

The Baker's Butcher

A Silly Karl's Bakery Murder Mystery



by **Kelly Szabo**

In loving memory of my dad, Earl C. Bacon.

I miss you.

Chapter 1

Some people romanticize about owning their own bakery. The usual thoughts will come to mind: warm, cozy atmospheres; the aroma of gooey chocolate chip cookies; loaves upon loaves of freshly baked bread; crowds of customers plunking down their dollars for a taste. But what these folks fail to think about is the unromantic side of baking. Waking up at ungodly hours of the morning. Sweating over hot donut fryers. Putting in all that hard work for a measly profit. And they'd never think that it could be hazardous to their health. But for the bakers of Everett Washington, it was becoming downright deadly.

In this quiet town of population ninety-five thousand, life was mostly peaceful. Not too many muggings, not too many murders, and not too much to talk about. But that all changed when the city of Everett was introduced to its first serial killer.

It all started with the murder of Hans Blinger, a well-known and respected Austrian baker. He owned The Pastry Mate on Rucker Avenue. He was found decapitated and the rest of him was found in the dumpster, tossed away like garbage. The Everett Police Department figured it was a random psychotic event. But when a second baker was murdered in the same fashion, they realized they were in trouble.

Alive and well was Judy Bacon, the owner Karl's Bakery and Coffee Shoppe on Wetmore Avenue. She had been baking since her high school days, and finally went into business for herself at the tender age of thirty-seven. She had now owned the place for twenty-seven years.

She and her husband, Earl, read all about the murders in the papers. They also caught all the news stories about them on TV. But instead of being scared that she'd be the next victim, Judy was more interested in the facts of the cases. She wanted to know all the details. So it was divine intervention when Pamela Jones walked in and asked for a job.

Pamela had worked for Esmeralda Gonzales, owner of The Panaderia. Ms. Gonzales specialized in Latin American pastries, and was very successful. Roughly one week ago, she and Pamela were there finishing up. In the middle of putting away dishes, Pamela noticed a dark figure lurking in the kitchen. Scared, she hid behind some boxes in the back. The figure moved out to the table area where Esmeralda was refilling packets of sugar. Soon screams of terror and awful noises caused Pamela to cover her ears.

Pamela was frozen with fright and never got a good look at the intruder. By the time she gathered enough courage to stand up and call the police, it was too late. What she discovered in the display case would forever haunt her: Ms. Gonzales's head, severed from her body. It was propped on a cake stand, rotating around and around in the display case like a German Chocolate Special. When Everett police arrived, they found the rest of Esmeralda in the dumpster out back.

Three days ago, when Pamela came by the bakery, asking if there were any positions available, Judy hired her on the spot. She knew Pamela would be a good fit at Karl's. And in addition, they could ask her every question about the grisly murder that they could possibly think of.

On this particular day, the bakery was humming. The sound of customer chitchat filled the air. Dishes clinked as tables were being cleared. The loud clamor of the bread slicer droned on and off. The dinging phone rang off the hook, and the Everly Brothers were singing "Bye Bye Love" on the radio.

Judy was untying her apron, ready to call it a day. She gazed around at the customers. Not bad, she thought to herself. Twenty-seven years and the place still managed to stay afloat. And a lot of the credit went to her husband.

Earl helped with the financial end of things. He managed the payroll and all the taxes. Sometimes he came to work with Judy and helped out, but today he was at home. He'd join her tomorrow so they could get caught up on cleaning; maintenance at Karl's was never ending.

Stella, an employee at Karl's, was Judy's right-hand gal. She helped Judy in the back making bread, Danish, cookies, icings, cake, and donuts. She had worked at Karl's for almost fifteen years, and Judy really enjoyed her sense of humor. And they supported each other emotionally. When Stella went through a nasty divorce, Judy was there to help her through the rough spots.

Stella was finishing up her order with Bob, the Scrumptious Supply sales rep.

