

HOLLY MOULDER

MAYHEM

AT

MAGNOLIA
MANOR



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Bladensburg, MD



Cast of Characters

Marjorie Sims: Also known as Marjorie Riley, she is a 62-year-old accountant from Philadelphia. Late one night, Marjorie witnesses the kidnapping of a Philadelphia police detective who is later found murdered. Marjorie is quickly placed in protective custody by the U.S. Marshals who want her to testify against Kingpin, the boss of an organized crime syndicate.

Stephen Breckinridge: A U.S. Marshal with training in physical therapy, Stephen accompanies Marjorie to her new home where he serves as her bodyguard against Kingpin's men.

Edna Duncan: The elderly widow of James, a Baptist minister. Edna works with Stephen to help protect Marjorie.

Beanie Buffala: Elderly widow of trucker Stan, and mother of five adult children. Beanie passes her days at the Magnolia Manor by solving mysteries with Edna.

Director William Peabody-Jones: Also known as PBJ. The director is a retired FBI agent who has been friends with Stephen for years. Although he always appears frumpy and unkempt, there's more to William than meets the eye.

Brett Hopewell: The new chaplain at Magnolia Manor, Pastor Hopewell claims to be born and bred in the Atlanta area. His handsome face and whiskey-smooth voice make the ladies of the Manor blush.

Pearl Porter: Pearl is the Manor's much-loved chef. Her salmon patties are literally to die for. After work hours, Pearl is responsible for taking care of her aging mother, Velma. But Pearl has a terrible secret that she can't share with anyone.

Irene Spencer: An elderly resident at the Manor, Irene is the proud owner of a miscreant cat, Mr. Whiskers. Irene complains constantly to anyone who will listen, especially PBJ. Irene's mission is to get Edna and Beanie kicked out of the Manor — for good.

Charlie Richardson: Edna's high school sweetheart, rumor has it Charlie once worked at NASA. Or did he? But now he's living at the Manor, receiving care for Alzheimer's disease.



One

A Terrifying Elevator Ride

Marjorie Sims despised the elevator in the Broad Street parking garage. With its stained walls, cracked linoleum floor, and 70s-era Muzak tunes playing nonstop, it was the perfect setting for a murder. The dim overhead lights blinked on and off in a scary serial-killer kind of way. The air smelled like Old Spice and old sweat, an odor that made Marjorie gag every time she stepped through the doors. To make matters even worse, the ancient machinery that hoisted this death box between floors creaked louder than an old man's knees.

It felt like a scene straight from a Stephen King novel. All that it needed was a bloody knife stuck in the wall and a dead body splayed across the floor.

Didn't help that Marjorie had a touch of claustrophobia, a fear of closed-in places she could trace back to when Mikey Mahoney, her childhood bully, locked her in the tiny storage

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shed behind her Pennsylvania home. The shed was full of spider webs and dead bugs and was so small she couldn't stand up. She beat and beat on the door. With tears streaming down her face, she screamed to be let out.

But all she heard was Mikey's cruel laughter.

After what seemed like hours to an eight-year-old, Mikey's sister Kimberly finally let her out.

But Marjorie never forgot the feeling of being trapped in that box. The panic. The terror. And now, closed-in places like this elevator sent her stress levels into the stratosphere.

And unless she arrived at work at the crack of dawn, she really had no choice but to ride it twice a day. The accounting firm she worked for, one of the most prestigious in Philadelphia, rented the entire deck for its employees to use. Parking in Philly was notoriously hard to find, so a private parking deck was a coveted perk. And when Marjorie could get there early, like before seven in the morning, she landed a spot on the first floor. No elevator needed.

But today, she was late. An overnight ice storm had left traffic on the Schuylkill Expressway backed up for miles. So, the search for a spot led her to the eighth floor.

Then, to make up for that late start that morning, Marjorie had worked well past her usual six o'clock quitting time. Tax season was just starting, but her bosses were already in a frenzy. She figured a few extra hours would help her get a handle on the chaos.

