

THIS OLD HEART
Holly Jacobs

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Original Dedication:

This one is for all the police officers in my life—and for the men who can't tell a screwdriver from a ratchet. You all know who you are.

Dear Reader,

This was my first book for Kensington's Precious Gem line. I'd love to say we took the advance for it and did something wild and crazy, but in fact, we put a new roof on the house! I felt such a sense of accomplishment...we were living under my words!

Kensington's Precious Gem line was available only at WalMarts nationwide. Once they were gone, they were gone. That means this book has been difficult to find, and I was thrilled to give it a new life. I thought about updating it (I mean, I mentioned a quarter for a phone call...LOL), but I've opted not to. I'd like to think that my writing has matured over the last decade, but I hope the unbridled joy I had writing this book translates to you the reader.

Thank you in advance!

Holly Jacobs

You can find me online at www.HollyJacobs.com

This Old Heart

By Holly Jacobs

Chapter One

"Ma'am, you can't push the silent alarm because you don't like the looks of a man."

"He had shifty eyes," the elderly sales clerk whined. "And a woman on her own can't be too careful."

"Ma'am," the officer said with far more patience than he was feeling. "The gentleman in question is eighty-two and used a walker. I really don't believe he presented any danger to you, or the property."

"Hmph."

Tom Lewis silently counted to ten. "Ma'am, if you have another suspicious character lurking around the shop, it would be better if you called this number." He handed her a card. "They'll send someone around. The silent alarm is only for true emergencies."

"But I tell you..."

Tom's radio squawked. "I'm sorry Ma'am, I have another call." He stuffed his notebook into his pocket and raced through the door before he was forced to endure anymore of Edna Panance's complaints.

His partner, Perry Bauer, was sitting in the driver's seat laughing.

"You could have helped me out," Tom complained. He got into the passenger seat and slammed the door.

"Could have, but didn't," Perry said. "And you know very well that you would have avoided Edna's complaints too if you had a chance."

Perry was right. Edna hit her silent alarm button at least once a month. They'd flipped to see who went in this time. "One of these days it might be for real," Tom said, trying to make himself feel better.

"Yeah, you know how many medical supply stores get hit nationwide in any given month." Perry laughed.

As they drove down one of Berkley, Pennsylvania's side streets a group of teens broke up and moved away. Tom sighed. "Do you ever wonder why we do this?"

Perry thought a minute. "The glamour or maybe the fantastic salary?" He rubbed his hand over the short dark stubble that covered his head.

Tom shook his head. His hair was a little longer than Perry's but shades lighter. "I've been thinking that I need some time away. I'm thinking about buying a little cottage out by Tanglewood Lake. I looked at it last week and think I can swing it."

"How can you afford it?"

"Well..." Tom hesitated. "I don't have a family like you do, so I've got a little set aside." Very little, but enough. "The cottage needs a little work," he broadly hinted. The fact it needed work was why it was within Tom's budget.

"Shelly will kill me if I volunteer to help anyone else with another project. She's still waiting for me to finish off the attic bedroom for the girls."

"I wasn't asking," Tom assured him. "I thought I'd just work my days off. And I

have those two weeks off next month. I figure, by the end of the summer it should be done."

"Ah, Tom?" Perry looked worried.

"What?"

"You remember what happened when you tried to build that CD rack?" That had been Tom's first project in Perry's well equipped basement shop.

An image flashed through Tom's mind, a shelf that would never hold any CD's. It had been warped and blood-splattered. He quickly cut off the thought. "Come on, Perry. That was two years ago. I've done some reading since then and I'm sure..."

"One oh two prepare to copy," Shirley from dispatch crackled over the radio.

Tom keyed the mic. "Two go ahead."

"Two, go to five seven seven Parker Street and see a Mr. MacKenzie in regards to children making too much noise on the playground across the street."

"Another day on the mean streets of Berkley, PA," Tom sighed as Perry turned the car around.

He was going to buy the cottage. He couldn't wait to get started. It would be a chance to do something different. Something safe. Something fun. Yeah, he was going to have a blast.

Three weeks later Tom said, "Ah, Perry?"

Perry looked up from the paper. "Hm?"

Tom cleared his throat and toyed with his spoon, beating an uneven rhythm against the side of his coffee cup. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"What happened?"

Tom took a sip of the scalding sludge that Perry called coffee. "I... Well, I had a little problem at the cottage yesterday."

"Little?"

"Well, I started to gut the inside and I think I..." He took another gulp and burned the inside his mouth. He sucked in some cool air, trying to clear the burning sensation from his tongue. "I think I might have knocked down something I shouldn't have."

