



## Tall Tail: A Mrs. Murphy Mystery

By Rita Mae Brown

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#### TALL TAIL

At any moment a perfect summer day in Crozet, Virginia—nestled within the Blue Ridge Mountains—might turn stormy and tempestuous, as Harry knows too well when a squall suddenly sweeps in. In a blink, Harry’s pickup nearly collides with a careening red car that then swerves into a ditch. Harry recognizes the dead driver slumped over the vehicle’s steering wheel: Barbara Leader was nurse and confidante to former Virginia governor Sam Holloway.

Though Barbara’s death is ruled a heart attack, dissenting opinions abound. After all, she was the picture of health, which gives Harry and her four-legged companions pause. A baffling break-in at a local business leads Harry to further suspect that a person with malevolent intent lurks just out of sight: Something evil is afoot.

As it happens, Barbara died in the shadow of the local cemetery’s statue of the Avenging Angel. Just below that imposing funereal monument lie the remains of one Francisco Selisse, brutally murdered in 1784. Harry’s present-day sleuthing draws her back to Virginia’s slave-holding past and the hunt for Selisse’s killer. Now it’s up to Harry and her furry detectives—Mrs. Murphy, Pewter, and Tee Tucker—to expose the bitter truth, even if it means staring into the unforgiving eyes of history and cornering a callous killer poised to pounce.

#### Praise for the Mrs. Murphy Mysteries by Rita Mae Brown and Sneaky Pie Brown

“As feline collaborators go, you couldn’t ask for better than Sneaky Pie Brown.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Mrs. Murphy mysteries are fun, sweet, and beautifully adventurous.”—*Bustle*

“Brown [is] the queen of the talking animal cozy.”—*Publishers Weekly*

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## Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

**Rita Mae Brown** is the bestselling author of the Sneaky Pie Brown series; the Sister Jane series; the Runnymede books, including *Six of One* and *Cakewalk*; *A Nose for Justice* and *Murder Unleashed*; *Rubyfruit Jungle*; and *In Her Day*, as well as several other novels. An Emmy-nominated screenwriter and a poet, Brown lives in Afton, Virginia.

**Sneaky Pie Brown**, a tiger cat born somewhere in Albemarle County, Virginia, was discovered by Rita Mae Brown at her local SPCA. They have collaborated on numerous Mrs. Murphy mysteries—in addition to *Sneaky Pie’s Cookbook for Mystery Lovers* and *Sneaky Pie for President*.

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chapter 1

Tuesday, July 12, 2016

Flaming sword in hand, the Avenging Angel, bestride a monumental tomb, looked over the rolling land toward the Blue Ridge Mountains. His mouth set hard, his eyes piercing, he was not the promise of peace, repose, and eternal joy with the Almighty.

Lying underneath this imposing marble tomb rested the bones of Francisco Selisse, born January 12, 1731. Died September 10, 1784. Historians still puzzle over exactly how he was murdered. Three other people stood in the room when it happened. The stories varied, but no one denied that Francisco had been stabbed to death.

Big Rawly, the plantation on which this sordid event occurred, looked much as it did in 1784. Brick or clapboard, most early Virginia homes resembled one another. In general, the wealthy wanted Georgian homes, but Big Rawly, modeled after a French château, down to the stables and outbuildings, never failed to impress.

Harry had played there as a child with children from the neighboring estate Beau Pre, Big Rawly itself, plus those children whose mothers drove them to the estate. The estate’s owners, the Holloways, had children, loved children, and were welcoming to any and all. Susan Tucker, Harry’s best friend, was their granddaughter.

Francisco and Maureen Selisse had been childless, and this gaggle of children might have pleased them.

Hard to say, for their reputation for ruthlessness endures to this day.

The cemetery in which this imposing tomb commanded center stage was said to be haunted. As a child, Harry had steered clear of the graveyard, and even as an adult that hard-eye stone angel gave her a shiver. Over the centuries, many declared they had seen ghosts here, but with a consideration praiseworthy in the disembodied, the departed never disturbed children.

