

FROM AN ELEMENT OF MYSTERY

SWEET, FUNNY, AND STRANGE TALES OF INTRIGUE

DEATH IN THE HAND OF THE TONGUE

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What do you get when the rabbi, priest, and police chief of Wahoo, Alabama get together on Tuesday mornings? Easy answer—a golf game. Not today, though. Instead, as I offered up a little prayer while I teed my ball up, a cell phone interrupted my concentration. You’d have thought “When the Saints Go Marching In” would be my ringtone, but it belongs to Chief Tom Johnson. Before Tom could pull his phone out of his pocket, Rabbi Eddie Greenberg’s phone began ringing, too.

“We got to go?” I didn’t wait for a response before I picked up my ball, thrust my club back into my bag, and jumped, as fast as the few pounds I’ve gained allowed, into the cart next to far younger and more slender Eddie. Whatever had disturbed our game had to be important. Tom was already heading his cart back to the clubhouse. “What’s up?”

“They found a body at the Temple. My stuff is in your car. Would you drop me off at the Temple instead of taking me home?”

“Of course.” Because a body necessitating pulling the chief

of police off the golf course isn't often found in a small town like Wahoo, let alone in our houses of worship, I refrained from observing I was glad to have a reason to accompany Eddie to what had to be a suspicious death scene. Besides, with our golf game canceled, my schedule was open until a pastoral counseling session at three.

At the Temple, Eddie led Tom and me down the stairwell that led to the Temple's reception hall and kitchen. At the base of the steps was an alcove and a double doorway opening into the large room used for events. As Eddie walked briskly through the reception room to the kitchen, which was on the far side of the hall, we passed two tables filled with women. Although I only glanced at them, I could feel their eyes following me to the kitchen doorway, which was completely blocked off by yellow crime-scene tape.

A young officer stood guard in front of the taped door; a dark-haired woman waited a few feet away. When Eddie and I moved aside to watch the confrontation between the smooth-faced officer and Tom, she joined us.

"Robinson," Chief Johnson said, "what's going on here?" Tom gestured toward the yellow tape.

Rather than answering the question addressed to him, the officer pulled a pad from his pocket and glanced at his notes. "Chief, our dispatcher received a call at nine twenty-seven a.m. that a group of Sisterhood women and the Temple's cantor found Sylvia Horowitz dead in the Temple's kitchen. I immediately responded to the call. When I arrived, I learned the women were supposed to be part of a matzah ball making session that Mrs. Horowitz was chairing."

Officer Robinson consulted his notes again. "In case you don't know, a matzah ball is a Jewish dumpling made from matzah meal, eggs, and oil."

"I'm aware of that," Chief Johnson said. "Get on it with it, Robinson."

"Yes, sir. Apparently, on entering the kitchen, the group found Mrs. Horowitz lying on the floor and called 911." He pointed to two men standing on the far side of the room. "It was too late by the time the EMTs arrived, so we were called."

Eddie looked toward the dark-haired woman, who nodded her head affirmatively. I assumed she was the Temple's new cantor, Joyce Silberman. I hadn't met her yet. All I knew about her from Eddie was that she was about forty, had a melodious voice, was a transplant from the East, and he repeatedly teased her about the difference between New York and Southern bagels.

Before Officer Robinson could continue his recitation, Eddie interrupted him. He stretched his hands wide, pointing one at Chief Johnson and me while gesturing with the other to the dark-haired woman. "This is Cantor Silberman. Cantor Silberman, this is Wahoo's Chief of Police, Tom Johnson, and Father Brendon O'Reilly. We acknowledged each other, but then directed our attention back to Officer Robinson.

Consulting his notes again, Officer Robinson said, "I responded, checked the body, confirmed she was dead, and sealed off the area. I found no sign of a weapon. Considering her age, which the other women indicated is somewhere between sixty and seventy-five, the EMTs and I figured she had some kind of seizure or heart attack, fell, and hit her head about an hour before she was found. Still, I thought you'd want me to treat it as a crime scene until you and the coroner knew for sure."

Tom peered through the tape and then back at the women seated in the reception hall. "Did you do anything else, Robinson?"

"No, I mean, yes. I turned off the stove. Ms. Horowitz apparently was waiting for a giant pot of liquid to boil when the incident happened. It was boiling, so I turned off the heat. I also knew you'd want to talk to the people who found her, so I had them sit out there. The first table has the group who found the body, while the second is people who came in later. To keep everything quiet until you got here, I made all of them give me their cell phones."

