

BEST LEFT BURIED

A DARCY & FLORA COZY MYSTERY

BLANCHE DAY MANOS
& BARBARA BURGESS



Pen-L Publishing
Fayetteville, AR
Pen-L.com

Best Left Buried

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ISBN: 978-1-942428-97-8

First Edition

Cover design by Kelsey Rice

Dedication

My granddaughter, Sara Manos, came up with an appropriate title for this third book in the Darcy and Flora series. Best Left Buried is dedicated to her and to my grandson, Nathan Manos, both of them inspirations extraordinaire!

Acknowledgements

A researching author asks lots of questions and because of the answers, I believe *Best Left Buried* has a ring of authenticity. Thanks to my son, Matt Manos, my brothers, Richard and Tracy Day, my critique group, Jane Barron, Peg Bossard, Nancy Grace, Helen Hoover, and Lola Ward. Also, thank you to Judy Lewis, a great proof-reader!

Chapter 1

“What on earth were you talking about, Cub?” I asked the big red-faced man who jumped off the seat of his dirt mover. “What did you mean ‘there’s something in the well’?”

The cold January wind did its best to blow my parka’s hood off my head. Shivering, I burrowed my hands deeper into the coat’s pockets. Back in my mother’s warm kitchen, my second cup of coffee was cooling so I had not had my usual quota of caffeine to jump-start the day. Cub had better have a good reason for calling me out here among the wilds of Ventris County on such a miserable morning. He had sounded urgent when he called but I could see no sign of an impending catastrophe.

“Darcy, get out here quick. I want you to look at something I found,” he had said on the phone and then hung up before I could ask questions.

Now as I gazed at the wintry scene, I certainly didn’t see anything to be excited about. Cold and lonely, yes, but nothing was unusual. In spring and summer, this was a lovely, green area but with the cottonwood and sycamore trees standing bare and white, the ancient graveyard visible in the distance, and the wind moaning among the cedars, the scene was cold and more than a little lonely.

Cub pointed at an irregular hole in the ground. “Take a gander down there, Darcy. I can’t see right well but there’s a package or a box or something and it’s lodged on a rock jutting out on the side. And don’t look so mean. You know I wouldn’t have called you out here for just nothin’ at all.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. Cub was well-known throughout my hometown of Levi as the best heavy equipment operator in two counties but he also had a reputation for being excitable and the world’s worst gossip. For example, when he was digging the water line for the new court house last year, He uncovered some bones and before notifying the sheriff, he called the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation and told them he had uncovered a body. His find turned out to be the bones of a cow which had probably died when the area was farmland.

“That hole in the ground is an old dug well,” I said. “It hasn’t been used since my grandparents lived here. Why did you move the covering off it anyway?”

Cub’s face took on a redder hue and he shrugged. “Your mom told me to cover it over with concrete and I will but I shore hate to do that. You know, there might still be right good water in it and I’ve always had a healthy respect for pure, clean water. It’s mighty scarce in this day and time. Doesn’t Miz Flora know that? So I used my grader to scoot that big rock away then I shone my flashlight down there. I saw water at the bottom, sure enough. But something else is in there. I don’t have no way of gettin’ it out so I wanted you to come and see if we could get it out together.”

I shook my head. What did he see and what did he only imagine? My stomach rumbled. I was hungry, I was cold, and I was fast losing my patience with this man.

“Cub, that old well was dug by hand a long time ago. Maybe you see a tin can of Prince Albert tobacco the person who dug the well lost. I guess looking down in that hole in the ground didn’t have anything to do with those old tales about bank robbers’ loot or hiding places for money?”

He must have caught the sarcasm in my tone because he dropped his gaze and scuffed the ground with the toe of his work boot. "Oh, well, maybe," he mumbled.

"Didn't you try to get it out before you called me?" I prodded.

"I did, I admit it. It's just out of my reach though. I thought maybe I could hold onto you and you could lower yourself down into the well and bring that package or sack or whatever it is, up."

"What? I hope I've got better sense than that, Cub Dabbins."

"Now don't get excited, Darcy. You know I'd hold onto your feet good and tight. Sure wouldn't want nothin' to happen to you."

"And you certainly wouldn't want something to happen to whatever's in there," I said. "OK. You're not going to be satisfied 'til I take a look. Let me have the flashlight, Cub."

I grabbed his MagLite, lay down on the rocky ground on my stomach and peered into the dark opening. The inside of that well hadn't seen the light of day for decades and everyone knows old hand-dug wells are dangerous. The rim can cave in. I, Darcy Campbell, investigative reporter, must have taken leave of my senses. Here I was, lying on my stomach on the cold, hard earth, trying to see something that had disturbed the mental well-being of an imaginative and well-known snoop.

Cub was right. The flashlight's beam glinted on an object about eight feet down. It was caught on a ledge or a rock in the rough dirt wall.

Without warning, hands grabbed my ankles and pushed. I kicked and squirmed but Cub kept shoving me forward. As my prone body inched toward the well, small rocks fell over the edge in front of me. I heard them splash in the water.

"Stop it, Cub!" I yelled. "What are you doing?"

Cub grunted and kept forcing me forward until my upper body dangled head down in the darkness of the well. The only thing keeping me from plunging into a watery grave were two rough hands around my ankles. Blood hammered in my ears.

As if from a distance, I heard Cub's voice. "Don't worry. I'm hangin' onto you, Darcy. Just reach down there and see if you can grab it."

I coughed and gulped a lungful of stale air. "Pull me back up, you idiot! You'll drop me!"

"No, I won't, Darcy. Can you reach it?"

Both my hands flailed the air, not because I was trying to reach the object lodged on a ledge but because I was trying to find something to brace against so I could push myself back into the light of day. My head felt as though it would burst. The smell of damp earth filled my nostrils and sticky spider webs clung to my face.

Once again, Cub called, "Come on, Darcy, try! Can you reach it yet?"

"Get me out of here. Now, Cub!" My voice sounded hollow and echoed in the depths below me.

"Oh, all right," Cub growled. He tugged me backward, dragging me over the rocks until I was in the open air again. Shaking with fear and anger, I scrambled to my feet. The dingy gray morning had never looked so good. I clawed at the spider webs clogging my nose, mouth and eyes. When I could see again, I lunged toward Cub, swinging at him with his flashlight.

"Of all the dumb, stupid..." I choked.

For a big man, he moved quickly. "Now, calm down, Darcy. You're out, aren't you?"

Cub backed away as I advanced. "You are undoubtedly the craziest, most ignorant..." I said between clenched teeth.

Cub held up his hands, palms out. "Well, it was worth a try, Darcy. We've just got to get that thing outa that well. Now I'm sorry I scared you but I knew you wouldn't lean over that far on your own."

It took several seconds of deep breathing to slow my racing pulse. "Nobody in his right mind would. I should bring charges of attempted murder! I should fire you on the spot!" I spat out more spider webs.

"Hey! Miz Flora hired me to dig the foundation for that new house of you all's and I reckon she's the only one that can fire me. Call your mom, Darcy. Tell her to bring a rope. I don't have one in my truck. I've got a wide-mouthed bucket and I figure we can tie a rope onto the bail of the bucket and maybe lever that can or package or whatever into it."

Cub dropped his eyes as I glared at him. I knew that he would not give up on getting whatever it was out of the well. If I went back to town, he'd probably think of some way to maneuver the object onto the surface and I might never find out what he had found. He was not above keeping it unless it happened to be completely worthless. Whatever it was, old tin can or a cache of diamonds, it was on our land, my mom's and my land that had belonged to Granny Grace, and it was mine, not Cub Dabbins'.

I pivoted and stalked toward my red Ford Escape. "All right, Cub. I'll phone Mom to bring a rope. I'm going to wait in the car," I said between clenched teeth.

"I've got a thermos of coffee in my truck, Darcy. Want some to sort of warm up?"

I ignored him and climbed into my SUV. My hand shook as I dialed Mom's home phone from my cell. She picked up on the second ring.