"What do you mean?" Perry folded the paper and gave Tom his entire attention, making Tom even more nervous.

"I was trying to open up the downstairs, you know no walls or anything cutting it up. They call it a great room in the magazines. Anyway, I decided to make the kitchen area and living room one room and now... Well, everything seems to be sagging."

Perry tossed the paper onto the table and started a low chuckle. The chuckle grew into a loud guffaw. "You knocked down the support wall?"

"Well, I'm not sure, but maybe. It was sort of in the center of the house."

"I think you need more help than I can offer."

"Come on, I thought we'd just put the thing back up and... I bought a case of beer." Tom knew that Perry had a hard time saying no to a cold beer, or a warm beer, or... Well, he never said no.

"You're way out of your league here and I know I'd be way out of mine. You don't want to mess with it anymore—you need a professional."

"Come on, I can't afford a professional." Working as a police officer might be

considered a high risk occupation, but the salary certainly didn't reflect. Most of the guys with families worked extra jobs to supplement their income.

"Listen, you're going to spend more on mistakes than you'd pay to have the whole place redone by someone who knows what they're doing."

"I wanted to do the work myself, that was the whole idea behind buying it. Something different than riding around in a car all day with you."

Perry didn't look insulted. "I'm sure there are parts of the project you can do, but at least talk to someone, let them handle the big stuff."

"Like support walls?" Tom asked.

"Like support walls. Listen, call Henley's. They're over there in Shannon, by the lake. They did some work for my father last year and have a great reputation. Ask for BJ."

"You're sure you don't want to..."

"You're not married, so you can't understand. Shelly will kill me." Shelly Bauer was five foot nothing and possibly weighed a hundred pounds—soaking wet—but she ruled Perry with an iron fist and silver kisses.

"Fine." Tom would have to be satisfied with professional help. "Henley's?"

"It's in the book. And make sure you ask for BJ."

Tom finished his coffee. He'd have to make the call tonight. Things seemed to be sagging pretty bad when he'd left yesterday. He'd done his best to shore things up, but...

He'd call tonight.

He'd let this BJ Henley offer advice and do the more difficult jobs, but he was going to be in charge. He knew just what he wanted this place to look like when it was done and he was going to see that it happened.

"BJ, I've been telling you since you were knee high not to slam the front door. One of these days you're going to shatter the glass and, let me tell you, I won't be the one paying for new." George Henley fluffed himself up to his full five foot nine inch height and sucked in his ever expanding girth.

"See this?" he asked, pointing to his head. "You've scared most of them away, and what little's left has quite lost its color." He raked his hand through the sparse thatch.

"Hi to you too, Pop." BJ walked past him and poured a cup of George's thick brew. "Ah, now that's coffee. I stopped at Johnson's for breakfast and what they call coffee, I call colored water."

"You got time for another job?" George asked as he sat back down, releasing his pot belly once again.

"Big or small?"

"Could work out to be big, though the guy claims it's a small matter of shoring up a sagging ceiling." They both laughed. Over the years they'd seen a lot of small projects turn into major jobs.

"You don't want it?" she asked. "Kyle's taking a class this summer, so he can only work mornings. I'm kind of underscheduled to compensate."

Kyle and a few others, worked part time for Henley's. BJ and George had discovered over the years it was best if they both worked on individual projects. Their need to take control of a job led to too many kings and not enough subjects. They'd learned to go their own ways.

"I promised Mrs. Campbell that I'd take care of her patio."

"Okay, I guess I can take a look at that sag, but if it turns into something major, I don't guarantee anything."

George thrust a sheet of paper across the counter. "Thought you might be willing. Told him you'd meet him there this afternoon at three."

"Awfully sure of yourself, old man?"

George chuckled. "I know you've had your eye on a new truck—figured you take whatever you could lay your hands on until it's paid for."

It was BJ's turn to chuckle. "Well, I'm going out to Zimmerman's this morning." Spring was a great time for anyone who worked in the home repair business.

"Three o'clock," George called. "And don't slam the..."

BJ didn't need to hear it to know he'd said, "Door."

"Hello?" It was three o'clock on the nose when BJ arrived at the address George had thrust across the counter earlier that morning. "Hello?"

"Over here," came a muffled voice.

"Where?"

"Here." The voice was coming from behind one of the big bushes that bordered the porch of the small cottage. The small, cape cod was in a beautiful spot, down a bluff and bordering the lake, practically hidden from the road. Just from looking at the outside, BJ could already spot half a dozen jobs. But with work and the proper care it would be a beautiful place.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying all the windows to see if one's unlocked," came the muffled voice.