Now, alone on the first floor of the parking deck, she tapped her foot impatiently as she waited for the death box to lumber its way down. She checked her watch. Midnight, on the dot. The classic time for murder and mayhem. *Great, just great.*

She'd celebrate birthday number sixty-two in just two

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weeks. Maybe it was time to think about retirement. Snag that social security check and crack open that pension nest egg. After all, forty years of dedicated service to Bradley and Bradley Accounting seemed like more than enough. With no family to speak of, she could travel the world. Settle on whatever beach grabbed her fancy.

And then there'd be no more elevators, no more traffic. Ah, *paradise*.

Standing in the elevator, Marjorie took a deep breath of sort-of-fresh parking garage air as she pushed the button for the eighth floor. But just before the doors thudded shut, a man rushed on.

From the corner of her eye, Marjorie gave him the once over, trying to decide if he was dangerous. Tall, late forties. Brown raincoat, and a battered black fedora pulled down over his face.

Who wears fedoras anymore? she wondered. *Certainly not accountants. Old police detectives, maybe?*

Fedora-man pushed the button for the seventh floor and then took a step back from the elevator doors. His raincoat shifted. *Was that a revolver-shaped lump in his coat, or is my imagination running off the rails again?*

She shook her head and sighed. *I've got to stop bingeing on those Hallmark Channel mysteries.*

Still, there was just something strange about this guy. To fend off her rising panic, Marjorie ran through all the steps she'd learned at her Safety for Seniors class last month. Look confident and stand up straight. Don't slouch like a victim. She lifted her chin, threw back her shoulders. Stretched out her five-foot-six-inch frame.

Darn. Should have worn high heels today. Could have added a couple inches.

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Marjorie pulled the belt of her black leather coat tighter around her waist. She fingered the car keys already in her pocket. She grabbed the pink plastic case of the MaceFace pepper spray attached to her keychain, her finger ready to hit the magic button. Richie, the self-defense guru who'd taught the class at the senior center, had warned against carrying the small canister, explaining that the stuff could end up being used against them. Or, it could blow back in their faces, get on their clothes, put them at risk. He favored stabbing assailants in the eye with car keys instead.

Marjorie shuddered. She didn't think she could ever stab someone in the eye. But who knows? In a pinch, maybe she could. And maybe this was just that kind of pinch.

So, she'd bought the pepper spray anyway, against Richie's advice. And now it was tucked in her pocket, ready for action. Marjorie's cellphone was in the other pocket, ready to dial 911. Her purse strap was wrapped securely around her body.

An assailant would have to cut it off her cold, dead body. Happy thought.

She felt prepared. Sort of.

The man jiggled the coins in his pants pocket and rocked back and forth on his well-worn heels. The floor numbers slowly climbed. 2. 3. 4. He studied the panel and let out an impatient sigh as the rickety box shimmied and shook its way from floor to floor.

The stranger glanced at Marjorie and smiled. Seemed like a kind smile, and Marjorie let down her guard just a little. Maybe he wasn't a threat after all. And he had nice eyes. Be a shame to stick a car key in them.

A sudden burst of brilliance overhead, a loud *POP* from the ceiling, and the lights went out. And to Marjorie's dismay,

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nothing's quite as terrifyingly pitch black as a parking garage elevator at midnight.

The stranger came to the rescue. He pulled out his cellphone and turned on the flashlight app. "How did we ever manage without these things?" he asked.

Marjorie smiled, grateful for the light.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the elevator shuddered to a stop on the seventh floor. She'd ride up one more floor, by herself this time, hurry to her trusty Camry, and drive away into the night. Pour herself a nice glass of Merlot when she got home. A bubble bath. Safe and sound.

At least, that was her plan until the doors slowly opened on the seventh floor. When the stranger stepped out, two thugs dressed in hooded sweatshirts and fancy tennis shoes appeared out of the shadows. They grabbed fedora-man and dragged him toward a waiting sedan. As Marjorie watched in terror, the man's raincoat opened wide, revealing a gun – and a badge. He was a cop!

The fedora-man yelled one word at Marjorie.

"Kingpin!"