"I've been going over these house plans again, Darcy," she said. "I've thought of several changes and can't wait to see whether you agree. I've also been looking at the notes I made about the school."

Her calm voice had a soothing effect on my jangled nerves. That school for boys was one of Mom's dreams. Plans for the school as well as the new house were spread over her dining table. She and I had been stirring pancake batter and talking about the type of shingles for the roof of the new house this morning before Cub's phone call postponed our breakfast. When a house once again sat out here on my grandparents' old farm, filled with family (actually, just our cat Jethro, my mother and me), the loneliness of Granny Grace's acres would surely disappear.

"Your school will probably be finished before the house, Mom, because I just might kill the heavy equipment operator." I said.

"Darcy! What do you mean? Cub Dabbins? Why? What happened?"

I drew a deep breath. No use upsetting her too. She probably *would* fire Cub, that is, after she had given him a piece of her mind, or had him arrested and I didn't know who else we could hire for excavation work on the house.

"Nothing, Mom. You know Cub. He is stubborn and insists on doing things his way. I'm glad you are making headway on plans for building."

Ben Ventris, an old friend of my mother's had named her in his will as his sole heir. She was in the process of changing Ben's farm she had inherited into a live-in school for homeless boys. She even had the name picked out, "Ben's Boys."

"Yes, they are beginning to take shape in my mind, Darcy, the house and the school too. I'm anxious for you to see what you think about them. But what about Cub?"

"Cub is all excited about something he sees in that old dug well," I told her. "He needs a rope to try and get the thing out."

"What kind of thing?" Mom asked.

“Hard to say. Using a flashlight, I can see a whitish-looking oblong something. It’s probably nothing but Cub is in a dither and we won’t have any peace at all until it’s out of the well.”

“Cub always did get excited over nothing,” she said, “but I’ll bring the rope. I suppose I’ll have to.”

“What is that sound?” I asked, hearing some sort of rustling come across the line.

“Jethro! That cat thinks all these papers on the table are his playthings. Get back, Jethro.”

“Good luck, Mom,” I said. “He does have a few bad habits.”

“He’s worth the trouble.” Mom sighed as I heard more sounds. “I guess.”

When the yellow and white tomcat appeared on our doorstep a few weeks ago, badly needing care and attention, we welcomed him in. Isn’t it good luck when cats decide to favor someone with their presence?

“See you soon,” I said. Then I snapped my cell phone shut, turned on the radio to my favorite Easy Listenin’ station, leaned against the seat’s headrest and closed my eyes.

The old love song, *Fascination*, lulled me to sleep. I dreamed that I was once again in the kitchen of my house in Dallas. The sadness that had haunted me since my husband Jake’s death evaporated and I felt happy. The dream seemed real. Jake’s arms slid around me as he walked up behind me and peered over my shoulder.

“What are you stirring up this time, Darcy?” he asked, his breath warm in my ear.

“Your favorite brownies,” I said, smiling. “What are you doing today?”

“I’m going out to blow those leaves off the lawn,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you I love you, Darcy.”

“Love you too, Jake,” I murmured.

But when I turned around to kiss him, it was not Jake with his arms around me, it was Grant Hendley, sheriff of Ventris County. I felt no shock nor surprise, only comfortably warm to be in Grant’s arms.

The noise of the leaf blower became the sound of my mother’s car as I awoke. Reality as cold as the January day replaced the dream as I realized anew that Jake was gone forever. As for Grant Hendley, well, he might be a part of the past too. But why were the two men, Jake and Grant, the same in my dream?

Mom sprang from her car, a small woman, her short gray hair in loose curls around her face. She moved and spoke like a person who was much younger than her nearly seven decades on this earth. Though my hair was dark and I wore it longer than Mom wore hers, our Cherokee heritage was clearly evident in our shared high cheekbones. As I aged, I suspected I would resemble her even more. I slid out of the Escape.

“Just what are you in such a tizzy about, Cub?” Mom asked as she winked at me. We were both well aware that some people in Ventris County still hunted for the money outlaws had hidden in our area in the 1930s. Cub was one of those people.

“Over here, Miss Flora. There’s something stuck down in that old well,” Cub said, pointing.

“Cub Dabbins! Why did you uncover the well? Nobody has used it for a long time. When Darcy and I move out here to live, we’ll use the drilled well over there.” She pointed to a pipe sticking up out of the ground. “I told you to cement that well up, not move off the rock that covered it. What if a person or cats and dogs fell in?” Mom stomped over to the opening, hands on hips, and looked first at it then at Cub.

“He had to take a look inside, Mom,” I said. “You know how he values fresh pure water and...”

“He does?” I giggled at Mom’s look of amazement.

“Well, he says he does but actually I think he wanted to be sure he wasn’t sealing up gold or diamonds or rubies or, who knows? The treasure of the Lost Dutchman’s Mine.”

Cub snorted. “I know that the Lost Dutchman is out in Arizona, Darcy! Actually, Miss Flora, there’s a box or something lodged on a rock in there and I think we oughta find out what it is before we cover it up forever.”

She handed the coil of rope to Cub. “Go to it,” she said.

Cub took the rope, tied one end around the bail of the bucket he had taken from his truck and started giving instructions.

“OK now Darcy, you hold the flashlight and shine it right on that thing and I’ll take this big ole long limb and see if I can scrape it off the ledge into the bucket.”

Cub knelt down beside the well.

I nudged him with my foot. “If you try any funny stuff again, Cub Dabbins, I swear I’m going to push you in there head first. So don’t get any ideas.”

“What funny stuff?” Mom asked.

Cub looked up, an innocent smile on his face. “Aw, nothin’, Miss Flora. OK, Darcy, shine that MagLite down in this hole.”

I squatted as close to the edge as I dared and beamed the flashlight into the depths of the well. Cub carefully lowered the bucket. It would serve him right if he knocked the object off its resting place and it fell into the water. I had a mental picture of Cub diving in after it.

“Shucks!” he said. “I can’t hold the bucket still. It keeps swingin’. I need two hands on this rope.”

“How about if I drive the Escape up to about 4 feet of the well, then you and I can hook our toes under the bumper and sort of anchor ourselves above ground. You hold the bucket still and I’ll take the limb and try to rake it into the bucket. Mom, would you like to stand back a way and hold the flashlight? I don’t want you to get close to the edge.”

“I’ll do it,” Mom said.

“OK,” Cub muttered, “but for Pete’s sake, Darcy, don’t knock it off into the water.”

After twenty long, uncomfortable minutes, Cub and I still lay stretched precariously over the opening, our toes hooked under the bumper of my Ford. I tried for what felt like the hundredth time to nudge that packet into the bucket. My limb would either miss its mark or merely scoot the packet. Although Cub tried to hold the bucket steady, it insisted on wobbling away from the wall of the well. Mom grasped the flashlight with both hands, but as she shivered from the cold, so did the bright beam.

Propping myself on one elbow to ease the strain on my arms, I said. “I’m ready to say that thing can stay down there. I’m freezing. The wind is coming up and I think I felt some sleet a minute ago.”

“Same here,” Mom said. “My teeth are chattering.”

“One—more—try,” Cub mumbled. “C’mon, Darcy. The bucket’s as close to the ledge as it’s going to get.”

I pushed the limb against the bundle just as Cub maneuvered the wide-mouthed pail under it. With a satisfying plop, the package fell into the bucket.

Cub let out a war whoop that echoed off the hills. Hand over hand, he carefully drew the bucket with its cargo out of the well.

Mom and I crowded around Cub, trying to see what the prize looked like.

Cub had brought up a whitish-tan package that was maybe eighteen inches long and twelve inches wide. The package looked like dirty, worn, tattered paper of some sort and smelled as musty as the well. I poked it with a finger. "It's hard," I said. "And kind of crackly."

"What in the world is it?" Mom asked.

"That's what I'm going to find out," Cub said, setting the bucket with its treasure on the ground.

