C is for Chocolate

There was a buzz of activity around the usually tranquil Happydale nursing home.

It was a beautiful morning in July when Emily Burrows parked her car in the leafy street outside, then made her way through the throngs of police and reporters gathering around the front lawn.

"Can't go in," said an officer blocking her entry.

"But my sister's here. I've come to visit," Emily objected.

"Name?" barked the cop.

"Emily Burrows."

The officer scanned his list. "Your sister?"

"Martha, Martha Burrows."

Just at that moment, Mrs. James, the home's manager came forward. She looked pale and tired. "Martha's in her room," she said ignoring the officer. "Go right on up. She'll be pleased to see you."

"What's going on?" said Emily as she entered her sister's room.

Martha was sitting up in bed and looked paler than usual.

"Have you brought my cigarettes?" she croaked.

Emily got out a packet and handed them to her elder sister. Martha took out a cigarette, lit it and inhaled deeply.

"Won't the nurses kill you if they find you smoking?" asked Emily.

Martha's frail hands began to shake.

"What is it Martha?" asked Emily

"Kill me for smoking?" Martha laughed nervously. "Maybe they will. That's why the police are here."

Remember Jessica Watts?"

Emily nodded. "The lady next door?" She'd met Jessica a few times. She was a sweet old dear. "How is she?"

"Dead. That's how she is. And what's more... murdered."

Emily gasped. "Murdered? But who would murder an old lady who, quite honestly, didn't have that long to live anyway?"

"Hey! Watch your language," squawked Martha. "She wasn't much older than you or I. She was barely eighty one."

"Are they sure she was murdered?" asked Emily.

"Oh yes," said Martha. "At first it looked like she'd died in her sleep, but the autopsy report came in yesterday. That's why all the police are here. She was poisoned."

"Do they know who did it?"

"Reno. Reno must have done it. He was with her last. It must have been him."

"Who's Reno?" asked Emily.

"One of the nurses. One of my nurses. Oh Emily, talk to the police. I don't feel safe here. Find out what happened. Tell them who you are. Find out who did it."

Just at that moment Emily spied a plate with two chocolates next to the bed.

"Really Martha, chocolates! You know you shouldn't with your digestion!"

"Oh those," Martha replied. "I don't eat them. You know I don't like chocolate." She waved her cigarette at Emily. "These are my only vice. Jessica gave me the chocolates. They were her
little wickedness. She was a regular alcoholic. You got to have at least one little indulgence at our age. Her daughter always brought her some liqueur filled trifles and Jessica always saved a few for me. I never had the heart to tell her I didn't like them. I always gave them to her dog when Jessica wasn't looking."

"Her dog!" exclaimed Emily.

Martha laughed. "I know, peculiar little thing, but he has a real taste for the stuff. I think he likes the alcohol in them."

Emily went straight down to the police. "Who's in charge here?" she demanded.

"Inspector McCoy," said the young officer in the hallway. "Hey! You can't go in there...."

Emily had already barged into the office.

"Well waddaya know? Emily Burrows!" exclaimed the Inspector on seeing his old boss. "What brings you here?"

"My sister actually. She's a resident here," said Emily as she pulled up a chair. "So what have we got so far?"

The Inspector sighed. He had learned a long time ago that it was best not to get on the bad side of Chief Inspector Emily Burrows. Not that he minded. She'd taught him everything he knew from the time he was just a young apprentice.

"Poison. Traces of arsenic in the blood and urine. By the sound of it, a build up in the system. So it's hard to pinpoint exactly when it was administered or by whom."

"Any suspects so far?" asked Emily.

"Difficult in a place like this," the Inspector floundered. "See, so many people are in and out, visitors, relatives, medical staff, domestic...." After all his years of experience, he suddenly felt like a young incompetent novice being questioned by the eagle eyed Emily.

"Not likely all of them will have had access to arsenic will they?" interrupted Emily sharply. "Let's find out who did."

The Inspector nodded.

"The other thing is," Emily continued, "with arsenic, someone could have been giving it to her for weeks, months even. It's unlikely they'd have put it all in one dose. She might have become suspicious."

"You're right," admitted the Inspector. "It can taste quite bitter can't it?"

"You don't mind if I have a sniff around then?" questioned Emily looking closely at him.

The Inspector held up his hands. "Not at all. In fact, I'd quite welcome it. I'll let my men know."

That evening Emily and the Inspector reconvened in the matron's office. Three people were invited in.

"This is purely routine," Emily reassured the group. "We're talking to everyone."

"But the police have already questioned us," said Trish Watts tearfully. "I've told them everything I know."

Emily felt for Jessica's daughter, a woman in her late thirties and heavily pregnant. She was taking her mother's death very badly.

"Just a few more minutes," Emily said gently. "Then you can go home."

"Tell me Trish, did you know your mother was thinking of changing her Will?"