The two men tried to jam the policeman into the back of the car, but he wasn't going down easy. He slugged one of the men in the jaw, sending him sprawling to the solid concrete deck. But the other man shoved a gun in the cop's back and pushed him into the car's rear seat.

The driver's side door opened, and a man got out. He was at least six feet tall, 300 pounds. Terrifyingly big. A defensive end for the Philadelphia Eagles would have been intimidated by this guy.

The parking garage light helped Marjorie get a pretty good look at the driver's face. His eyes were steely blue. A jagged

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scar ran along his cheek. His salt and pepper hair was pulled back in a shoulder-length ponytail, and he wore a beat-up Phillies cap on his head. Fury radiated from every pore on his acne-scarred face, and he was coming straight at Marjorie with his gun drawn.

He shot one time into the dark elevator. The bullet ricocheted off the dull gray wall before penetrating the metal inches above Marjorie's head. Just like in the movies, she actually heard the bullet whizz by.

Panicked, Marjorie hit the floor. She pulled the pepper spray from her pocket, and without taking the time to aim, shot blindly at the open elevator door.

Bullseye.

Maybe there's a God after all. Marjorie couldn't believe it. The assailant yelped in pain, covered his face with his hands, and backed away from the door. One of the hooded thugs grabbed his arm and dragged him back to the sedan, put him in the back seat, and got in on the driver's side.

Trembling, she reached up and pushed the button, closing the elevator doors.

She was thrown back into pitch-black darkness. Thank goodness.

She heard the sedan's tires scream as it took off down the ramp and out of the garage.

She had the presence of mind to turn on her phone. The soft glow helped her locate number eight on the panel. When she got to her floor, Marjorie burst out of the elevator, hit unlock on her key fob, and ran as fast as her trembling legs would carry her toward the safety of that *beep beep*. She struggled to open the door but finally made it inside her car. She jammed the key in the ignition, started the engine, and careened down the ramp to

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the exit. Her tires shrieked as she dialed 911.

The exit gate lay in pieces on the asphalt, a souvenir left by the bad guys as they crashed through on their way out. She didn't stop to look both ways like her mother had taught her. She just drove like a crazy woman into the middle of Broad Street, briefly sending up a prayer of thanks that no one else was on the road at this time of night. Well, except for kidnapers and murderers.

Marjorie arrived home at record speed. She watched in the rear-view mirror all the way, just waiting for the bad guys to come up behind her and run her off the road or shoot out her windows. This was no Hallmark movie. This was for real, and she was terrified.

The garage door took forever to go up, but at last, she was able to pull in, turn off her car, and race to the safety of her own home.

The two officers were hesitant to believe her story. An older woman, fending off an attack with a pink canister of MaceFace? And the bit about the police detective being kidnapped? It just didn't make sense.

Marjorie poured herself another glass of wine, just to calm her nerves, and explained the evening's events again to the unconvinced officers. How she'd worked late, ridden the elevator with the stranger — who was probably a police detective — and then avoided being shot by fighting back with the only weapon she had on hand — MaceFace.

When Marjorie had finished her tale the second time, the police officers shook their heads in disbelief. They decided to take her to police headquarters downtown and let her tell her story to the detectives. Maybe they could clear this all up.

One thing was for sure. This woman had been through a

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terrible ordeal. She couldn't stop shaking. The officers took her arms and gently helped her into the police car.

A few minutes later, she was sitting at the police station, sipping hot tea and looking through mugshots. Until she found him. The man who shot at her in the parking deck. The startled detective looked at her, shock written on his face.

And maybe something akin to admiration?

"This is the man who tried to shoot you?" he asked. Hearing the excitement in his voice, a group of officers gathered around to see what was going on.

"Yes, that's him. Who is he?" Marjorie asked.

"That's Kingpin. He controls all the drug trafficking in south Philly. The detective you saw dragged into the car had been investigating him for months. Your testimony may be enough to put him away for good." The officer shook his head. "You're lucky to be alive, lady. Kingpin doesn't usually miss his targets."

And that's how Marjorie's years of elevator riding came to an end. But pretty soon, she'd recall that time as the days of wine and roses. There were no white sand beaches or exotic umbrella drinks in her future. In fact, compared to the nightmare she was about to face, a scary elevator ride was a walk in the park.