"You lost the key to the door?" BJ felt odd talking to the bush, but was unable to see the man behind its dense foliage.

"No. The door won't open. I think it has something to do with the little problem I had the other day. I could kick it in—it wouldn't be the first door I've broken down—but since this one is mine and I'd have to pay to replace it, I'd rather try the windows."

A tall, thick body that apparently was attached to the voice, came out from behind the bush. His brown hair was cut in a short, military style. "It was locked," he said, annoyance lighting his dark eyes.

"Sorry," BJ said, for lack of anything better to say. "Have you tried them all?"

"There's still two in the back." He held out a hand, "Tom Lewis."

"Bobbi Jo Henley." She went to take his extended hand, but it dropped to his side.

"You're BJ? I mean you can't be... No one said anything about your being a..." Tom sputtered.

"A girl?" Bobbi filled in for him. The poor man looked flustered. "You didn't know?"

"Of course I didn't know. I mean, I have some problems here, big problems. More than a girl could..."

Bobbi held up a hand. "Seems to me this might be the place for you to stop before you end up with both feet in your mouth instead of the one you're already chewing on. Let's start over."

Bobbi thrust out her hand again. "Hi. I'm BJ Henley, Bobbi Jo to my friends, just

plain Bobbi if you prefer. I've worked my father professionally for the last ten years, before that I worked as grunt labor all through school."

"Listen, honey, that's fine, but I think I'm going to need a man for this job. Thanks for coming out, but I think I'll make some calls."

"I teathed on Pop's tools and can tell the size of a socket just by looking. And I know the difference between hammering and screwing." She glared at him. "You just make your calls, but make sure you pay the bill I send. I'm not in the habit of wasting my afternoon and someone's going to pay. Looks like that's you." She turned and began walking to the front where she'd left the truck.

"Listen, it's nothing personal, but this is not a job for a..." Tom called.

Bobbi whirled around. "I'm not afraid of breaking a nail, getting a boo boo or whatever other snide remarks you might feel the need to make. My understanding is that you are looking for someone with building experience to help you do some work around here. Well, whatever I can't do, I know someone who can. So, shall we find a way in and take a look, or should I get back in my truck?"

Bobbi had put up with men like Tom all her life. She couldn't understand why they seemed to think only brawn could get the job done. Most of the problems she'd faced needed more brain than physical strength.

"Let's go check those back windows," Tom said. He sighed and stomped around to the back of the property.

BJ followed him. She was used to it. All the snide remarks, all the sly looks, the off colored comments. Being used to being treated like she didn't know anything, didn't mean she liked it.

"Just what happened here?" she asked as Tom started pushing on one of the back windows.

She saw his back stiffen. "I think I might have damaged the support wall."

"How?"

"I, well, I kind of knocked it down." He didn't look at her, but concentrated on raising the window instead.

"What kind of fool would knock down a support?"

"Well, I didn't know it was supporting anything when I knocked it down. I mean it just looked like a regular wall. I want to open up the downstairs and it seemed like the thing to do."

"Save us from home improvement wanna-be's," BJ muttered.

The window Tom was pushing against opened. "Here we go," he said, his voice triumphant.

"Boost me in and I'll see what's going on in here." BJ was already moving toward the window.

"No, it's okay. I don't want you to get hurt. I'll go in and see if I can find a way..."

Bobbi looked up and down Tom's thick physique. To say he had dark brown hair and equally dark eyes, would have been a huge understatement. It sounded far too ordinary and Tom looked far from ordinary. Bobbi swallowed hard, forcing herself back to the problem at hand—five foot five and wiry was a big asset sometimes. "I know that for some things in this business my lack of bulk is a liability, but for something like this it's an asset. Now, just give me a hand."

She turned and stood facing the window, waiting. When no helping boost came, she turned and glared at the big man, her blue eyes flashing her annoyance at him. "What are you waiting for?"

"I'm not quite sure where to... Where to put my..."

"Just grab my waist and heave," she said. Her father was going to pay for this. George delighted in sending BJ out on jobs and surprising unsuspecting new customers.

"Oh," Bobbi suddenly screamed as she found her inner musings interrupted by her abrupt change in altitude. She found herself hurtling through the window. Grabbing for some hold, she managed to shimmy through the opening into the actual cottage.

She turned and glared at the man outside the window. "Next time you need to remember it's not a race."

"Just go look at the room and tell me what you think."