Great police technique, I thought, observing the women speaking in hushed tones to each other. I guessed Robinson never heard about keeping witnesses separated until after they gave their statements.

A noise attracted my attention to the right of the door, where a small table was piled with cellphones. Two women stood next to it. The first thought that went through my mind was that I was looking at Mutt and Jeff. One was small, but solid. Her hair matched the red of her lipstick and nail polish. The other was tall with a curvaceous physique and sun-kissed skin. I assumed they sidled up to us during Tom's exchange with Officer Robinson.

The redhead spoke first. "I'm Ellen Levy, president of the Sisterhood. This is our secretary, Mitzi Katz. She helped give Mrs. Horowitz CPR."

"But to no avail." Mitzi Katz shook her head sadly.

Mrs. Levy patted Mrs. Katz's shoulder. She then focused attention back on Tom and Eddie. "When you get this ridiculous tape down and get into the kitchen, you'll see Sylvia was murdered. She didn't just face plant herself next to the chicken soup. I've seen plenty of heart attacks at the retirement home where I live. If Sylvia had one, she'd either have knocked the pot from the stove with the big spoon she was stirring the soup with, fallen differently, or gotten herself to one of the chairs in this room."

Mitzi ignored both Ellen and the sputtering sounds coming from Officer Robinson that reminded me of how Barney Fife got upset during every episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*. She addressed her remarks to Tom. “Chief Johnson, I’m so glad you’re finally here. Officer Babyface keeps insisting the chicken soup, the ladle in Sylvia’s hand, and everything else in the kitchen is evidence relevant to his crime scene. That may be, but the Sisterhood needs our kitchen and its contents back immediately.”

When Tom didn’t respond right away, she turned toward Eddie. “Rabbi Greenburg, explain it to them. The girls and I have a lot of matzah balls to make for the Temple Seders.”

“I’m afraid the kitchen will have to stay closed until we figure out exactly what happened.” Rabbi Greenburg gently took Mrs. Katz by the arm and escorted her back to the nearest table, with Mrs. Levy two steps behind them.

He returned and stood next to Cantor Silberman while Tom pulled the crime tape off the doorway. Once Tom was done, he walked into the kitchen toward where Mrs. Horowitz lay. The rest of us just poked our heads into the kitchen to evaluate the crime scene for ourselves.

There was a gigantic pot on the stove. The counter next to the stove had crates of eggs stacked and an industrial-sized container of matzah meal. The table behind Mrs. Horowitz had been divided into individual workspaces denoted by torn pieces of waxed paper. Eddie and I couldn’t help but move further into the room, but Cantor Silberman didn’t follow us. Sensing she wasn’t with us, I looked back and saw her standing by the door, her gaze riveted on the body.

“Cantor?” Rabbi Greenburg said. “What were you doing down in the kitchen area today?”

“Saying ‘hello.’ I knew Sylvia came in early to get all the ingredients and stations set up for the volunteers and to start the

soup base. Because the rest of the Sisterhood women were going to be in the kitchen around nine, I thought it would be a good idea to be in the lobby to open the door when they arrived. You know how Sylvia complained last week that the Sisterhood does so much for the Temple, but the members often feel ignored by the clergy and staff?"

Rabbi Greenburg nodded in agreement. I understood perfectly. Volunteers want to be appreciated when they're not being martyrs.

"Once I let them in, I thought it was the perfect time for me to come downstairs with them and stay ten minutes as a goodwill gesture. We were laughing and kibbitzing as we came into the kitchen. That all stopped when we saw Sylvia. I yelled for someone to call 911, while two of us tried to give her CPR."

My attention focused on the Cantor, I could see blood dotting her clothing and shoes. I thought about something Ellen had said. "Did you move Mrs. Horowitz?"

"Yes, we turned her over. It was the only way we could give her CPR. Sadly, we were too late." She followed my gaze to her skirt. "I must have gotten blood on me when we turned her over. I'm sure the woman who helped me did, too."

Chief Johnson knelt next to Mrs. Horowitz, carefully out of the way of where blood had pooled from a wound on the back of her head. "Did she have any enemies?"

"Oh, no." Rabbi Greenburg wrung his hands. "Everyone loves, I mean, loved Sylvia. When she moved here three years ago, she immediately became such a Temple super-volunteer that she's slated to be the next Sisterhood president."