"We need pan liners, a case of your assorted rainbow sprinkles, and," Stella consulted her list, "have you got any of those little plastic baby rattles? We ran out last week."

Bob marked the items on his order form. "No problem with the baby rattles. I know we just delivered a case to Helen over at Bravo Bakery two days ago, so we should have more in stock."

"Great. That should be it."

"Well, you and Judy have a nice day, and I'll get this order out by early next week." Bob ripped off the top copy and handed it to Stella. "Oh, and by the way. Watch out for the Baker Butcher." He smiled and gave her a wink.

"Ha ha ha," said Stella dryly. "Thanks Bob. You have a nice day too."

Bob left, and Judy approached Stella. They gave each other a tired look. Both she and Judy had arrived at work around eleven the night before.

"It's been real," Stella said, grabbing her coat. "I went ahead and put in the order for Scrumptious Supply. Gonna head on home now and tackle some laundry and get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning?"

"Yep. Same time," replied Judy. "Earl and I will pick you up by midnight."

"Oh Yeah," Stella suddenly remembered. "The freezer."

Judy sighed. "The longer we wait, the more the junk keeps piling up. We've got to get the darned thing cleaned." A smile spread across her face. "And just think. Norma Jean will be here in the morning. Her plane gets in at four A.M."

Norma Jean was one of Judy's oldest friends. She also happened to be an ex-employee, which is how they met. After a couple of failed romances, and a bachelor's degree in biology from the University of Washington, Norma Jean packed up and headed back to her home state of Kentucky to be closer to her family.

Stella smiled. "How long has it been since you saw her?"

Judy shook her head. "Gosh, at least seven years. I wanted to make it to her wedding, but never got the chance."

"Didn't she marry someone after only two weeks?"

Judy nodded. "Yes. Robby. Only they knew each other for three weeks, not two. But you know Norma Jean, she's so impulsive, it was bound to happen."

Nelly, one of Judy's employees that worked the front, approached them in a tizzy. She was holding a copy of the day's Everett Herald.

"Did anyone read this?" Nelly held the paper up so they could see the headlines: *BAKER BUTCHER STRIKES AGAIN*.

Stella grabbed the paper from Nelly. "Another baker killed?"

Judy grabbed the paper from Stella. "Let me see that." She scanned the article. "Oh my gosh. Helen. Helen Smith."

"Helen Smith?" Stella asked. "Not Helen Smith, the owner of Bravo Bakery."

"Yes." Judy was visibly shaken.

"That makes three bakers dead in less than two weeks," said Nelly.

Betty, Shannon & Elizabeth, who also worked at Karl's, gathered around Judy and the paper.

"Not another." Betty's face was grim. "Where did they find the head?"

"It says here an employee found the head on a tray in the cookie case."

Elizabeth shook her head in disbelief. "And where did they find the rest of her?"

"In the dumpster. Just like Esmeralda Gonzales and Hans Blinger."

Judy, Elizabeth, Betty, Nelly, Shannon and Stella all looked at each other with dread on their faces.

"Is anyone else thinking what I'm thinking?" Shannon asked, her voice clearly filled with doom.

“Oh my,” replied Nelly. “You don’t think that....” She broke off.

Judy swallowed. “That I could be next.”

The girls erupted into loud protests of reassurance.

“Judy,” said Stella, grabbing the paper out of Judy’s hand and shoving it into the trashcan. “Don’t be ridiculous. No one is going to lop off your head and place it in the cookie case!”

Judy’s legs became wobbly.

“Good one Stel.” Elizabeth gave Stella an evil eye. She grabbed a chair out of the break room for Judy to sit on.

Pamela, who had been bussing tables, came around the corner with a bin full of dishes. She saw the look on everyone’s face, and then saw Judy sitting in the chair.

“Is everything OK here? Judy, are you all right?” She placed the bin on the drain board of the sink. Nelly reached into the garbage can and extracted the newspaper, handing it to her.