I darted down and grabbed the package from under his hands. "No! That's what Mom and I are going to find out!"

Cub's eyes were pleading. "Aw, Darcy, come on now..."

"Sorry," I said. "I sure thank you, Cub, for being so curious and uncovering this thing. There's no telling what is in there. Could it be money from Pretty Boy Floyd's last bank robbery? You know, stories were that he buried some loot somewhere around here."

"Just let me have a look," Cub begged, trying to grab the package.

"Nothing doing. Mom and I are going back home and finish that breakfast you interrupted. Have a nice day, Cub."

The look on Cub's face as we drove away almost made up for the dirty trick he played on me. Almost.

Chapter 2

Surrounded by Mom's house designs, the long-buried relic from the past looked out of place on her kitchen table. That table was an heirloom, well over a century old, the grain of its wood a mellow sheen under the ceiling light. It had held many a family dinner, heard years of shared conversations, and if it could speak, might reveal a family secret or two. Her old yellow coffee pot filled the room with a wonderful aroma. In this homey, comfortable place, that mysterious, lumpy package looked forbidding, a discordant note to the harmony of the kitchen. On the way back from Granny Grace's acres, we had decided to wait until we reached home to open it. We wanted to be sure that whatever lay within those tattered and soiled wrappings was not further damaged.

We hung up our coats and sat down, staring at the soiled bundle that had so disrupted our morning.

"I certainly can't do one thing about house plans or breakfast or anything else until I know what's in there," Mom said, nodding toward the packet.

I poured two cups of steaming brew, set one cup in front of her and warmed my hands around the other as I sat down. "I'm not hungry anymore and I'm just as curious as you are. It will take a while to remove the paper or we could just use the scissors," I said. "What is that stuff anyway?" I wondered, running my hand over the brittle surface.

Mom pursed her lips. "You'll think this is silly, but I'm pretty sure it is an old sheepskin."

I choked on my coffee. "Sheepskin?"

Mom turned it over. "Years ago, sometimes people wrapped things they wanted to keep in the skin of a sheep. I don't mean the wooly fleece but the actual skin. It had enough lanolin in it to sort of preserve what was inside. My mother kept her silverware wrapped in a sheepskin."

"This is absolutely crazy," I said, touching that wrapping again. "Why would someone take the trouble to wrap up something and then toss it in an abandoned well?"

"Maybe it fell in by accident," Mom said, gently returning it to the table.

"Do you get the feeling that it is somehow threatening?" she asked quietly.

Could objects, houses or places, retain the flavor of past events? I certainly did not sense a warm, fuzzy feeling emanating from the lumpy object on the table. It was cold and hard. I felt a revulsion when I touched it, almost as if an inner voice were telling me to leave it alone.

Mom picked up the package. "It's heavy," she said. "I'd guess maybe 4 or 5 pounds." I fingered a loose edge. "I'm going to try to unwrap it, starting here."

The skin had been folded in one position so long that it had melded together in places. She gently unstuck it but though she was careful, a few brittle bits broke off as she unfurled layer after layer. At last the wrapping mingled with house plans on my mother's table and the secret lay exposed to the light.

She pressed both hands against her heart and stared at me, her eyes wide and frightened. Mom's table had held many things but never anything as forbidding-looking as what now lay before us. Goose bumps covered my arms. There in front of us, the overhead light glinting off its long dark barrel, lay a gun.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then Mom whispered, "I knew we should have left it alone."

Trying to absorb the fact that Cub had discovered an old-looking firearm in my grandparents' hand-dug well, I stood mutely staring at it. The only sound was Jethro, crunching the Tender Vittles in his dish next to the stove.

"Is it . . . do you think that thing is loaded?" Mom asked.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't even know how to check whether it is or not. It looks ancient," I said. "It doesn't look like Dad's pistol."

"It sure doesn't," Mom agreed.

"I guess it belonged to Granny Grace or Grandpa George," I offered, "but why would they throw it away?"

"Never in all my life did I know of your Grandpa George owning a pistol," Mom said. "He had a rifle on pegs over the front door but I don't think I ever saw him take it down and fire it." She shook her head. "No, I don't think this gun belonged to my family."

I ran my fingers down the barrel. "Maybe it dates back even further than Grandpa and Granny." I started to pick it up.

Mom slapped my hand. "No, don't do that, Darcy. We don't know if the thing is loaded."

"If it is or not, it looks to me like there's so much rust on it that it would never fire," I told her. Nevertheless, I withdrew my hand and absently picked up my coffee cup.

"What should we do with it?" Mom wondered.

I swallowed my coffee and fingered the largest sheet of sheepskin lying on the table. "We could take it to Grant. He might be able to tell us what kind of gun it is and whether it could relate to an unsolved crime in Ventris County."

Mom sat down as if her legs had buckled. Her hands shook as she reached for her cup. "Unsolved crime? Don't tell me you think this gun might have been used to kill someone?"

"Now, Mom, don't get excited. Let me refill your cup."

"Thanks." She made a face. "This coffee is cold."

"Grant is the sheriff, Mom, and this is a weapon. Antique guns are his hobby, or at least, I remember they used to be his hobby years ago, but the question remains, Why would someone wrap it up and then just throw it away?"

She took her full cup and set it, untasted, on the table. Her eyes never left our deadly-looking discovery.

"How about this?" she asked. "Suppose somebody wrapped it up, maybe had it in their coat pocket and while they leaned over the well for a bucket of water, it fell in."

"Yes, I guess that would be a logical explanation."

I picked up the brittle parchment. Something about it caught my eye. Dim markings of some sort covered the inside of the skin, the side that had been against the gun.

"What are you looking at?" Mom asked.

I held the skin toward her. "What does that look like to you?"

Mom pulled her reading glasses from her pocket and held the wrapping close to her nose. "Hmm. Sort of looks like an imprint, maybe some words but they are strange words. They're faded and I can't make head nor tail of them."

She handed it back to me.

"Could a message have been written on this?" I asked. "You know, scribes of long ago wrote on animal skins they called parchment."

"Darcy, I don't think anybody has used animal skins to record messages for centuries."

I ran a fingernail across the skin. Flakes of something that looked like paper dropped onto the table.

Mom squinted at it. "What in the world?"

Something had been stuck on this hide of a long ago sheep. Could a paper have imbedded itself into the skin through the years? Was there enough lanolin or oil in the skin to have absorbed it?

"Where's your magnifying glass, Mom?"

"In the front room, in the drawer of the desk."

I hurried from the kitchen and came back with the magnifier. Holding it above the sheepskin, I tried to make sense of what I was seeing.

"I think there's funny-looking writing on this skin. Maybe a message?" I whispered. I don't know why I whispered. There was no one to hear but Mom and Jethro.

"My digital camera," I said. "It shows up things that my naked eye can't see."

"It's probably nothing," Mom said. "Although I can't imagine why there'd be lettering on the inside of a skin that somebody used to wrap their silverware."

"Or in this case, a gun," I amended.

My camera was within reach, in a pocket of my purse. I carefully unrolled the sheepskin, moved the camera within inches above it and pressed the shutter. A few minutes later, I had plugged my camera into my computer, downloaded the image, hit "Print" and waited for a copy of the faded letters to appear.

Gently, I moved the hide of some long-dead sheep to one side. I spread the printed sheet on the table and studied it through the magnifying glass.

"Mirror writing," I said.

"What?" Mom looked at me sharply.

"Come with me. Let's hold this up to the bathroom mirror."

Mom followed me down the hall to the bathroom. I flipped on the light and leaned in close to the mirror, holding the print-out in front of me.

"I can see a faint outline, like a small page from a book," Mom murmured.

"Yes, it is an image of a page with faded letters on it. I think that someone put a piece of paper in the sheepskin and through the years, the paper sank into the skin, leaving the ink imprint of the words imbedded in the sheepskin."

"That sounds far-fetched," Mom said. "But I guess anything is possible."

"And I can see a few letters, faded though they are. 'Un_t_ed_n H__y_a__mony.'" I grabbed her arm.