"Nobody else wants the job?" I couldn't help myself. My quip was rewarded by a gasp from the Cantor and a smile that Eddie quickly wiped from his face. I caught it, but I don't think Tom saw it as he stood up.

“Being a volunteer was a calling for Sylvia and a blessing for the Temple,” Eddie said

“That type of volunteer always is,” Tom said. He moved next to me, and together we peered into the oversized pot. It was filled with a green and orange-tinged liquid that I presumed from its smell was chicken soup. The orange I attributed to the sliced carrots floating alongside chunks of chicken, but I had no idea what added the green tint. The chief and I quickly stepped back from the stove.

“Today’s Tuesday,” Tom said. “If I remember correctly, your services are usually on Friday night and Saturday morning. Isn’t it unusual to have so many people here on a Tuesday morning?”

“Not before Passover. Our Sisterhood does yeoman work making matzah balls for our three Temple Seders,” Eddie said.

“Three?”

“Yes, we offer a congregational, women’s, and children’s Seder. All told, we use five to six hundred matzah balls, so you can imagine what a project it is preparing them. For the past two years, Sylvia has coordinated our Passover efforts. I guess I should tell everyone we won’t be cooking today.”

“Let me,” Cantor Silberman said. When she left, Tom turned his gaze back to Eddie.

“Super volunteers sometimes get on people’s nerves. Is there anything you can tell me about Mrs. Horowitz that might have irked someone?”

“If you weren’t the one asking, Tom, I wouldn’t say this. I don’t believe in talking badly about a member of my congregation, especially a dedicated volunteer like Sylvia Horowitz, but you know how it is. Some volunteer to serve, others to also gossip.”

I knew exactly the type of woman about whom he was talking. “In my church, we call those folks ‘pillars of the parish,’ and we watch our step around them because they’re the ones who

know everything about everybody and love to share what they know.”

Tom smothered a laugh. “So, everyone tries to stay on their good side and out of the way of their mouths?”

Eddie and I agreed.

Tom motioned to two men, one with a camera, who’d just arrived and stood by the door. Eddie and I stepped aside so the crime scene techs could get into the room. Before we could leave, Tom put his hand on Eddie’s arm. Removing it, he pointed toward the reception hall where Babyface had finally separated most of the women by moving them to different tables and was now taking statements. “What can you tell me about them?”

“The ones still sitting at the first table are the cantor and mainly Sisterhood officers. You already met Ellen and Mitzi, who helped give Sylvia CPR. The one in the aqua polyester pantsuit is Sylvia’s best friend and the vice-president of the Sisterhood, Candy Feldman. The woman in pink is the Sisterhood treasurer, while the one in jeans is our newest temple member, Terry Reed.”

“Reed doesn’t sound Jewish. If she’s new, what’s she doing with the officers?”

“She recently converted. Mitzi and Sylvia adopted her to make her feel comfortable. In our faith, we don’t seek converts, but once someone converts, that’s it. We welcome them and don’t mention it again.”

“Well, she seems pretty broken up about what’s happened.” We all looked in Terry Reed’s direction. She was sobbing on Cantor’s Silberman’s shoulder.

“I’m sure she is. Sylvia has been a mentor and a quasi-mother to Terry,” Eddie said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Eddie lowered his voice. “Terry moved here from New

Jersey when she got engaged to a young man who was a member of our congregation. She found a job and started her conversion classes in anticipation of her wedding. Then, her fiancé dumped her. He left our Temple and moved out of state, leaving her here alone. The Sisterhood women circled their wagons around her, especially Sylvia, who also was a transplant from New Jersey. Coming from the East, Sylvia felt a kinship with someone thrust into our southern culture and then deserted.”

I watched Cantor Silberman smooth Terry’s hair and whisper in her ear. Whatever she said apparently was comforting because Terry slowly straightened up, pulled away, and wiped her eyes. She stood and moved to an empty table. For a moment, I thought Cantor Silberman was going to follow her, but instead she turned in our direction. “Looks like you eased a rough moment,” I said, when she neared me.

“Hope so. Apparently, they had words the other day and Terry hadn’t seen her to apologize.”

“Was it over something important?” Tom said.

“Probably not. Terry’s the type who hears something and blows it out of context.”