Bobbi looked through the room, noting the exposed wiring here, the rotted floor boards there and... What the hell had he done?

The remains of the load bearing support wall lay strewn about her feet. In its place Tom had nailed together a couple two by fours and used them to prop the sagging ceiling. The wood was bowed and looked like it was going to pop its seam any minute. No way was Bobbi going to check the upstairs.

She walked back to the window and shook her head, the short locks of ash blonde hair flying into her eyes. She brushed them aside. "You certainly did a number here," she muttered as she leaned through the window and began to crawl back out.

Two strong hands grabbed her under her arms and pulled her through the window. "I wish you wouldn't do that," she muttered.

"What do you think?" Tom asked, ignoring her complaint.

"I think I'd better head right back to the shop and pick up a jack for starters. You can't open the door because the entire center section of the house is in danger of collapsing. Then, I think we're going to jack up your sagging cottage and discuss what you want done."

"All I want is the ceiling back where it belongs. I'm planning to do the work myself."

Bobbi snorted, laughing as if he'd just told her some fantastic joke, but one look at his face assured her he wasn't kidding. "Ah, okay, maybe we can discuss just what jobs you think you can handle and what ones you want me to..."

"I'm not sure I want you handling any of them."

Bobbi smiled, clenching her teeth to keep from screaming. "Fine. But I will offer you one bit of advice before I leave, get a jack to hold that ceiling in place while you decide who you do want to repair it or there won't be a cottage left to renovate."

"Where do I get a jack around here?" Tom asked. He didn't look like he was taking her advice seriously. Bobbi shrugged, she was used to that too.

Trying to maintain her professional facade, Bobbi said, with all the grace she could muster. "We could rent you one at the store, or you can drive back into Berkley, was it? Anyway, in a city that size, I'm sure you can rent one."

"Then what?"

She grinned a not so pleasant grin. "That was your freebie, Mr. Lewis. Any other questions will cost you."

He shook his head. "Never mind, I'm sure I can figure it out."

"Wish I was," Bobbi muttered as she walked back to the truck. She took one more look at the cottage and in her mind's eye she could see its potential. With some work it could be a picture perfect place. Glancing at Tom Lewis standing, staring after her, she shook her head. If he was going to do the work himself, the poor cottage would be lucky to be standing at the end of the week.

She threw open the door of cab, just as Tom suddenly burst into laughter.

Bobbi felt her face flush. He was laughing at her. The jerk ripped down walls that supported the house and left it in danger of collapsing, and he laughed at her?

She didn't care, she assured herself. She knew she wasn't the most feminine woman in the world, but she knew just about everything there was to know about building. She'd worked at just every job possible. Let him laugh now, because in the end she'd have the last laugh—Tom Lewis doing the work himself was a great big joke.

Not sure if she was more disgusted with Tom for doubting her abilities, or for herself for caring that he did, Bobbi threw the car into reverse and backed out of the driveway.

"Well, that was a good one," Tom said to Perry over his cup of coffee. They were cruising through some of Berkley's hot spots.

"What was a good one?" Perry asked, glancing over at the passenger seat.

"You know. BJ Henley being a girl."

"Dad said she was cute, figured I was doing you a favor. She took the job?"

Tom laughed. "Yeah, right. Like I'd be stupid enough to actually hire your little gag girl to fix the cottage. Took me a while to figure it out, but I had a good laugh over it. Where'd you find her anyway? She was a bit higher class than most of your jokes."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Perry pulled the cruiser to the side of the street and threw it into park.

Tom just looked at Perry. Surely his partner didn't think he was that gullible? "I'm talking about BJ Henley. She was one of your better jokes, but it didn't work. BJ didn't look butch enough for construction. Oh, not that she intentionally messed up. I mean she didn't have any make-up on, or jewelry or anything. But she was just too feminine to play the role."

"You think suggesting BJ Henley give you a hand with the cottage was a set-up?"

Tom just smiled. Perry was forever pulling pranks on him, though Tom managed to get in his share too. Sometimes they actually ganged up on some unsuspecting member of the force. The other guys dreaded that. But mostly, they took turns getting each other.

Just last week Perry had fallen asleep in the passenger seat of the cruiser. It was late, and when things were quiet it was easy enough to do. Tom saw his opportunity and grabbed it. Pulling up about five feet from a brick wall, he turned on his high beams and stopped. Then he punched the accelerator and threw on the break so the car jerked. Then he'd screamed.

It worked beautifully. Perry woke up, headlights shining on brick, Tom screaming in the driver's seat, his hands thrown over his face, and the car jerking to a halt. Perry had done the only thing he could—he'd screamed too. Tom chuckled just thinking about it.