"Mom, I believe this says "United in Holy Matrimony."

She nodded. "It's about the size of a page in the Bible, you know, in Family Records section. Could it be that?"

"Could be. There's lots more writing. What's wrong, Mom?"

"I've got a headache, Darcy. I don't know if it's the cold wind when we were there at the well or if it's the excitement of finding the gun or what but I've got to take an aspirin and lie down."

She looked pale and her hands, when I touched them, were icy.

"Will you be all right? Can I do anything?"

"No. I haven't been really warm since being out so long and my feet are freezing. An old remedy for a headache is to warm up the feet so I'm going to heat that little corn bag in the microwave and lie down for a while."

"Call me if I can help," I said. "I'm going to keep on trying to decipher whatever this is we found."

I painstakingly held the parchment to the mirror and wrote down each letter on the notebook page. After an hour, I read and then re-read the amazing message the parchment contained. It was unbelievable and frightening. It didn't solve anything but it sure opened up a whole lot more questions.

Chapter 3

A baffling record of a long ago secret marriage lay on the table in front of my mother and me. I had worked on deciphering those faded backward letters while my mother napped. Now I almost wished I hadn't because they opened a door to an unbelievable event that had been unknown to either of us until today.

"But Darcy, I don't know this man, this Markham Cauldfell. My father, your grandfather's name was George Daniels. My parents were married on December 27 in the same year that's on that sheepskin, 1918. Look there—you've written that Mama and this Markham Cauldfell were married on October 7, 1918."

I shrugged. "That's what was faded into the sheepskin."

My mother gazed again at the accusing page. "Maybe somebody did this as a joke, do you think?" she asked in a small voice.

"Whoever wrapped this all up took the trouble to put it where they didn't think it would ever be found. I just imagine that the person tossed it in the well and had no idea it snagged on something before it hit the water."

My mother had come downstairs for lunch, ready for the tomato soup and cornbread I had waiting for her, but neither of us was hungry. We had been knocked for the proverbial loop by the faded message on the sheepskin.

"What I think, Mom, is that a page from a Bible was wrapped up in that old skin. It must have been put into the sheepskin print side down, then the gun put in on top of it. I mean, that much is obvious. Only thing is, what was the purpose and who threw it in?"

"Yes, who and why," she repeated, vertical worry lines forming between her eyebrows.

"Somebody wanted to get rid of the marriage record and the gun. But why not burn the page? That would have completely gotten rid of it. There had to be a reason that the page and gun were together. One has to be connected with the other."

She sighed. "Oh, I just don't know, Darcy. I've never heard of such a puzzle. It seems like a nightmare."

"I know. This seems to be credible evidence that Granny Grace was married before she married Grandpa George. It even lists the witnesses and the preacher, a Reverend Hopkins and lists the place where they got married as Siloam Springs, Arkansas. Did Granny ever speak of a first husband?"

Mom shook her head. "Of course not. And, if she had been married twice, somebody would have said so. If my Mama had been married before she married Papa, you know that everybody in Levi would have known. In a small town like this, everybody pretty much knows everybody else's business."

"Not necessarily. Siloam Springs is several miles away and travel and communication in those days weren't nearly as good as they are today. Even though Granny and this Markham fellow got married in Siloam, at some point, Granny was back in Levi. Didn't she live here when she married Grandpa George?"

"Yes. So far as I know, they didn't live anywhere else but out there on that land close to the river, the place where we're going to build our house. I've got my mother's family Bible. It has a marriage record right in the front. I'll go get it."

She hurried to the front room and soon came back to the kitchen table with a large, leather-bound Bible. She opened it to the front. "Look, Darcy. Just look at that."

On the beautifully illustrated flyleaf was a record written in the flowing style of a few years ago attesting to the fact that George Daniels had married Grace Wolfe on December 27, 1918 in Levi, Oklahoma.

"I've looked at that record many times, Mom. It has been on our bookshelf since Granny died. Nobody ever hid it away somewhere but, even though we hate to admit it, this page that Cub brought up bears a different record. The question is, why was it kept secret and why was it hidden? Or maybe somebody just filled in the blanks, wishfully thinking, and the marriage to Markham didn't happen at all."

Mom turned her coffee cup around and around in her saucer. She started to take a drink then set the cup back down.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I don't know if I am or not. I feel like my world has tilted."

"Please eat your soup and cornbread, Mom. It has been snowing lightly while you slept and it would not be a good day to get out. But tomorrow, weather permitting and if you feel like it, I think we should take this old gun to Grant. We might not be able to figure out the marriage license but maybe he can help us identify the gun. Old guns and their history are a hobby of his. If we knew more about the gun and its age, it might shed some light on everything else."

"You're right, Darcy. Tomorrow bright and early we'll go see the sheriff."

Chapter 4

"This gun is a rare find," Grant said, holding it under the reading light on his desk. "It is a Remington .44 caliber." He turned it over, and ran his hand down the barrel. "What a beauty." He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a small can of lubricant and a piece of flannel and began oiling the old firearm. "Where in the world did you get it, Darcy?"

"That's sort of a long story, Grant. We want to see what you can tell us about it."

"I keep this handy for Jim's and my guns." He squirted oil on the old revolver and gently wiped it with the soft cloth. "The cylinder is pretty much stuck but with a little patience, I might be able to work it open. I've seen a gun like this only once, in a museum." With infinite patience, he rubbed, oiled, and wiped again. As if he were talking to himself, he said, "What stories this old gun could tell. Who knows where it has been or who it belonged to."

Grant Hendley, sheriff of Ventris County, is what some people might call an "old flame" of mine. I would take issue with the "old" since he and I are the same age. When we were sixteen, we were in love as only youngsters can be. That attraction lasted for several years, until, in fact, Jake Campbell came into my life. I left Grant and my hometown of Levi, Oklahoma, behind in favor of Jake and Dallas, Texas. Now that Jake was with the Lord and I had returned to Levi, Grant and I were rediscovering that the flame which once burned brightly could be re-kindled with very little effort.

"I guess it is a valuable antique," Mom said, edging around his desk to gaze at the gun.

Grant kept oiling and rubbing. "It sure is, Miss Flora. Soldiers in the War Between the States used guns like this. It's a six-shooter, percussion with a walnut grip. Really a nice weapon. Where'd you say you got it?"

I cleared my throat. "Well, um, that's what's strange about it, Grant. It was in an old dug well out at Granny's Grace's place. Cub Dabbins found it."

Grant's blue eyes shifted from me to Mom. "Why would somebody throw a gun like this into a well? Or any gun for that matter? And how did Cub know it was in that well?"

Mom concentrated on scooting her right foot around in a circle. "Well, um, we didn't actually know what it was 'til we got it out of the well. But that's not all we found."

I frowned at Mom and shook my head. We had decided to keep the message on the sheepskin a secret until we could learn just what the gun meant. To me, 'secret' meant not telling anyone, even Grant about that strange document that had shrouded the gun.

My mother returned my frown. "Well, now, Darcy, if anybody would know how to keep his mouth shut, it'd be the sheriff. Grant, you'll keep this under your hat, won't you?"

Grant laid the gun on his desk and ran his hand through his red hair, flecked with gray. He motioned for us to sit down as he dropped into his office chair, facing us across his desk. "Darcy, you aren't going to tell me that you are in the middle of another murder, are you? What's going on? What is so secretive about this old weapon that I'm supposed to keep under my hat?"

I reached into my purse for the page I had copied. "It's not just the gun, Grant. It's this, too."

He unfolded the page. The crease between his eyebrows grew deeper as he read. At last, he looked up.

"What's this all about? Does this mean that your mother, Miss Flora, was married to this gentleman at one time?" he flicked the paper with his forefinger.

Mom fidgeted and looked out the window. "Well, it kind of looks that way, doesn't it?"

"But you didn't know about it until you found this record?" He included me in his question.

