

# Bearer of Gifts

By K. J. Boyd

Phil inhaled the scent of newly mowed lawn as he swept the flagstone walk leading toward the house. Without question, he and Lisa had the best kept place on the block. He paused to admire the red roses blooming their heads off, the compact boxwood hedge, the glazed blue pots overflowing with yellow lantana. Lisa had designed the plantings intent on enhancing the grandeur of the two story painted brick house.

The realtor who'd shown them the property called the architecture French Country. Lisa had said the oak slab front door accented with hammered ironwork reminded her of a castle.

She'd squeezed his hand repeatedly as they'd walked from the quaint foyer into a low ceilinged great room, paneled library, and rustic country kitchen. After the house tour, they'd stood curbside and looked back. The resplendent house, nestled amongst mature oak, maple, crabapple and birch trees, beckoned to them. Though he hadn't said, Phil had hoped a move would help them escape the painful memories haunting the rooms of their current home.

And so it had, until the killings began.

Phil set the broom in his tool shed and walked under the wisteria-covered trellis leading to the back door. He kicked off his yard shoes before entering the house. *Too late to get a haircut but not too late for a cold beer*, he mused, running his hands through thick graying hair usually as neatly trimmed as his lawn.

He was surprised to see Lisa washing dishes at the sink. "Hey, brown-eyed girl, didn't see you come home." Phil opened the fridge to get a beer. One long swig cooled his parched throat.

“You were edging around the hostas. I didn’t want to distract you.”

Lisa tested the coolness of a rack of chocolate chip cookies setting on the counter. “Still too hot to eat,” she said, plunging her hands into sudsy water. Wisps of blonde hair escaped her ponytail as she bent to her task of washing dishes.

It had taken more than a year for five inches of hair to grow over the shaved patch on her scalp. Lisa’s gaunt frame had yet to recover, maybe it never would.

“Tree-killer’s at it again,” she said in a monotone.

Phil groaned. “Who’d he hit this time?”

“Beth and Tom. They flagged me down on my way back from the store to show me their Japanese lilac tree. This morning they found poison pellets at the base of the trunk. Beth took pictures before they touched anything. She asked if we’d take the photos and pellets to our contact at the county horticultural office.”

“Damn, what’s that make, forty trees poisoned or killed in the last two years?”

Lisa stopped washing dishes. She braced her wet hands on the sink. “Forty-one including the birch we managed to save two months ago. They’ve trenched around the tree and they’ll sprinkle in charcoal like we did. Hope it works to detox the roots.”

Phil twirled his beer bottle on the top of the granite island. “Wish the cops would throw the bastard in jail.”

“You know that’ll never happen,” said Lisa, drying her hands on a paper towel.

“Detective Ranson said they have to catch the guy in the act. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. I can’t believe it didn’t matter I saw a bag of poison pellets on the front seat of tree-killer’s pick-up.”

“Or while houses all around him have lost trees not one of his has died.” Lisa rubbed the muscles at the back of her neck.

“What really blew my mind is that Ranson shrugged me off when I told him we’d discovered every poisoned tree belonged to someone who’d confronted tree-killer,” said Phil.

He stared out the window at the birch struggling to survive. They hadn’t been able to save their pair of seventy year old oaks nor their silver maple.

“Okay. We should never have asked tree-killer not to park his truck so close to our driveway. What did Beth and Tom do to piss off the creep?” Phil asked.

“They refused a check from him at their bakery after his last three checks bounced.”

“Really? And risk losing a tree?” Now Phil surveyed the new sod finally taking hold under the birch where he’d trenched, treated and refilled the hole with untainted soil. “What’d he do when they wouldn’t take his check?”

“Beth said he didn’t flinch. Just stared them down with cold blue eyes, shoved his checkbook in those ratty cargo shorts he always wears and walked out the door.”

The color had drained from Lisa’s face. She stood before him rigid, fists clenched.

“Hey, come on,” Phil said, wrapping his arms around her. “We can’t let this take over our lives. Thought we were ordering pizza tonight and watching *Titanic*.”

Lisa returned his embrace. Her tensed body relaxed. Leaning back, she offered Phil a weak smile. “How many times have we seen that movie? I’ve lost count.”

Phil delayed his answer, pretending to add in his head, “This will make one thousand, three hundred twenty-six.”

Lisa rewarded his humor with a chuckle. “Let me tell you what else Beth said after ordering Tom to dig faster. She thinks everyone in the neighborhood should befriend tree-killer.

Invite him to block parties. Wave to him rather than ignore him. Stuff like that. Her theory is that over time he might abandon his tree killing.”

In Phil’s estimation, the scheme warranted no more retort than *bullshit* but he opted for a less contentious response. “Not sure I want any part of that conspiracy.”

Lisa pulled away from him. “How come?”

Phil massaged her shoulders wondering if it was too early in the day to switch from beer to scotch. “Lisa, the police described this guy as a sociopath. What Beth’s proposing is like taping a bandage over a bullet hole.”

“Look at it like this,” Lisa countered. “I’ll bet every neighborhood in the country is vexed with a loner living in a rundown house. This might be a way to nudge tree-killer toward eccentricity and away from his sociopathic tendencies.”

Phil suppressed a snide comment about Beth headed for greatness having cracked the code for achieving world peace.

Lisa turned from him to load a plate with chocolate chip cookies. “Besides, I’m going crazy sitting around waiting for him to strike again. That’s why I baked these cookies. I’m going to wrap the plate in cellophane, tie it with a bow, and take it to him.”

Phil’s jaw dropped. “You’re not serious.”

Lisa’s voice cracked like it did whenever she tried to hold back tears. “I can’t go on this way. The killings have got to stop.”

Phil acquiesced. “You’re right, babe. What you’re doing is better than sitting around doing nothing.” He kissed her cheek and headed upstairs to the bathroom.

Showered and dressed, Phil gathered his grass-stained clothes and wet towels. The back door slammed. He glanced out the window. Lisa hurried down the sidewalk toward tree-killer’s

house. She paused to pluck at the ends of a green ribbon tied around the cookie plate. Then, with a light step, she rounded the garage and disappeared from sight.

Phil headed to the utility room. He dumped his armful of laundry into the washer and reached for detergent from an overhead shelf. A clear plastic bag next to the soap caught his eye. Taking it down, he slipped out two photos and set them side by side on the counter. One showed a full view of the Japanese lilac tree in Beth and Tom's backyard. The other, a close-up shot, zoomed in on a handful of poison pellets at the base of the trunk.

The photos spurred his hatred toward tree-killer for the debilitating effect his malicious behavior had on Lisa. Her gardens, the shaded arbor and terra cotta planters overflowing with colorful annuals had brought her back from the brink of emotional collapse. But now she lived in constant fear of discovering something else poisoned in her yard.

Phil turned his attention to half a dozen pellets scattered loosely in the bottom of the bag. *That's strange, he thought. There's a handful of pellets in the photo but only a few here. What happened to the rest of the poison?*

He drummed his fingers on the counter considering the possibilities, then froze. "Oh, God," he moaned. "Not that."

Phil bolted through the kitchen and out the back door, nearly colliding with Lisa hurrying back home, empty-handed.

"Tree-killer accepted my gift," she announced, bright-eyed, face glowing. "In fact, he tore through the cellophane to grab a cookie as he kicked the door shut in my face. You know, Phil, I honestly believe that guy's killing days are over."