“I take it you haven’t seen today’s headlines.”

Pamela took the paper and scanned the headline. A look of horror came across her face. “No. Not again.” Her eyes welled up, and she began shaking. Judy stood up as she sensed that Pamela was the one in need of a chair.

“Pamela, sit down.” Judy gently pushed her into the chair.

As the girls stood around Pamela, Doc Nesbitt came out of the men’s restroom, and spotted all the commotion. Dr. Joseph Nesbitt, or Doc, as the townsfolk called him, was a jovial old physician who had been practicing in Everett for nearly thirty-five years. He was a regular at Karl’s, and everyone found him quite likeable.

“Pamela,” he said, “Are you OK?”

Doc approached the seated woman, a look of concern on his face. He picked up her wrist to check her pulse. “You don’t look so good.”

“No,” Pamela agreed. Her eyes seemed to twinkle at the sight of the elderly man. “I don’t feel so good. There’s been another murder.”

Doc Nesbitt nodded his head. “Yes, I read about it in the paper. Terrible. Just terrible what happened to Ms. Smith.”

He finished taking her pulse, but continued to hold her hand. He looked her in the eye. “Now, I know you’ve had a rough week. I want you to stop by my office this afternoon after you get off work, and I’ll give you something for your anxiety. There’s no sense in you suffering like this.”

“Thanks Doc. I’ll do that.” She gave Doc a dreamy smile.

At that moment, Doc’s wife, Shirley, came around the corner. She saw the young woman’s hand in Doc’s, but showed no surprise. If she had any jealousy towards Pamela, she didn’t show it. Doc, uncomfortable just the same, released Pamela’s hand.

She spoke with her nose in the air. “Joseph, we have an appointment in ten minutes, and I refuse to be late.” She eyed Pamela with an ever-so-slight look of disgust, and walked away.

Shirley Nesbitt was almost thirty years younger than Doc. She was what one called a trophy wife. They had married ten years earlier, when she was twenty-five and he was well into his sixties. She had an air of sophistication that came with being a doctor’s wife. Well dressed, and still very attractive.

Doc Nesbitt looked slightly embarrassed. “Well, I guess I’d best not keep the wife waiting. Good day.” He gave Pamela and everyone a nod, and then returned to his table where his wife was waiting.

Nelly was curious. She turned back to Pamela. “Are you one of his patients?”

“Yes,” Pamela replied with a smile. “For about six months now. He’s super nice, and his office is really convenient.”

Judy, Stella, Betty and Elizabeth were all thinking the same thing: Doc was more than just her doctor.

Pamela’s thoughts about Doc Nesbitt faded, and came back to the murders. “This is just awful. I wish I could help out the police more with the case. I wish I could have seen the killer that night. Who would do such a thing?”

A man’s voice boomed out from behind them. “That’s just what we’re trying to find out.”

Everyone turned around. There stood Detective Hutch of the Everett Police Department.

“Oh, Detective Hutch! It’s so good to see you.” Judy gushed and gave the detective a big hug.

Detective Hutch, a ten-year veteran of the Everett Police Department, was no stranger to Judy, Earl and the gang. He and Detective Rominski had worked together on another case at Karl’s Bakery & Coffee Shoppe not too long ago, when Judy’s newly hired baker was found dead in a mixing bowl full of chocolate cake batter.

“Where is your sidekick?” she asked.

Detective Hutch motioned to the donut case out front. There stood Detective Rominski, eyeing the donuts. He continued past the pastry case and joined his partner.

“Nice looking pastries Judy,” he said.

“Thank you Detective Rominski. Thank you very much. Can I bag one up for you?”

“No, thank you,” declined Detective Rominski. “I’d love one, but I’m trying to watch my weight. Maybe some other time.”

Detective Hutch got down to brass tacks. “I take it you’ve all seen the headlines. We’ve come here to make sure you all know the inherent danger that Judy is in.”