Eddie gave Cantor Silberman one of the semi-stern looks clergy of all faiths use to make members of our congregations pause and hopefully have a moment of self-inflicted internal guilt. It beats giving them a formal scolding. The cantor must have gotten his message. She pressed her lips together before asking Tom, “Chief Johnson, would it be okay if I wait in my office in case you need to ask me anything beyond what I told Officer Robinson? I must prep for some students coming in this afternoon.”

Tom acquiesced. As she left, he turned to say something to Eddie, but stopped when Ellen and Mitzi left the table and joined us. I hadn’t noticed it earlier, but Mitzi had a dark stain on the left knee of her pants.

"We see you let the Cantor leave," Ellen said. "May we go too? As we told Babyface in our statements, everything is as you see it except that when we came in, Sylvia was clutching the soup ladle."

"It must have fallen out of her hand when the Cantor and I turned her over and gave her CPR," Mitzi said. "That's all we can tell you, so can we go?"

Tom blessed their departure. He then walked over to those sitting at the other tables and one by one dismissed them, too. As the women were leaving, all having retrieved their cell phones, Tom came back to where Eddie and I waited.

"Don't you think you should caution them to not say anything?" I knew immediately Eddie had his Rabbi hat back on. "You know how it is. The last thing my congregation needs is for them to spread any gossip about what happened or our reaction to this tragedy."

"We can't shut them up."

"Besides," I said, "asking that group to be quiet would only backfire. What are you so worried about?"

"The Temple's reputation. Tradition teaches: 'Gossip kills three people: he who speaks it, he who listens, and he about whom it is said.' The analysis equates gossip with murder."

"If I remember right," I said, "it's a discussion interpreting the meaning of the Biblical verse, 'Death and life are in the hand of the tongue.'" The quizzical expression on Tom's face amused me. From things said on the golf course, I bet he couldn't remember the last time he crossed the threshold of any house of worship in a non-working context. "Guess you aren't familiar with this Talmud passage."

"No, I am," Tom said. "If I recall, it continues 'that just as the hand can kill, so too can the tongue.' One might suggest that unlike the hand, which can kill only one near it, the tongue can

kill he who is far away. Therefore, the text states, "The tongue is a sharpened arrow'."

Every now and then, our police chief astounds me. This was one of those times. I couldn't believe he pulled this passage out of the recesses of his brain. I stared at him.

"My philosophy class." Tom smiled. "Appreciate you guys reminding me of it."

Slowly, it dawned on me. He didn't need the yellow tape, any test results, or to question more witnesses—he'd figured out who killed Sylvia Horowitz.

"How? Who?" I asked.

"Can't talk now," Chief Johnson said. "I need to get upstairs and confiscate the murder weapon—probably the big can of oil missing from the matzah ball prep table—before Cantor Silberman disposes of it."

"But . . ." I said, as I followed him to the steps.

"Simple. Sylvia Horowitz was a gossip who learned things and then used them against others. While she was killed by a hand near her, I think we'll find the gossip Sylvia got from Terry concerned something that happened on the East coast that the Cantor didn't want shared here."

"You figured it out from the quote?"

"I only wish I were that smart. It was the blood spatter pattern. When you hit someone in the head, there will be a spatter. The only blood on the floor was the pool from where Mrs. Horowitz bled after the Cantor and Mitzi turned her over. I was careful to stay away from the puddle when I knelt next to Mrs. Horowitz. Mitzi obviously put one knee in it, the only place she got blood on her, when she administered CPR. That means the spray at the time of the murder had to go somewhere else.

Cantor Silberman probably wiped some of it away when she went upstairs to hide the weapon. She thought she eliminated being considered a suspect by opening the door for the

matzah ball makers and then going downstairs and finding the body with them. After you noticed how the tell-tale spatter marked her skirt and shoes, she told us other women had blood on them, too, but when I went to each table, I realized that except for the knee of Mitzi's pants, everyone's clothing was spotless.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judge Debra H. Goldstein writes Kensington's Sarah Blair mystery series (*Five Belles Too Many*, *Four Cuts Too Many*, *Three Treats Too Many*, *Two Bites Too Many*, and *One Taste Too Many*). In addition to winning BWR prizes, her novels and short stories have received an IPPY award and have been named Agatha, Anthony, Derringer, and Silver Falchion finalists. Debra has served on the national boards of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America and was president of the Guppy and SEMWA chapters. Find out more about Debra [here](#).