"I'll start at the beginning," I said. I told him about Cub's discovery and how we had worked to get the sheepskin bundle out of the well, how we had taken it back to the house and found the gun inside.

"I think the lanolin in the skin just absorbed the page, leaving only the ink locked in the skin," I said.

Grant raised an eyebrow. "The lanolin is probably why this gun is in as good a shape as it is. The date on the Bible page is 1918 so we know they weren't thrown away before then but this gun is a lot older than that. Probably 150 years old. Of course, they could have been thrown away any time after 1918 but since the paper had disintegrated, I would guess not."

He paused, staring at the gun and thoughtfully rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I would think it was somebody's prized possession and it looks strange to me that it was thrown away like so much trash. The two things don't jibe—throwing something away and carefully wrapping it first." He shook his head. "Maybe it was stolen and somebody got cold feet and got rid of the evidence."

Mom drew a long, quavery breath. "Oh, I don't understand any of it. I'm just sorry that nosy Cub found it and wouldn't rest until we got it out of the well."

"It must have been a secret for a lot of years," Grant said. "Sometimes it's best not to probe too deeply into the past especially when it seems to present a mystery as dark as this one. I understand how you feel, Miss Flora."

He picked up the gun again and cautiously tugged at the cylinder. It slid out and Grant held it to the light. He squinted at it then pushed the cylinder in place and looked at us.

"It is fully loaded except for one bullet. One round has been fired."

The three of us sat silently, staring at the gun and the copy of the marriage record as if they could suddenly answer our questions. A few pellets of sleet pinged against Grant's window. I shivered. This day was cold and bleak inside and out. We were facing something unknown which made me feel as restless as the frozen limbs swaying on the maple outside Grant's office window.

Grant shook his head. "If you can't find anything strange to get involved in in the here and now, you'll go back eighty or ninety years, I guess, Darcy. I don't think you can help it. Trouble seems to follow you like that old coon dog of Jasper Harris' follows a trail. Maybe there's nothing dangerous about something that happened so long ago but you'll have to admit when Cub found this gun and the page that went with it, he may have unearthed a few secrets that should stay buried. Just be careful, Darcy. You too, Miss Flora. Somebody, some unknown person, might not want any of this coming to light."

I swallowed a swift retort. The Bible says a soft answer turns away wrath. Grant didn't look wrathful, however, just exasperated. Trouble might follow me but I hadn't asked for any of the danger I had found myself in since returning to Levi from Dallas. Maybe investigative reporters have an aura that acts as a magnet for evil. Sobering thought, that.

Grant wrapped the flannel around the gun and handed it to me, grip first. I gingerly took it from him, dropped it in a brown paper sack and tucked it away inside my purse.

"Believe it or not, Grant, I wish I had never found this gun or the Bible record. It is very hard for me to believe my grandmother was ever married to anybody except Grandpa George. And I sure don't want to find out my family was ever involved in anything as deadly as this gun

and record seem to indicate. I'm perfectly willing to put it in our safety deposit box and let it stay there for another ninety years."

Turning to face me, Mom's eyes looked as steely as the gun. "Maybe you are, Darcy," she said, "but I'm not."

She opened the door to Grant's outer office and I obediently followed her out.

"Grant! Darling! How wonderful to see you."

Mom stopped so abruptly that I bumped into her. A vision in bright colors sprang up from the chair placed beside Grant's receptionist, Doris Elroy. The woman was almost as tall as Grant. A yellow shirt and tight black jeans invited one and all to admire her obvious physical attributes. Long earrings dangled halfway to her shoulders. Her shiny black hair was piled in loose curls atop her head and she had the greenest eyes, rimmed with mascara and eyebrow pencil, that I had ever seen. She ran to Grant, amazingly acrobatic on three-inch heels, and threw her arms around him.

Grant's face turned an alarming shade of purple. Then he stepped back into his office, tall female attached, and closed the door.

When my breath returned, I looked at Doris. She shrugged. "Her name is Eileen Simmons. That's all I know, Darcy.

Mom and I made a quick exit and headed for home.

Chapter 5

On Thursday morning Cub and his men finished the footings for the foundation of our new house and squared off the partial basement. To celebrate, Mom and I drove to Dilly's Cafe for what we Oklahomans considered the best fried chicken in the USA.

Stepping into Dilly's was like stepping back to an earlier time. The ambience of the small café as well as its home-cooked food drew people inside its doors. In 1946 a World War II soldier returned to his home town of Levi, Oklahoma with the dream of starting his own restaurant. He did the cooking, using local fruits and vegetables. Dilly's was an instant success. Yellow Formica-topped chrome tables, black and white checked tile floors replicated the eating place of the 1940s. With a little imagination, I could believe that going through Dilly's doors was walking into a time warp of sixty years ago.

The place was packed when Mom and I arrived shortly before noon. But, astonishingly, the hubbub of conversation quieted before we could even find a seat. It seemed as though the crowd had been waiting for our appearance. All talk of the weather, the price of beef, last night's accident on Perry Road, and the prospect of a new tool and tractor supply business west of town quieted. Bruce Dowell, the biggest and loudest citizen anywhere in three counties, pushed himself off his seat, headed straight for us, and rumbled, "Is it true, Miss Flora?"

Mom frowned. "Whatever are you talking about, Bruce? Is what true?"

His grin was sly. "Why, I'm purely certain you know that old Cub has told everybody in Ventris County about the metal box he found while he was digging the foundation for your new house."

Metal box? I remembered the childhood game of gossip. Facts were twisted and changed as they went from person to person. Mom's frown deepened. "I don't know anything about what Cub tells anybody, but if we did find something out there, it's my property and nobody else's business, and it's not very professional of him to talk to anybody in town about what he finds on his jobs."

My mother stepped around Bruce and headed for the nearest empty booth, calling, "Tony, bring Darcy and me a plate of that fried chicken that smells so good."

"I think you'd better leave well enough alone, Bruce," I told him, following my mother.

But Bruce Dowell wasn't smart enough to know when it was time to shut up. He trailed behind us all the way to our seats, leaned over, and put both hands on our table.

"That might be the thing to do, unless what old Cub found was a box of stolen gold from those bank robberies of the thirties. Why, everybody in the country knows those stories and some of them are bound to be true. You've heard about how banks were robbed and money buried in the Cookson Hills. Cherokee County, Ventris County, plenty of good hiding places. Your place out there on the river has lots of places to stash stolen loot." His eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't try to keep something like that a secret, would you Miss Flora?"

"Is that your yellow truck parked out front, Bruce?"

We all looked up as a dark, small man stopped at our booth.

Bruce's squinted at the newcomer. "Yep. That would be mine."

"Maybe you didn't pull the emergency brake. Looked to me like it is rolling off down the hill."

Bruce yelped and dashed for the door.

“That fellow been bothering you, Flora?”

“He’s a pest but he’s gone now. Sit down, Mr. Hopkins. You came at a mighty good time,” Mom said, scooting over to make room.

Burke Hopkins slid in beside her. Tony appeared immediately and set three cups of steaming black coffee in front of us.

For as long as I could remember, Burke Hopkins had been a fixture in Levi and Ventris County. He was Cherokee and he lived on a farm just beyond town. If Levi could be thought of as a tapestry, Burke Hopkins would be a colorful thread, appearing and then disappearing in the pattern, lending richness and depth to the fabric of life here in this small town. Mr. Hopkins was the sort of character that locals liked to point out to visitors. He preferred living alone in his small house with his two dogs and a flock of laying hens to the company of townsfolk. Maybe it was because he was a rich store of Cherokee lore that he occupied a special niche in long-time Levi residents. He had the reputation for knowing about the healing powers of herbs, and some said he still believed in many of the ways of his ancestors. I knew a couple of people who claimed Burke had cured them from an illness that stumped the doctors.

Anyone Burke counted as a friend felt blessed. My mother and I were two of those fortunate people.

Mom smiled at him. “I’ve been meaning to call you and ask if your hens are laying. I’ll need a dozen of those brown eggs as soon as you have them.”