Judy swallowed hard again. “Inherent danger?”

He continued. “Judy, we don’t know who this maniac is, or why he’d want to lop the heads off of innocent bakers, but we’re trying to find out. Until we do, however, you’re going to need to be aware of your surroundings. Never work alone. And that goes for the rest of you.” He pointed his finger at each employee. “Stay in pairs. Keep an eye on each other. Watch each other’s backs. And if you see anything, and I mean anything, out of the ordinary, you call 911. The last thing Detective Rominski and I want to do, Judy, is to find your head spinning around in your pastry case. Got it?”

Judy nodded and stared at Detective Hutch as if in a trance. She got it.

“Um, Detective Hutch?” Nelly raised her hand shyly. “Have you got one of those psychic profilers that you work with down at the station? From what I’ve seen on TV, they can really help with solving cases.”

The girls rolled their eyes.

Detective Rominski answered amusedly. “Gosh. No, we’ve never used a psychic.” A slight smile could be detected on his face. “We’ll definitely keep that in mind though.”

“We’ll be in touch if we hear anything new on these cases,” said Detective Hutch. “Pamela, if you think of anything else that might help in identifying the killer, don’t hesitate to call.”

Pamela stood up. “OK. Thank you detective.”

Chapter 2

Judy made it home, and told Earl all about Helen Smith and their visit with the Everett Police. It was a beautiful day, and they were sitting out on their deck enjoying the sunshine.

“Poor Helen,” said Earl. “What a terrible way to die. Do the police have any leads?”

Judy was sipping some iced tea. “No. That’s the creepy thing about it. Bakers around Everett are dropping like flies.” She took a large swig. “And I could be next.”

Earl smiled. “Oh Judy. Everyone knows that Helen Smith was in debt up to her ears. She probably got whacked because she couldn’t pay off her debts.”

“No,” countered Judy. “She was not in debt up to her ears. In fact, she was doing quite well. Some of the customers told me I needed to be on my toes, because the Bravo Bakery was really bringing in the crowds. In fact, I told Norma Jean about it during our last phone conversation a few weeks ago. I was telling her about how the competition in Everett nowadays is stiff. And boy was I right.” She took another swig. “Except now it’s not the kind of stiff that I actually meant.”

“Well, I’ll be with you in the morning,” said Earl. “And Norma Jean will be there too. And she’s pretty tough. She’ll be able to protect the both of us.”

Judy perked up. “Yeah. I’m feeling better already. Norma Jean’s a feisty Kentucky farm girl who can handle just about anything.”

There was a pause as they soaked up the sun on their faces.

“Are you picking her up from the airport?” asked Earl.

“She asked if I could, but we’re going to be slammed for the morning. I told her I just couldn’t, so she said she’d just take a taxi to the bakery.”

The next morning Judy and Earl arrived at Stella’s house at exactly midnight. They picked her up and shortly thereafter pulled up to the front of the bakery. After turning on the lights and starting a pot of coffee, they began the day’s work.

The first thing to do was the donuts, and then the Danish. At the same time, they mixed up the bread dough and any special orders for the day. By the time they got around to doing the cakes, it was around six, and the sun was rising.

Betty had been there for about fifteen minutes when Shannon arrived.

“Hey Betty,” asked Shannon. “What’s Doc’s car doing parked in the bus zone? I just got off the bus and the driver was ranting about it.

Betty, setting creamer out on the tables, ambled up to the door and took a look.

“That’s Doc’s car alright.” She shrugged it off and went back to the creamers.

“Speaking of Doc,” said Shannon, taking off her sweater. “I wonder how Pamela is doing today. He must have given her a ride home because her coat is in his car.”

Just then the door opened. It was Doc Nesbitt and his wife. They were both dressed in their workout clothes, having just finished their morning exercises next door at the Hercules Gym.

Shannon and Betty immediately ceased their conversation.