Trish turned white. "She did mention it once. But then she never gave me money. I didn't expect her to leave me anything. All I cared about was that she was happy."

Emily then turned to an elderly man standing nervously by the door. "Mr. Woodrow, exactly what is
your position here at Happydale?"

"I'm... I'm the head gardener," he stuttered.

"And your relationship with Mrs. Watts was?"

The old man hung his head. "We were friends. She liked me to plant a window box for her in the spring. She loved poseys, to look at 'em on her window sill, seeing as she couldn't get out of bed."

"What did you do when you visited her?" asked Emily.

"Small talk, played some cards..."

"Did you ever bring her refreshments?"

The old man smiled. "Always the same. She had a real weakness for it. A sweet tooth. I'd take her up a special cup of hot chocolate. She was real partial to it."

"And did you visit her often?"

"Almost every day. She didn't have many visitors, ya see."

Emily watched Trish's reaction to this statement and noted she looked guilty.

"Is this true Trish?" she asked.

"I got here when I could," said Trish. "You can see it isn't easy for me." She burst into fresh tears. "Now she's gone and it's too late."

"Tell me Mr. Woodrow," said Emily turning back to the old gardener. "Is it true you keep arsenic in your shed?"

"Yes, of course I do," he blustered. "It's to kill off 'dem dandelions. They make an awful menace to my lawn."

"And does anyone else have access to your shed?" asked the Inspector.

"No, no just me. I keep the keys here on my belt so no one could have got in." Suddenly he sat up. "Hey, you're not saying I killed Mrs. Jessica are ya?"

"No no, of course not," soothed Emily. "Just asking a question." She could see it didn't calm him much.

Next she turned to a young man who had been sitting quietly throughout the interviewing.

"And you are?"

"Reno ma'am."

"And your position?"

"I'm a nurse here. I'm also in charge of the housekeepers. You know, see everything is ship shape and so on."

He had an open friendly face, handsome with masses of dark hair.

"And you tended Mrs. Watts daily?"

"I did."

"And did that include feeding her and arranging her meals?"

He nodded again. "And before you ask, I also had access to arsenic. In the summer we were plagued with rats in the pantry. As you can imagine, we can't let a thing like that continue in a place like this. Arsenic's the only thing gets rid of them. But I was very careful with it and where I left it."

Emily regarded him closely. She'd come across this before. A guilty suspect offering information before it was asked. It made them look good and eager to help. Innocent.

"And you also used to look after a Mrs. Daniels as well, didn't you?"

The young man's face suddenly clouded. "How did you know about her?" he asked.

"My job," said Emily. Even the Inspector was surprised. He hadn't had this information.

"She's the lady that died here last year," offered Emily. "It was in all the papers. There was a lot of trouble over the Will. It was contested. She was a rich old dame and left all her money and estate to Mr. Reno here."

"I never asked her to, honest. I, I..." Reno stammered. "It was as big a surprise to me as to her children. I swear!"

"Her children rarely visited?"
Reno shook his head. "She was so lonely."

"So tell me Reno, if she left you so much, why do you still work here? Surely you don't need to anymore?"

"I love my job ma'am. And I believe I'm good at it. What would I do all day if I didn't come in here?"

Suddenly Trish stood up. "Maybe you come in here because it was just too tempting. Everyone knows my mother was loaded. Maybe you were working the same scam with her. Wheedling your way in. Probably getting her to change her Will like you did with Mrs. Daniels. That's your real job... preying on lonely, vulnerable old ladies!"

"Never, I never," Reno looked genuinely upset. "I wish Mrs. Daniels had never left me that money. I don't prey on old ladies. They need me. I make them happy, which is more than you ever did. And your mother was a lovely old lady, if you'd only taken the trouble to find out. Oh she spoke to me about you. And your boyfriend. She never liked him. I know she was going to cut you off without a penny. She told me. Not as long as you were with him. But she wasn't going to leave anything to me. I never asked her to. Oh God, I hope she hasn't."

"Just one thing before we finish Reno, did you know about Mrs. Watts liking for chocolate?" asked Emily.

Reno nodded wearily.

"And did you supply her with it?" pressed Emily.

Again Reno nodded, "Chocolate cake, chocolate mousse, chocolate ice cream... she was crazy about anything chocolate."

Emily asked the three to wait outside and one by one they trooped out leaving Emily alone with the Inspector.

"So what do you think?" he asked.

"It's a clear case," said Emily mysteriously. "Before we started the interviews, I went back into Jessica's room and the evidence there quite clearly points to the true killer."

She opened the door and pointed directly at one of the suspects, "And that evidence clearly reveals that only you could be the murderer."

INSTRUCTIONS
FOR DETECTIVES:

1) Complete the two puzzles, one of which shows the scene before the crime and the other the aftermath.

2) Check the puzzles for clues and solve the mystery.

3) Hold the crime solution up to a mirror to read the answer to the mystery.