen. She was going to regain control of this meeting. "Actually," she said in a booming voice. "I had another idea completely. We could certainly have a *parallel* club that meets for suppers. But giving up on book club just because the selection has been weak..."

Amazingly, Erma stepped in again. "Weak is right," she agreed. "I never did get what the writer was trying to say with that Bo and the Boy Scout book we did that one time."

Myrtle said through gritted teeth, "You mean *To Kill a Mockingbird*."

"Which you'd *think* would be about endangered birds! When I read, I want to be able to understand the point! But there aren't enough books like *Jennifer's Promise*, so we end up reading about Boy Scouts. But food...we all understand food."

Myrtle stared at Erma's protruding tummy and figured that some people understood it better than others. She opened her mouth again to explain that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was real literature and that there were many others where that came from—but then snapped her mouth shut again. Because where would she start with that argument? How could you argue with someone as dense as Erma Sherman? "Mockingbirds are *not* endangered," was all she could muster.

Tippy Chambers pushed a strand of blonde hair off her forehead. "I think the point really is," she said, "that we've been doing book club for a long time and we're ready for a change. A supper club would be fun, and we can even get our husbands involved." Myrtle opened her mouth to argue and Tippy injected quickly, "Would you be interested in having the desserts at your house, Myrtle? I remember your blackberry cobbler was the best I'd ever had."

Myrtle puffed up a little in her chair. Miles smiled. Diplomacy was the reason why Tippy was the perfect president of anything. Miles clearly recalled Myrtle's blackberry cobbler as a soggy, undercooked disaster. But Myrtle was already planning her dessert menu, happily putting the unkind comments about her cooking out of her head.

"Y'all, I've got to run," said Jill Caulfield, picking up her pocketbook. "I've got a house to clean. So I'll host the main course, and we said two weeks from today? I'll have it all set up."

When Jill walked out, Tippy said quickly, "I'm a little concerned about Jill having to provide all the food for the main course. I think that's...well, it's a lot to ask."

"Why *did* she offer to provide the main course?" Miles quietly asked Myrtle. "Didn't you say that Jill just cleaned your house? Providing a barbecue dinner for a house full of people is kind of a pricy proposition, isn't it?"

Myrtle murmured, "I strongly suspect that Jill likes everyone to feel sorry for her. She piles that misery on herself. You know, the whole 'Poor Jill' thing. But she sure does know how to clean a house. I'm going to ditch that Puddin' of mine."

"There will probably be thirty people there, if we include spouses," Tippy was saying. "Are there three or four people who can volunteer to bring some sides in?"

A few hands went up. At the same time, the front door opened and Jill's sister Willow came in. The hands drooped, and then fell under the censorious eye of Tippy. No one wanted to mention Jill's financial situation. Especially around Willow, who was sure to blame her brother-in-law for any money problems her sister might face.

Willow's long, prematurely-gray hair swung around her shoulders. With her hair down, her black tunic over a long, ruffled black skirt, and the amulet around her neck, Willow looked like she'd escaped from a coven.

"Sorry I'm late," she said in her low, sing-song voice. "Was that Jill I saw pulling out?"

Erma nodded, eyes dancing as she anticipated trouble. "Yes it was. She was off to clean somebody's house."

Willow's face darkened.

Tippy jumped in with a quelling look at Erma. "We're all hearing wonderful things about Jill's housekeeping. It seems that she has a wonderful talent for hearth and home."

Myrtle glanced quickly over at Blanche, who grimaced before her face resumed its usual placid mask.

Willow shook her head and fingered her amulet. "All this work isn't good for her. She's got two really draining jobs. She should be reconnecting with her spirit instead of scrubbing people's bathrooms."

Erma nodded sympathetically, avoiding Tippy's quelling glare. "Which she could do if Cullen could go back to work. Such a shame about his *disability* and all," said Erma, who sounded hopeful for some disability details, which Willow seemed unwilling to elaborate on. "But don't worry. Even though Myrtle changed the book club into a supper club, and Jill took the main course, we're all going to chip in with the sides so Jill can afford to host it."

Tippy jumped in again in her continuing effort to keep control of the meeting. "Willow. I'd better fill you in. Myrtle suggested we change the book club to a supper club." Myrtle clenched her teeth. "We're starting it two weeks from today. Miles will have the hors d'oeuvres and drinks, Jill's covering the main course, and Myrtle is hosting the dessert."

Willow thought a moment. "What if I host a soup or salad course? It'll keep the progressive dinner moving."

"Great idea," said Tippy. "That cements our plan for the first progressive dinner. The best part is that y'all all live on the same street; we can easily walk from the appetizers to the salads, to the main course, to the dessert. And maybe even enjoy a little wine along the way!" Tippy gave her tinkling laugh. "And thanks again to Myrtle for her brainstorm. To Myrtle!" she said, raising a glass of sweet tea.

"To Myrtle!" everyone chimed in, holding their tea aloft.

Myrtle was ready to trade in her sweet tea for something a bit stronger.