The Nesbitts looked to be immersed in a heavy conversation. Shirley Nesbitt seemed very jovial and was doing most of the talking. Doc, on the other hand, was not as animated. Betty wasn’t the least bit surprised. This was a common occurrence between Doc and his wife.

“And then I thought,” Shirley laughed, “why not invite all the ladies from the gym. And once we’re all together in the same room you can bet your bottom dollar they won’t be gossiping about each other.”

They approached the counter at the deli. Shirley stood beside Doc giggling. Doc pulled some cash out of his wallet and gave Betty a look that said *she’s driving me nuts*.

Betty cracked a smile. “Thanks Doc.” She put a donut on a plate and placed it on the counter for him.

After they seated themselves in a booth, Betty could hear Shirley continuing on. Poor Doc, she thought. She supposed that Doc now regretted his choice of bride. She was high maintenance, and everyone knew it.

Shannon approached Betty behind the counter. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Hmm," Betty responded. "Don't know why he'd give Pamela a ride. Doctors don't usually give their patients a ride. And they especially don't leave the patient's coat in the back seat where their wife can see it."

The door to the bakery opened again and both Betty and Shannon turned. It was Norma Jean, suitcase and duffle bag in hand.

"Well I'll be. Norma Jean Bailey." Shannon laughed. She and Betty walked over and gave Norma Jean a hearty hug.

"Shannon and Betty. You two look as good as you did seven years ago."

"Oh, well," Shannon blushed a bit. "It hasn't been easy." "Well I doubt that." Norma Jean craned her neck towards the back of the bakery. "Now where is that Judy hiding?"

Judy came around the corner from the back. "Norma Jean!"

They gave each other big hugs, like young schoolgirls excited to see one another.

"You're early. I didn't think you'd get here for another hour," said Judy.

"Well, plane was on time, and I lucked out in finding a taxi right away."

"That's great," said Judy. "The earlier you are, the more time we've got to enjoy each other."

Norma Jean rolled up her sleeves and got to work. Judy, Earl and Stella were glad to have an extra set of hands. After all the orders and cakes were done, they began cleaning the pan racks and the freezer.

It had been such a long time since Judy and Norma Jean worked together side by side that it didn't really matter that they were doing something as menial as scraping caked-on goop off racks. Stella and Earl enjoyed themselves, sorting and sifting through crumpled paper bags full of mystery contents, and old dinner rolls with freezer burn that were in the freezer. They all laughed and reminisced about the past.

"Remember the time," recalled Judy, "when that customer came walking back here one morning and said, 'I've been pooped on'?"

Norma Jean and Stella howled with laughter. The thought of an old man getting pooped on by a little bird trapped inside the bakery was hilarious.

"Yeah," Norma Jean giggled. "And what about the time we were working back here when it was still dark outside, and that weirdo came through the back door and down the ramp?"

Judy laughed again. "And I threw that five-pound weight at him."

"Dang," said Norma Jean. "You didn't even come close to hitting him, but you sure did leave a nice dent in the wall."

"I can still remember the perplexed look on the guy's face." Judy said. "He never did come back around, did he?"

"I still can't believe you missed him," said Earl. "That would have been one for the bakery history books."

"Yeah, well," said Judy. "Don't think I don't think of that often. I nearly cringe every time I think of how close I came. We're just lucky he took off."

They told more stories and did more laughing. Later, when Judy was wiping down the scaling bench, Betty approached her.

"Judy, I hate to tell you this, but Pamela hasn't showed up yet."

Judy sighed. "Have you heard from her yet?"

"No."

"Well," said Judy, "that's what I get for hiring someone on the spot without following up with references."

Norma Jean couldn't help but overhear their conversation. "What's wrong?"

"It's my new employee Pamela. She's been here for maybe a week, and now she's already flaked out on us."

"Oh," replied Norma Jean. "She's probably just running late."