Two

A New Life

*I*t's time to go, Marjorie." U.S. Marshal Stephen Breckinridge slung a canvas bag over his shoulder and closed his bedroom door. Marjorie took a quick look around her room, checking for any items she might have missed. She zipped up her small suitcase and followed Stephen down the stairs.

Knock, knock. Pause. Knock, knock, knock.

Marjorie recognized the signal. The marshals used it to let each other know it was safe to open the door.

"Go straight to the van and get in," he said. "One of the drivers will take your suitcase for you. Don't look around. Don't speak to anyone. Got it?"

Marjorie nodded grimly at the man, her nearly constant companion since the U.S. Marshals paid her that first visit. Right after Kingpin had nearly killed her.

They had brought her to this house the very night she'd

identified Kingpin as the elevator shooter. From the very beginning, Stephen had done his best to make her feel safe. He'd cooked their meals, played cards with her—anything to distract her. They tried to watch TV together, but it was tough to find a channel they both liked. Marjorie loved the Hallmark channel, and Stephen was a news junkie. Still, they worked it out and soon developed a friendship.

Not that she hadn't noticed that Stephen was a very attractive man. With thick silver hair and ice-blue eyes, he was a real looker. In his early sixties, like Marjorie, he still had a nice, trim physique. But the show-stopper? A smile that showed off dimples, perfectly straight white teeth, and little crinkles around those gorgeous eyes.

But when it came down to it, the only thing that really mattered to Marjorie was that she knew she could trust this man, no matter what.

Stephen opened the front door, and Marjorie hurried down the concrete steps into the bright sunlight. Keeping her head down, she walked quickly to the van, just as she had been told. She climbed inside and slid across the vinyl seat. Stephen buckled in beside her, and the van door slammed shut.

Marjorie was headed to the WITSEC center, a secret facility outside Washington, D.C., designed to prepare protected witnesses for their new lives.

Here she'd get her new name, new documents, even a new Social Security number. She'd learn about her new community, somewhere in Georgia. Far away from the dangers in Philadelphia. She could never go back there again.

She'd made the decision to give up her home, her friends, everything that was familiar to her. All because of what she had seen and heard in that parking garage on Broad Street.

“How far is this place?” Marjorie asked. She chewed on her lower lip, a nervous habit she’d had ever since she was a little girl. It bothered her that she couldn’t see outside. Claustrophobia struck again. The windows in the van had been blacked out, making her feel like the walls were closing in. There was even a wall between the drivers and passengers so that no one riding in the back could see the road ahead.

She shoved her hands into her pockets and burrowed down in her thick sweater. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“C’mon, Marjorie. You know the rules. I can’t tell you that.” Stephen squeezed her hand through her sweater pocket. He knew Marjorie was scared to death, and she had good reason. Robert King, the criminal who called himself the Kingpin, was a terrifying man. His reputation for violence and cruelty was well known in the law enforcement community.

Kingpin controlled a legion of loyal followers – petty criminals and drug pushers hoping to make it big as part of Kingpin’s organization – all of whom were now searching for Marjorie. Their aim was to silence her because of what she’d seen: the kidnapping of a Philadelphia detective whose body had been discovered on the banks of the Schuylkill River the very next day. It was a murder that could bring down Kingpin’s empire.

As a witness to the kidnapping, Marjorie was Kingpin’s number one target. So, the U.S. Marshals Service had stepped in to keep her safe until she could testify in court.

But Kingpin was on the run, and Marjorie was in extreme danger.

She glanced at Stephen, sitting silently beside her in the van. She watched him making notes on papers that were probably about her. But he couldn’t share any of the information. She

laid her head against the back of the seat and fell into a restless sleep.

Marjorie dreamed of her parents for the first time in years. They were beckoning to her, calling her to come to them. It was a bewildering dream, not comforting at all, and she woke up in a cold sweat when Stephen gently nudged her arm.

"We're here, Marjorie," he said softly. He slid the door open and jumped out, then turned back to offer his hand to Marjorie. "Welcome to WITSEC."