Now, as an adult, as Harry passed the place, rumbling on the narrow road leading out of Garth Road, she wondered if this consideration would always hold true.

Turning left, heading for Crozet, she noted dark clouds backing up behind the Blue Ridge. Never a good sign. Accompanying her in her old 1978 F-150 sat Mrs. Murphy, the tiger cat, and Pewter, the gray cat. Tucker, a corgi, was also present and always ready to help. The same could not be said of the cats.

They reached another left turn, which wound a few miles down to old Three-Chopt Road, Route 250. Given the threat of a storm, Harry chose this faster route instead of the pleasant drive to Whitehall, where she would also turn left to head home.

Coming at her in the opposite direction, a red Camry flew around a curve up ahead. On such a twisty road, Harry thought it best to be alert. She had stopped, put her left flasher on, when a tremendous clap of thunder startled her and her passengers.

Immediately after, the red Camry swerved straight at them. The car appeared totally out of control. Harry hit the gas, and the vehicle missed her truck bed by inches. She quickly surged ahead before turning around in the small Mt. Olivet church parking lot up ahead. Returning to the turnoff, she found the red Camry nosed into the low runoff ditch. Its wheels spun, the motor kept running.

Turning onto Owensville Road, Harry pulled as far as she could off to the side. Closing the door as the first raindrop fell, she ran to the Camry. A middle-aged woman was slumped over the wheel and did not respond to Harry's rapping on the window. Recognizing the driver, Barbara Leader, who had been in the class behind her at high school, Harry rapped louder. "Barbara!"

No response.

Fortunately, the door was not locked. Harry opened it, touched Barbara's shoulder. No response. She took her pulse. No pulse. Barbara's head dropped forward. Seeing the glassy eyes, Harry knew there was no hope.

Racing back to her truck, Harry climbed into the bed where she kept her tool box, yanked out two flares, and ran back, putting one on each side of the Camry to cover both directions of Garth Road. The flares burned about twenty yards from the beached automobile, giving passing motorists time to slow.

Harry ran back to her truck, hopped in as the rain increased, plucked her cell from the visor where she always tucked it and dialed her friend, her neighbor, and a deputy of the Sheriff's department, Cynthia Cooper.

"Coop. I'm at Garth and Owensville Roads. A car has gone off the road. The driver, Barbara Leader, is dead."

"Be right there."

“Is there any food in the dead lady’s car?” Pewter asked.

“Pewter!” The dog’s voice carried a reprimand. “Have some respect.”

“Why? There’s no point in it going to waste.” The gray cat was nothing if not practical.

Trees began to bend low; small branches flew out of them. The sky turned black with the now hard rain, and Harry could barely see ten feet ahead. She hoped passersby would see the flares and her flashers.

Fortunately, the sudden terrible weather proved a help, keeping more sensible drivers off the road. Within ten minutes, Harry heard the siren, then saw the flashing lights. Heedless of the weather, she jumped out from the driver’s seat, hurrying to the squad car.

“Harry, you’re soaked.”

“It’s warm,” Harry answered Coop, who wore her slicker.

The slender officer opened the Camry’s door, used her flashlight to glance around. She, too, felt for a pulse. Walking to the passenger side, she opened the door. From the glove compartment, she pulled out registration papers, then returned them.

Harry sighed. “Knew her from high school. She became a nurse. I mean, I didn’t know her well, but she was a class behind in school, popular. She was home-nursing Susan’s grandfather.”

Susan Tucker, Harry’s closest friend, also knew Barbara. Susan’s grandfather Samuel Holloway had been governor of Virginia in the early seventies. Diagnosed with leukemia, he’d ignored it and kept going, but finally the disease and his advanced age were taking their toll. Barbara was at the farm, Big Rawly, Monday through Friday. The nurse’s buoyant personality lifted everyone’s spirits.

“At least she died quickly.” Cooper exhaled. “I suppose that’s some consolation.”

Saddened to see a longtime acquaintance in such a state, Harry simply shrugged. Yes, a lingering death is painful to watch, but a sudden death, especially when the deceased is young, is a shock.