Burke took a sip of coffee and sighed appreciatively. “Nothing beats a hot cup of coffee on a cold day. The hens are picking up again, Flora. I’ll bring your eggs along in a day or two.”

I had been only half listening to Mom and Burke’s conversation. Somehow, I had to ask Burke Hopkins about that name on the Bible record. The preacher who had supposedly married Granny Grace and Markham Cauldfell was Hopkins, a pretty common name and the marriage took place in Siloam Springs, not Levi. How could I find out if Burke was related to the preacher listed on that record without telling him more than I wanted known?

“Actually, Mr. Hopkins, I ran across a name the other day and I wondered at the time if you were kin to a Reverend Monroe Hopkins.”

Burke’s dark eyes crinkled. “That brown line around the top of your cup ought to be polished by now, Darcy. You’ve been rubbing it ever since I sat down.”

My face grew warm.

“What I’m wondering is, why was it so hard for you to ask that? And where did you run across my father’s name?” Burke asked, smiling.

“Your father?” Mom and I blurted at the same time. Several heads in near-by booths turned to look at us. “I don’t remember ever seeing your father,” Mom added.

“No, you wouldn’t have. He was a circuit-riding preacher. He was way before your time, Darcy. I was just a lad when Father passed away, but Mother and I managed to take care of ourselves and lived on in the house that he built. You didn’t answer my question. Where did you see his name?”

Help, Lord, this astute old man had eyes that seemed to see through me. How much should I tell him?

Mom came to my rescue. “You know how Darcy is, Mr. Hopkins. She likes to delve into the past. She may have seen his name on an old document that she unearthed somewhere or other.”

My mother, who began and ended each day talking with her Heavenly Father, sometimes came up with the truth in a most interesting fashion.

My thoughts were whirling. Could it be that Burke's dad was the man who officiated at my grandmother's first wedding? How much did he know about Markham Cauldfell and how could I find out if the information had been passed to Monroe's son?

Bruce Dowell stomped back into Dilly's and stood glaring down at Burke. "My truck wasn't rolling down the hill! You lied to me, you old buzzard! You just wanted to get me out of here!"

Burke gazed silently at the table. Several people around us laughed as Bruce snorted then stalked out of Dilly's.

"I think you just made an enemy," I said.

Burke shook his head. "Dowell hasn't liked me for a long time, Darcy. Not since I complained to him about one of his dogs that liked to come around and catch some of my laying hens. When that old dog turned up dead, Dowell thought I had killed it but I sure didn't. I never would poison anything; certainly not a dog."

Burke Hopkins rose to his feet and looked down at us for a few seconds.

"Sometimes it's best to let what's past stay buried, Darcy," he said. "Don't go digging around too much."

Then he turned and silently left the café

Chapter 6

Mom paused in her biscuit making and frowned at me. “Oh, Darcy, honey, I wish you wouldn’t go to Siloam Springs this morning. The weatherman is predicting snow flurries and it’s awfully cold. Besides, I don’t see what you think you can find out. Maybe we’re just stirring up a hornet’s nest by trying to get some answers to the gun and marriage. Even if there was a wedding that nobody ever knew about, it was probably never recorded like it should have been. I think you’ll just be making a wasted trip.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “You may be right. But there are other things that turn up in old records. For instance, even if there was no record of the wedding, there might be a death certificate that will let us know what happened or some kind of real estate documents that show where this Markham Cauldfell came from and where he lived. After what Grant told us about the gun, we have to assume that it’s connected to the marriage certificate.”

Besides, although I didn’t tell Mom, I was still so steamed up about Eileen Simmons bursting into Grant’s office and hugging him like he was her own personal teddy bear that I felt I had to do something today. Although there were no official ties between Grant and me as of yet, such as an engagement ring, there was no denying the growing attraction we had for each other, an awareness that had begun when we were in high school and never really disappeared. Even though I knew there were bound to have been other women in my high school sweetheart’s life, Eileen Simmons did not seem to be the type to fit the quiet, handsome, intelligent man who had impressed everybody enough to become a highly respected law enforcement officer.

Then another thought came to me. Mom and I were relying heavily on Grant because we thought we knew him well, but maybe neither of us knew him like we thought we did. After all, until I moved back home, there had been no close contact with him for quite some time. I thought I trusted Grant but that shapely woman who seemed to know the sheriff very well indeed was a wild card. I hadn’t talked to Grant since discovering Eileen Simmons perched in his office like some bird of prey. Why hadn’t he called me with an explanation? It wasn’t my place to pry into Grant’s personal affairs, but shouldn’t he want me to know about Eileen?

“Anyhow, it’s something I feel like I’ve got to do. Mom closed the oven door. “Well, okay” she pronounced, “you can do your own research and I’ll do mine.”

I thumped my coffee mug down. “Research? What on earth are you talking about?”

She shrugged. “You can hunt through old newspaper files and your computers and maybe, just maybe, you’ll find out something. But I can usually learn a lot by simply listening to people. I’m going over to talk to the Jenkins sisters first thing this morning.”

Mom was probably right. The Jenkins sisters were 95 years old, more or less, twins who had lived in the same house in Levi all their lives. They knew a lot about the past—if they could remember it.

So, leaving Mom to pursue her own method of fact-finding, I put on my coat and gloves, poured a thermos of coffee, grabbed my laptop and headed for the back door. As I backed out of the garage, a gritty spit of snow rattled against my car. Only the streak of orange in the east showing me that the sun was up there somewhere urged me onward.

Sleet pinged against the windshield as I turned my car toward Siloam Springs. My car thermometer showed the outside temperature was thirty-nine degrees. Since it wasn’t down to

freezing, I should be able to search through any records that were available and get back home before the roads became treacherous.

As I drove, I considered the very curious situation we faced and tried to come up with a few plausible answers to some alarming questions. Why had no one in the family ever heard about an old gun and wedding document that revealed a mysterious wedding? And why had the gun and document surfaced now? Why was it on Granny Grace's land? Did anybody else know the items were in the well?

I found it incredible that my grandmother had married a man nobody around Levi knew. Even in a small town like ours, somebody remembers past events, no matter how many years have flown past and no matter if said event had happened in a neighboring town. I hoped Mom would glean some information from the Jenkins ladies.

As the miles flew past, thoughts of that marriage document twisted in my mind. They made no sense at all. If Granny Grace had really married somebody named Markham Cauldfell on October 7, 1918, as the record indicated, then it was impossible that she was married shortly afterward on December 27 to George Daniels and lived with him for the rest of her life. If the first marriage had actually occurred, there barely would have been time for a divorce before the second marriage. A death might have made it possible and was the logical explanation. Maybe Cauldfell died along with thousands of other victims of the flu that plagued the nation in 1918. If Markham succumbed to the flu shortly after the wedding, Granny Grace could conceivably have gone ahead with a marriage to Grandpa George. My mom said she understood that her parents planned to be married as soon as Grandpa was released from the army. They had known each other all their lives and were best friends even before they were sweethearts. That was why it was not easy to believe that she had married anybody else but Grandpa. My grandmother was not a shallow person. From all accounts, she truly loved Grandpa George. For some reason, that marriage certificate must be false. It flew in the face of all I knew about my grandparents.

But what about the gun? Exactly what part had it played in the long ago scenario? Since it was found along with the marriage record, there had to be a connection.

I was suddenly blindsided by an idea that had been stewing in my mind ever since we unwrapped the sheepskin with its contents. Although the marriage record indicated the ceremony had been properly performed by the Reverend Monroe Hopkins, and signed by two witnesses, there was no recording information anywhere on the marriage certificate, or at least none that bled through onto the skin. If a legal document was not properly recorded in the clerk's office of the county where the act was performed, it would not be considered legal, even a hundred years ago. So were they legally married or not? We might have to consult our attorney and Mom's friend Jackson Conner about that situation.