Stella, who was deep inside the freezer, emerged with a sack of old hamburger buns, and a 9-inch round cake box. "Well, these buns are toast, but I bet we can still salvage this cake."

Judy had a blank look on her face. "Yeah, whatever. Take the cake to Sharon. She can slice it up and put it out."

Earl emerged from the freezer, with more cake and a paper bag that he held up. "Now here is a bag of fries reminiscent of the ice age." He dumped the contents out on the bench, showing a frozen mass of ice with French fries sticking out randomly.

Betty took a look at the French fries. "Hmm. No, don't think I'll be using those, Earl."

Earl shrugged his shoulders and dumped the French fries into the garbage.

"Well," sighed Judy, "try calling her. In the meantime, do the best you can do without her."

Betty nodded and went back to her order on the grill.

Turning to Norma Jean, Judy asked, "How about going sailing this afternoon?"

Judy had a twenty-five foot sailboat that she had enjoyed for almost as long as she had owned the bakery. When Norma Jean had worked at the bakery, they spent their summers sailing after they got off work.

Norma Jean thought for a moment. "Well, sure. To heck with my jetlag. I'm a bit tired, but I can rest on the boat."

Stella reappeared, shaking her head and babbling. "Why is it that an employee will pick an important day to skip out of work? We've still got a ton of stuff in the freezer to sort through."

At that very second, there was a bloodcurdling scream that came from the front of the bakery. Judy jumped halfway out of her skin. She and Earl, Stella and Norma Jean all broke into stumbling runs to see what the matter was.

As they came around the corner, there was Shannon with her hand over her mouth, backed up against the wall. She was whimpering and shaking her head back and forth. Customers, alarmed out of eating their donuts and drinking their coffee, were gathering around where Shannon stood.

"Shannon?" said Judy. She slowly approached the shaking woman. "Shannon, what is it?"

Shannon was barely able to make eye contact. She was pointing to the cake box that Stella had brought up to her not one minute before, and was trying to form the words, as if she had never spoken a word before in her life. Then it all came out in a loud horrific shriek. "P-P-PAMELA!"

As Shannon said these words, Earl approached the box. With everyone following behind him, including the customers, he opened the top of the box, and immediately stumbled backwards. But the lid of the box stayed open for all to see. And when all the customers saw the severed head of Pamela Jones, all hell broke loose.

Terrified customers were screaming and knocking each other over, shoving each other like mad men and women. Anything to flee the hideous sight that stared back at them from the 9-inch cake box on the counter.

All that Judy could do was stare in horror. Stella, sensing the chaos, gathered up all her strength, jumped to the counter, and shut the box. She then ran to the bathroom, thinking she might be sick.

"Oh my Lord, Oh my Lord." Betty kept repeating the phrase. Elizabeth was as pale as a ghost, and Nelly kept mumbling under her breath, pacing back and forth.

Earl gathered his senses. "I'll call 911." He wobbled to the phone. He was queasy from the site he had seen.

Most of the customers fled back into the eating area, where they were safe from a glimpse of the box. They were hugging and comforting one another, some whimpering, others crying.

Doc Nesbitt had been there when it all happened. He took control of the customers, and after tending to an older woman, he returned to the counter where the box sat.

"Is everyone here OK?" he asked. "I'm a doctor, remember. You may all be suffering from shock."

Shannon was still wobbly.

"Judy," said Doc Nesbitt in a commanding voice. "What Shannon needs right now is a stiff drink. Break out some of your brandy. And while you're at it, bring a bottle for the customers."

"But Doc," said Earl. "We don't have a license to serve liquor."

Doc turned to Earl and barked, "Doctor's orders."

"Well," said Judy. "We're never ones to go against a doctor's orders." She made a beeline for the storage area where the brandy was kept. She grabbed two large bottles off the shelf, and turning to go back, stopped herself and grabbed one more. Struggling under the weight of three large bottles of brandy, she hastened her pace back to the chaos.