They had parked in an underground garage at the Safesite and Orientation Center for the Witness Security Program, better known as WITSEC. Marjorie followed Stephen into an elevator — this one a little better than the death box, but not much. They traveled up several floors before the doors opened onto a carpeted hallway.

Marjorie glanced up and down the hall. Bad lighting, stained carpeting. Beige, beige, and more beige. Faded artificial flowers on a side table did their best to welcome visitors, but the effect was more depressing than cheery.

They passed several rooms along the way, but the place was silent as stone. No TV noise, no music blaring through the walls, no children laughing.

"Are there other people here like me?" Marjorie asked as Stephen unlocked her door.

"Not allowed to tell you that. If there are other 'guests,' you won't see them. Everything here is very private, very self-contained. You'll eat all your meals in your room." Stephen rolled her suitcase into the room and flipped on the light.

"Home sweet home."

The walls and carpeting of the tiny room were the same dull beige color as the hallway. Apparently, the U.S. Marshals

Service did not intend to waste precious tax dollars on elaborate decor.

But at least the room was clean, and it contained everything she'd need for her short stay: a single bed, a well-worn sofa, and a dining table with two chairs. A dresser and mirror were pushed up against the wall next to a narrow closet. A coffee pot and microwave had been set up on a laminate counter close to a dorm-sized fridge. A door led to her private bathroom. A single rectangular window, placed high above the dresser, was narrow and tinted. Only the barest amount of sunlight passed through. It would be impossible to see outside without the help of a step stool.

"I'll be back in an hour," Stephen said, "and then we'll get to work. The quicker we get this done, the faster you get to your new home." His face turned serious. "Make sure you lock the door behind me."

After Stephen left, Marjorie unpacked the few things she'd brought with her. She'd been told that the Marshal's Service would provide some clothing for her, things that would be appropriate for her new location in Georgia. And, as promised, the tiny closet was already filled with new garments that were just her size. From the looks of the designer labels, the Marshal's Service had good shoppers. So, this was where they spent their money.

Marjorie pulled a lightweight gray sweater from the closet and found a pair of jeans in the dresser. She laid her clothes on the bed, grabbed her toiletry bag from the suitcase, and headed into the bathroom.

She was arranging her cosmetics on the vanity when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She was shocked by what she saw. A sixty-two-year-old woman with bags under

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her bloodshot eyes and deep lines around her mouth. Out-of-control brown hair streaked with gray, in desperate need of a good cut and professional color.

She looked awful.

And then she laughed out loud at the woman in the mirror. *Here you are in a government safe house, being chased by a brutal criminal, and you're worried about a little gray in your hair?* With a grin, she turned the shower on full blast and climbed in. The hot water instantly calmed her nerves and lifted her spirits.

Stephen knocked on her door in an hour, just as he promised. He had changed out of his suit into a pair of jeans and a Penn State sweatshirt. Marjorie couldn't help but admire how well he filled out his clothes. And those bright blue eyes gave her a little thrill each time he looked at her.

If she hadn't been fighting for her life, there might have been something there. But right now, there was no time for foolish romantic notions.

They sat at the little table in Marjorie's room and filled out paperwork for all the new documents she'd need to start her new life.

And then Stephen slid a DVD into his computer and brought up a video of what would soon be Marjorie's new home, Magnolia Manor in Palmetto, Georgia. "A retirement home for active seniors age fifty-five and up in a quiet little community just south of the bustling city of Atlanta," boasted the youngish-sounding narrator.

The video began with an overview of a stereotypical southern town. Palmetto's main street — actually named "Main Street" — was lined with old-fashioned storefronts that dated back to the early 1900s. Hanging baskets overflowing with bright red geraniums hung from vintage light poles that

dotted the sidewalks. At one end of Main Street stood the Bank of Palmetto, a solid gray structure that inspired confidence and security. At the other end, hungry residents could complete their weekly grocery shopping at a modern-looking supermarket.