I headed now for the newspaper office at Siloam. My task was not going to be easy. I knew from experience that digging through moldy old newspapers in storage bins that often hadn't been opened for many years was unpleasant. However, reporters know there is a story behind every story that is published in any newspaper. Even if I couldn't find anything about the first marriage, maybe there was something in all those ancient papers that would at least let us know who Markham Cauldfell really was.

The Tribune occupied an old house that was originally constructed for the vice president of one of the area's first banks. Many years after the house was built, the tiny basement had been enlarged and shelves added for the thousands of file boxes that held a printed history of the town.

Today, the red-headed receptionist at the front desk smiled when I came through the door. “Nasty weather, isn’t it? But the weatherman says it’ll clear up by afternoon.”

“I certainly hope so since I’ve got to drive back to Levi before the roads freeze over.”

I explained my mission to her.

She shook her head thoughtfully. “You’re certainly welcome to go downstairs and dig through the files but I’ve got to warn you. We discovered a long time ago that the people who did the filing over the years sometimes seemed to pay no attention to date sequences. Although one box may be marked 1949, there could be back issues stuck in from a broad range of other years.”

Oh boy! That was just what I needed.

“And one other thing. I’m sure you’re aware that old newspapers are fragile and easily torn, especially if they’ve been damp at some time like ours have because we had a leak in the roof a few years back and rain ran down inside the walls to the basement.”

This was sounding more and more like a hopeless task, but I had to give it a shot.

“I’ll be careful,” I assured her.

She led me down unpainted stairs to two cavernous rooms that smelled moldy and damp. There was one improvement. I had been in *The Tribune’s* morgue once before and I recalled the large rooms being lit by four small overhead lights that made it necessary to use a portable light for most searches. Since then, someone at the newspaper had broken loose with enough money to install full-length overhead fluorescent lights that would certainly make any search easier.

Settling myself at the long, scarred table, I opened my laptop, took out my notebook, and pulled my reading glasses out of my purse.

First in line was a file carton marked “1910.” I soon discovered there were two, sometimes three, cartons for that entire year. According to the scribbled dates, there were four cartons for each year beginning in 1918. Evidently the war, the flu epidemic, and the failing economic situation provided more fodder for the weekly newspaper than had been available before those catastrophes struck.

By two o’clock, my eyes burned, my stomach growled, and my back hurt. The straight-back chair I sat in probably was as old as the stories I read. Undoubtedly made by hand, it was the sort of find antique dealers went wild about. I wondered if the receptionist upstairs knew that an authentic collectible languished in the basement among the long ago newspapers.

After reading until my sight blurred, I knew more about the heartbreak of the flu epidemic than I ever wanted to know and more about the fierce battles of WWI than seemed possible. I learned that the country had gone through a drought in 1917–1918 that made life doubly hard for many people, as though things weren’t hard enough already.

Rubbing my back, I stood and stretched. A bowl of chili and some fresh air were just what I needed. After eating, I planned to head for home. Nothing had turned up anything helpful to our problem but I had known when I came that it would be a long shot.

Closing my laptop, I shrugged into my coat. Then, as though Fate had planned the whole thing, my glance fell onto a tab sticking out of a carton on an upper shelf. On the box someone had scrawled 1911 but on the tab was another faded date: 1918. On tiptoe, I stretched upward and carefully pulled out the misplaced issue. It was only four pages. I spread it out under the fluorescent light and searched through much of what I already knew. At the bottom of the front page I hit pay dirt. Above a small article was a blunt headline: SON OF LOCAL CITIZEN DISAPPEARS. The newspaper was dated November 4, 1918.

This newspaper has been informed that Markham Cauldfell, son of Elmer and Edna Cauldfell disappeared from his home near Levi, Oklahoma, on Tuesday of last week. His wife, Grace, reported the disappearance to local authorities on Tuesday night. Mrs. Cauldfell related that her husband had gone hunting early in the morning and had never returned. A search was instituted but to no avail. Cauldfell recently returned from the army. Elmer and Edna Cauldfell's extensive farm is located approximately five miles north of town. Markham Cauldfell attended Siloam Springs High School and graduated in 1913. The elder Cauldfells own Cauldfell's Mercantile in downtown Siloam Springs.

Chili and fresh air forgotten, I dropped back into my chair. Although this wasn't the sort of information I'd been looking for, it was certainly far more than I knew before coming to Siloam. Markham had returned to Siloam to be married because his home and his parents were there. I made a note to check into local history if we didn't turn up anything else about the man.

Then I had another revelation. I had been reviewing the back issues of the paper sequentially, year to year, and stumbled onto this 1918 issue that had been stuck in a 1911 carton. If there were other such misfilings, and based on what the receptionist told me, I was pretty sure there were, then common sense dictated that I should make a quick survey of the tops of all the cartons to see if there might be other years misfiled and sticking up where they would be noticeable.

There were. In the next hour, a quick scan along the endless rows of file cartons revealed more than a dozen back issues stuck into the wrong carton, as though somebody long ago had wanted to get them out of sight.

I made another find with a tab sticking out of a 1924 file that contained part of an issue from January, 1918. There were only two yellowed, ragged pages. I spread them out carefully under the brightest part of the new fluorescent lighting. It looked as though a rat had chewed on both pages and part of the article was gone. But there was enough of the faded newsprint to tell me much of what I needed to know.

Markham Cauldfell had been arrested because he had attacked another man on a downtown street. Also, he had been charged with assault and theft in a prior incident when he tried to take a horse that didn't belong to him. It was impossible to get more details from the ragged front page.

I was still struggling to understand what I had read when the receptionist opened the door at the top of the stairs. "I'm sorry, but it's closing time for us. I hope you found what you were looking for."

Thirty minutes later, with photocopies of the old news stories in my briefcase, I climbed into my Ford Escape and drove out of the parking lot and west onto highway 412. The dark sky peppered sleet alternately with snow but I was too engrossed in thinking about those clippings from crumbling newspapers to worry about the weather. Now, however, many more questions than answers swirled in my thoughts. Circling round and round like a whirlpool was the recurring question: According to the newspaper, Markham Cauldfell was a resident of Siloam Springs Arkansas and served in the army in 1918. That same year, he returned from the War, married Grace Wolfe, lived in Levi, Oklahoma and disappeared. None of this would have mattered or been important to me except that neither Mom nor I had known of the marriage. Why had my grandmother married him when it was well-known that she was engaged to George Daniels, my grandfather. And why, after the brief newspaper article, was nothing more said about Markham's sudden disappearance?

Chapter 7

I carried a couple of cups of coffee into the living room and handed one to my mother. “You look like the picture of comfort,” I said.

She smiled. “The fire sure feels good.” Dancing flames in the fireplace cast a glow over her small person as she sat in the old recliner, Jethro on her lap.

I settled down on the sofa across from her, kicked off my shoes and stretched my cold toes toward the blaze. “One thing we must be sure of in the new house is a fireplace. I’m glad we had this one repaired after the earthquake damaged it.”

Mom yawned. “I agree. And on a night like this, there’s no better place. You got back from Siloam just in time.”

The weatherman’s forecast had been wrong. This morning’s sleet had turned completely to snow shortly after I arrived home. Driving up Deertrack Hill between Levi and Siloam would not have been fun, had I waited any longer to leave the newspaper office.

Earlier, as we ate supper, I had recounted what I learned from the clipping about Markham Cauldfell’s disappearance. The photocopies still lay spread out on the dining table. Now it was Mom’s turn to share her gleanings from the Jenkins sisters.

A shower of sparks flew up the chimney as a log fell behind the dog irons. Since childhood, I liked to imagine pictures in those dancing flames. In my imagination, I could see future walls and roof taking shape. Yes, the new house definitely must have at least one fireplace.

Mom shifted in her chair. “I don’t know the exact age of those Jenkins twins but they’re getting up in years.”

“How strange that neither of them ever married. I wonder if they had any beaux a long time ago?”

“Well, I have heard stories through the years, gossip actually, about a young man who came courting one of them but he just up and disappeared one day.”

“Stories?”