“I guess you’re never too young for a massive heart attack or stroke.” Cooper then ordered Harry, “You go on.”

“I’ll wait with you until the ambulance comes.”

“Go. I heard over the radio driving here that the winds will pick up. This is turning into some kind of storm. We’ll catch up later and you can give me what details you have.”

Back in the truck, Harry cut on the motor. The rumble always sounded glorious to her ears.

“No food?” Pewter pressed.

Harry reached over to pet the fat gray. She kept her flashers on, slowly driving down the road. It took her forever to reach St. Paul’s, where she turned right. Moving with care, she noticed cars pulled off to the side of the road, cowed by the inclement weather. Branches flew around, a few landing on the pavement and

forcing Harry to drive around them. By the time she reached her farm, she uttered a prayer of thanks. It felt like a miracle that she'd made it.

Cooper was right, this was some kind of storm. The rain dropped like a steel gray curtain, and the wind blew dangerous gusts of sixty miles an hour.

Rolling down her stone-covered farm road, she noticed trees that had fallen in the rain. She pulled the truck in front of the barn, ran in, and opened the outside stall doors, all of which opened onto paddocks. She could barely see the horses, huddled with their backs to the wind. She whistled and they happily trotted in, each horse entering his or her stall. Petting her friends as she moved from stall to stall, she closed those outside doors, then closed the big end doors, leaving them open a crack. It wouldn't be too smart in this situation to allow the interior of the barn to keep a higher pressure than the outside.

The wind screamed. Slipping back outside, she opened the truck door. The cats shot out, flying for the house, nearly colliding as they hit the animal door in the screened porch door.

Lifting out Tucker, Harry, too, bolted for the house. Tucker, even faster, ran ahead.

Once inside, she stripped off the wet clothes, dried herself with a fluffy towel, pulled on dry clothes. She left her soggy garments in the shower. She'd come back to wring them out and take them downstairs to the washer, but right now she was hungry and worried.

The lights flickered and went out. She put down food for the animals and tried calling her husband on the cell, as the power was out. She couldn't get through. Not that she was worried about her six-foot-five-inch husband. The equine veterinarian was equal to just about any task, but she wanted to hear his voice.

The windows rattled. Tucker looked worried.

The cats did, too.

Harry knelt down to pet everyone, in case the violence of the storm frightened them. "We've been through a lot together," she said consolingly.

"Yes, we have," Tucker agreed.

Mrs. Murphy rubbed against Harry's leg. "Indeed. We have been through a lot together."

"And most of it was your fault," Pewter firmly stated.

"Pewter, you are so full of it," Mrs. Murphy shot back.

"Buttface," Pewter grumbled.

"Your language has deteriorated," Tucker criticized her.

"You all drive me to it. On my own, I am perfectly well behaved." The gray cat said this, knowing it was a major fib no one within hearing distance would believe.

Standing up, Harry smiled. "What are you two chattering about?" A ferocious gust of wind diverted her

attention to the kitchen window. "I can't see a thing."

She opened the refrigerator door. Without its light, she knew where everything was and pulled out a piece of cheese and a Co-Cola. Sitting down, she shoved the cheese in her face, she was so hungry.

"I like cheese, too," Pewter announced.

Harry glanced down at the cat, who put on her best begging face, then looked up again as the windows rattled more. "I wonder if Barbara's ghost will haunt the curve where she went off the road."

"What?" Tucker asked.

Harry shook her head. "It's the Avenging Angel in that boneyard. Makes me think of ghosts. I don't know if I believe in ghosts, but people say animals can see them."

"I don't want to see one," Pewter replied. "If I see one, I'm going the other way."

"What if the ghost had tuna?" the dog said.

"Well, that's different," the fat gray cat responded.

"But wouldn't the tuna be ghost food?" Mrs. Murphy tormented Pewter.

"Fish aren't ghosts." Pewter declared this with authority.