And running parallel to Main Street was a railroad. It had been used as far back as the Civil War, announced the narrator proudly, and was still used today to ship goods up and down the eastern seaboard. A quaint but deserted depot stood nearby, a reminder of times past when train travel was king.

Small roads ran under the railroad tracks, making use of overpasses and low bridges that had served the community for years. These roads led to Palmetto's suburbs, neighborhoods full of well-built but not high-priced family homes.

The video showed groups of happy, chatting residents of all ages seated at charming, open-air restaurants and cafes. Smiling children rode bikes, jumped rope, and licked ice cream cones on warm summer days. An idyllic little town.

She could almost hear the church bells ringing.

Andy and Barney should be driving down Main Street at any moment.

Compared to the towering, soot-covered snowbanks and freezing weather she'd left behind in Philadelphia, this place looked like Nirvana in the springtime.

It's almost too good to be true. And how would I fit in?

Aside from peaches and peanuts, Marjorie knew precious little about Georgia. But Stephen told her not to worry.

"Your cover story has you coming from Kansas, so we'll have you do a little reading about that. Just tell everyone you picked Georgia because of its warm climate and friendly people."

By the time they got to the end of the video, Marjorie was ready to pack her bags and head south.

Stephen gave her some important advice. "Remember, when you're asked questions about your past, just keep your answers very simple. You're a retired math teacher from Topeka. Don't give too much information. It's easy to get trapped into saying the wrong thing," Stephen warned. "Keep your answers short and sweet, and you'll do just fine. And I'll be there to help."

"You're going undercover, too?" Marjorie asked.

"Yes. Before I joined the Marshals Service, I was training to be a physical therapist. Got recruited right out of college. I'll use that knowledge as a cover at the retirement home. Shouldn't be too bad, helping little old ladies with bad knees and golfers with sore elbows."

"Sounds pretty awful if you want to know the truth, Stephen," Marjorie grimaced. "So, I'm supposed to be from Kansas, and everything about me is changed. Except I'm keeping my real first name? How come?" Marjorie asked.

Everything else about my life had been wiped clean. Why not my name, too?

"WITSEC found that people in hiding come off as more believable if they introduce themselves using their actual first name," he explained. "You can say it without thinking. Gives you some time to remember your fake last name." Stephen's expression was very serious. "Think of it as the little pause that can save your life."

The next three days flew by. Marjorie learned all she could about her new identity as she and Stephen reviewed everything she'd need to know. Her make-believe children's names, her past profession, her hobbies and interests.

Anything to make her lies believable.

In the evening, Marjorie read everything she could about Kansas. Major cities, the state bird and state song,

local politicians. The list seemed endless. But she knew this information might just save her life, so she studied until she thought her brain couldn't hold one more sunflower-filled fact.

One afternoon, Stephen caught her singing, "I'm as corny as Kansas in autumn, high as a kite on the fourth of July."

"Well, that's a happy little tune," he said. "Make that one up yourself?"

Marjorie's jaw dropped. "You're kidding, right? It's from the musical South Pacific. You know, 'Gonna wash that man right out of my hair.'" Marjorie sang the lyrics, snapping her fingers and doing a little dance.

Stephen stared at her blankly.

Marjorie tried again. "Some enchanted evening, you will meet a stranger?" Crickets. "Sorry," he said.

"Oh, Stephen. We must do something about your musical theater education. When we get to Georgia, I'm going to get some DVDs, pop some popcorn, and introduce you to Rodgers and Hammerstein, or maybe Lerner and Lowe. It'll be awesome."

Stephen looked glum. "Can't wait."

On the morning of the fourth day, Stephen appeared at her door with a smile on his face and a stranger by his side. "Your reward for working so hard," he grinned. "Sharon's here to give you the full treatment. Time to wash that gray right out of your hair, right?"

Marjorie smiled broadly and threw her arms around Stephen's neck.

Within a couple of hours, a brand-new, updated Marjorie stared back at her from the bathroom mirror. Marjorie Simms was gone. And in her place was the new – and vastly improved – Marjorie Riley.

That afternoon, with Stephen by her side, Marjorie boarded

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a plane that would whisk her to her new life in a little town in Georgia.