"I don't just think it was a set-up, I know it was. But not nearly as good as the

brick wall. I mean, a woman like Bobbi in construction?" Tom snorted and shook his head. "Not likely."

Perry scowled over the thought of the wall. "What do you mean, like Bobbi?"

"Gorgeous. No matter how hard she tried to hide it, you can tell she's a beautiful woman. Oh, I played along. Let her take a look, but she didn't get me." Tom gave his friend an evil look. "Or rather you didn't get me."

"You're right, I didn't."

Tom felt rather smug. Perry tried hard, but rarely took Tom in with his practical jokes.

Perry looked at him and began to laugh. "You're absolutely right, I didn't get you—didn't even try. So, maybe that means I did." He howled.

"What's so funny?" Tom asked, annoyed that Perry seemed to be enjoying his defeat.

"Bobbi was legit."

Tom shook his head. "No way. She's too small, too petite to build. I mean she couldn't haul all that equipment and..."

Perry laughed even harder.

"Could she?"

"You should see her go at it sometime. I watched her one day when she was working at Dad's—that's why I recommended her, even though I've never formally met her. She puts me to shame and I'm pretty handy with my tools."

"That's not what Shelly says," Tom muttered.

"Hey, hey, don't mess with Shelly because you're mad I got you."

"You didn't," Tom growled.

"That's my point, I didn't set anything up, but I got you anyway. You know what that means?"

"You're an asshole?" Tom asked.

Perry just chuckled. "No, it means I am the master! I can get you without even trying."

"Oh, hell," Tom swore.

"What?"

"If she was legit, then her advice was too."

"What advice did she give that you didn't follow?"

"Something about a jack for that support wall I tore down."

Perry groaned. "You just left it?"

"Well I nailed a couple two by fours together and braced it with them. I'm not a complete fool."

"I might consider arguing that right now, but I won't. Maybe it's time to drop the chauvinist attitude and realize it's the nineties. Call her."

"I'm not calling her." He was not about to eat crow and see that short little woman in her tight jeans, jeans that showed off her...assets so wonderfully. Tom pulled his mind away from Bobbi's assets. He wasn't calling her.

"By the time our shift is over and you get out there you might not have a ceiling, much less a roof. Call her."

"I can take care of it."

Perry reached over and patted Tom's shoulder, as if he was a kid. "Tom, I'm your

friend and as a friend I have to tell you something . . . you don't know anything about building, much less the kind of repairs this cottage is going to need. BJ's one of the best." He chuckled again. "Call her."

"Give me a damn quarter," Tom said, no humor in his voice.

"BJ?"

Bobbi hit pause on the business answering machine. "Yeah Dad?"

"That guy with the cottage on the lake called." George smiled, the kind of smile that made Bobbi very nervous.

"Tom Lewis." Bobbi shuddered. The thought of what kind of mischief Tom could get into on his own scared her more than her father's smile. "What did he want?"

"Asked if you'd take the jack out, said you'd know how to get in and what needed done."

It was her turn to smile. Tom Lewis was admitting defeat. Bobbi was woman enough to enjoy the sensation. "Looks like you're cooking tonight, Pop."

George shook his bare head. "I've got a date."

Bobbi froze. "A date?" Her mother had died when Bobbi was little more than an infant. For as long as she could remember it had always been just her and George. He'd never dated, she didn't think he was interested in woman, not that she thought he was interested in men. He was her dad for Pete's sake. He didn't date.

George Henley was a big man. Except for the small pot belly, George still had a physique most men would envy. Maybe they wouldn't envy his balding head, but years of working outside, hauling heavy equipment around had kept his body youthful.

"A date?" she asked again, beginning to suspect she heard him wrong.

George blushed. "Ah... Yes. I was working on Mrs. Campbell's place this afternoon and she told me she had a pair of tickets to some shin-dig in town and wondered if I wanted to go."

Bobbi just looked at him.

"I said yes."

It was Bobbi's turn to feel embarrassed. "Well, don't be out too late," she teased, trying to hide her confusion.

George laughed. "Get out of here and go take care of that poor man's house. Was it as bad as all that?"

"He knocked down the support wall and told me he's planning to do the renovations himself. I get the feeling he doesn't know much about renovating or tools in general."

"Won't be the first time you worked with a novice."

"Would it be wicked if I prayed it was the last?" She headed out to the storage shed for the jack and worried about how much damage had been done since she left Tom last night.

God save them from toolman-wanna-bes.