"You don't know." Mrs. Murphy licked her front paw. "Maybe Moby-Dick is out there, scaring everybody."

"Really, why would anyone write a giant book about a pea-brained whale? If humans intend to write, they should write about cats." Pewter puffed out her cheeks. This was a sore spot for Pewter. She hated Melville's storytelling. When alone, Harry had been known to read to them from Moby-Dick.

Now, as the animals bantered back and forth, Harry thought about the tenuousness of life. She'd seen people die. It didn't upset or frighten her. But Barbara Leader wasn't old. Death arrives when He wishes, most generally unannounced. Harry said a prayer for Barbara Leader and then thought again about her spirit. A ghost would not haunt that spot. That was silly.

She said another prayer and then thought that was the end of it.

It wasn't, of course.

2

Tuesday, July 12, 2016

6:30 p.m.

Knowing most everyone in the area, Fair drove down the country roads and cleared debris along the way. Doing so, he also checked on the local horses in pastures and poked down driveways, usually finding the owner clearing mess from the storm. The miracle was no horses had been hurt at any place Fair checked.

Cell service fluctuated, meaning the weather fouled a lot of stuff. Whatever this storm was, it wasn't over. He just prayed the strong winds wouldn't return.

Fair finally drove down his own driveway at six-thirty p.m. Drenched, tired, hungry, he walked through the door, lights on, thanks to the generator, a five-thousand-dollar job worth every penny.

"Honey!" Harry turned from the stove to embrace him. "You look like the dogs got at you under the porch."

"I resent that," Tucker grumbled.

"If you got at anyone under the porch, only their ankles would be bleeding." Pewter smirked.

The dog curled her lip. "You could do better?"

"Better! I'd claw their eyes out. Then I'd attack from every direction. They'd be shredded like government documents." She puffed up.

"You could sit on them. That might break a few ribs." Tucker reached out a paw to tap her.

Pewter hissed. "Don't touch me. Don't you dare touch me!"

"Oh, shut up," said Mrs. Murphy. "I want to hear what Daddy has to say." She leapt onto the counter.

Harry was so relieved her husband was home. "Sit down. I've been waiting for you. Tried to call, but even cell service is out."

"I know." He wearily dropped his large frame onto a chair at the kitchen table.

"Snow peas. Rice and flank steak. Not French cooking but good for you, plus it's all I could find. Today is shopping day and I never made it." She placed the food in front of him, sitting down to eat, too.

The animals' bowls were full, so they didn't bother either of the humans, especially since Harry had sliced up some steak. Spoiled doesn't begin to cover it.

"How much damage did you see?" she asked.

He swallowed a big bite of snow peas, which he loved. "Roofs peeled off, especially the standing seam roofs. Just as though a can opener had cut open a side. But only narrow sections. I didn't see one structure without some roof damage. Large branches down. Loblolly pines are uprooted, and here's a strange thing, anytime I passed a creek, downed trees everywhere."

"The creeks must have acted like a wind tunnel," Harry wondered.

"I guess."

"If our cellphones start working again, we can find The Weather Channel."

"Power crews are everywhere. Gotta give it to the utility companies."

“Honey, what we give the utility companies is our money, lots of money.” Harry was tough about money and service.

She worked hard for a living, as did her husband, and she expected anyone with whom she did business to do the same. The problem with the utilities and cell servers, Internet stuff, was holding their feet to the fire if they slogged off. If sufficiently disgusted, she cut off the service. She'd been studying ways to generate her own power with old-fashioned farm windmills. A very exciting cube structure using wind was being developed in Akron, Ohio. Once engaged, she stuck to it, and none of her friends doubted she would be the first to generate her own power with the latest affordable technology. Solar panels sounded good, but days and occasionally a week might pass without sunlight, thanks to heavy cloud cover or fog. The surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains had their own weather system. Harry, being born to it, could feel the weather in her bones. Seeing the clouds when they piled up behind the nearby peaks gave her fair warning of a storm. She didn't know how fierce it would be, though.

## **Users Review**

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#### **Aaron Eldred:**

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