“Yes, well, Darcy, you know rumors start about anybody who is a little different. Remember Old String?”

Oh, yes, the old man who went about picking up every little bit of string he found along the roadside. When he died, his house was so stacked full of junk that it took two weeks to remove it.

“You’ll have to admit, Old String was a little odd, Mom.”

“That’s neither here nor there, Darcy. Those two dear ladies, Carolina and Georgia”

“Were they actually named for states?”

“Their folks were from the South. They are of Cherokee ancestry and proud of it. They live way on the other side of town in that old Victorian house their daddy left them. They keep it as spruce and neat as the day it was built. Never knew them to work anywhere, but they attend that little Methodist church a couple of blocks from where they live. Haven’t missed a Sunday in 50 years, they said.”

My eyelids were starting to close in spite of the hot coffee. I set my mug down beside my chair. “They must have had money coming in from somewhere.”

“From their daddy, I imagine. He left them well off. Could be they never married because they never found a man to measure up to him.”

“How did you steer the conversation around to Granny Grace and Markham Cauldfell?”

“It wasn’t hard.” Mom chuckled. “We were sitting on what were probably expensive antique chairs, sipping hot tea, when Carolina, she’s the no-nonsense type, Darcy, Carolina looked at me with those piercing black eyes and said, ‘So, Flora Tucker, what brings you out this way? I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times you’ve come to visit.’”

“Georgia smiled and shook her head. ‘Now sister, you know it’s not polite to ask,’ she said.”

“I was grateful for the opening so I just came out with it, ‘You two probably know more about Levi’s past than most people and I’ve got a puzzle of my own I’d like to ask you, about something that happened during World War I.’”

“Carolina set her cup back into the saucer so hard I thought it would break. Her voice fairly crackled when she said, ‘We may be old, Miss, but we’re not *that* old.’”

“Georgia ignored her sister. ‘We heard stories about that time from Mama and Papa.’”

“‘You knew my mother,’” I said.”

“‘Of course. Miss Grace Wolfe. A real lady, not given to asking impertinent questions,’” Carolina told me. And then, as if to make up for her brusqueness, she asked if I wanted more tea.”

“I told her what I’d really like to know was whether she had heard anything about my mother in connection with a man named Markham Cauldfell.”

“The room got so quiet that I could hear the sleet bouncing off their front porch. Georgia paused with her teacup halfway to her mouth and Carolina just stared at me. Then Carolina said, ‘That was a long time ago, Flora.’”

“And Georgia said, in her soft, trembling voice, ‘There are some things about the past that should stay there.’”

“And, you know, Darcy, for the life of me, I couldn’t guide the conversation any further. Carolina kept talking about the Methodist Ladies’ Aid Society and what a good work it was doing. Georgia remarked that they’d better phone the grocery store and be sure they had enough food if we were going to have a blizzard. And so, I thanked them for their time and tea and left.”

“More coffee?” I asked, getting up to empty my own coffee which had grown cold. “That is amazing, Mom. The Jenkins sisters and Burke have both warned us about digging up the past. That means they must know something that we don’t. And what is it? What is so bad that nobody wants to talk about it? They are far too secretive.”

“And they intend to keep their secrets.”

“And I intend to find out what they are.” I handed her the refilled cup. “You said that the boyfriend of one of the Jenkins sisters disappeared. Don’t you find that strange? Markham Cauldfell disappeared too.”

“There couldn’t be a connection, Darcy. Mr. Cauldfell vanished about the time the Jenkins sisters were born.”

“Right. I’m just saying that it’s strange, Mom.”

A knock at the door stopped me before I could sit down. “Who would be out on such a snowy night?” I muttered.

Mom was right behind me as I went down the hall and swung open the door. Burke Hopkins stood on the porch.

“Mr. Hopkins, come in and get warm.” I stood aside for him to enter.

“I brought your eggs, Flora,” he said, holding out a wire basket.

“Surely you didn’t come out in this weather just to deliver these eggs. Come on in and have a cup of coffee. Warm up some,” Mom said.

“I don’t mind the snow. My old truck has good tires and can get through many a bad road. I won’t track all over your rug, Flora. Just wanted to bring the eggs since you mentioned the other day that you needed some. I’ve been thinking about our visit at Dilly’s and what ol’ Bruce said about wanting to know what you dug up. Just let it alone. People are curious enough already and who knows? There could be someone in town who might be afraid of whatever was in that box.”

I opened my mouth to say the gossip was wrong and there was no box.

He held up his hand. “No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. My father told me a few things about the old days and I understand that they were pretty rough. Just stay safe, the both of you.”

He waved, and left, the snow swirling around him as he stepped off the porch. Mom and I stared at each other. “He didn’t come just to bring those eggs,” Mom whispered. “He was worried about us, Darcy. He’s afraid for our safety.”

I switched off the porch light and followed Mom to the kitchen. The room seemed suddenly chill. What had we gotten ourselves into? And why was Burke trying to warn us?

Chapter 8

Mom placed the eggs in the refrigerator and shook her head. "Burke may be right. We should just put that sheepskin and gun in my cedar chest and forget we ever found it. I don't know what the answer is, but it is incredible to me that my mother ever had anything to do with this Cauldfell fellow. Why, that's just ridiculous. I can't bring myself to believe it, in spite of the proof."

I rinsed our coffee cups and put them in the dishwasher. "Life would be a lot simpler if it had no riddles, Mom. We didn't exactly ask for this, but don't you really want to know what it's all about?"

She scooped Jethro from the chair in front of the fireplace and sat down. "Oh, I guess I do mostly just to ease my own mind about it. I wouldn't want any sort of a shadow to be over my parents. They were such good, honest people." She ran her hand over Jethro's smooth head. "You know, you think you know someone and then life throws a curve and I wonder whether I ever really knew my mother at all. It's like she's two women, the one I loved and that other one that I know nothing about."

"But Mom, think of this way: if this brief marriage to Markham Cauldfell really did happen, there was a reason for it. I think we both knew the real Grace Daniels. That episode with Cauldfell didn't last. The real Grace is the woman we knew and loved, not that young girl who for a short time was Mrs. Markham Cauldfell."

My mother looked at me with a quizzical expression; then she smiled. "You know, you're right, dear daughter. I couldn't have said it better myself."

How odd that all the mysteries we had been involved in since my return to Levi almost a year ago had seemingly dropped into our laps. I hadn't wanted anything but peace and healing after my husband Jake's death. That's why I had come back to my hometown. Peace was coming but it was mixed in with a good deal of danger.

"I'm going to sit here for a while and watch the fire," Mom said, propping her feet on the footrest. "Maybe I can get my mind on other things. There's still the school out on Ben's old farm that is near to being ready for a bunch of boys. I'm tired of old problems. I want to think about helping start a new life for some youngsters who need a helping hand. Why don't you go on up and take a nice, long soak? Think about something else besides what might have happened almost a hundred years ago."

The school for troubled boys was an ongoing project and it provided Mom with something positive to think about. Her old friend Ben Ventris had not only left her his farm but also enough money to make that dream a reality. She was slowly turning it into a home and a school for those who needed a nurturing home environment and a firm hand. Mom would not have wanted to benefit from Ben's generosity, but she was quite willing that others should.

A hot bath sounded like a good plan of action to me. My feet had been freezing all day in the basement of the Siloam Springs newspaper morgue, although at the time my search into the past had kept me from paying a lot of attention to my cold toes.

Fifteen minutes later I was relaxing in a tub full of lavender-scented bubbles while I replayed in my mind the information about the stranger named Markham Cauldfell. Judging from what I had gleaned, not many people in Levi knew of him. The knowledge that he had certainly

been a man of less than sterling character disturbed me. Although I found few details, three fights that resulted in Cauldfell's being charged with assault indicated that he was surely a violent man. Then there was the extremely short stint in the U.S. Army that was in itself highly unusual at a time when America was desperate for strong young men to turn back an enemy that was proving to be far more vicious than our government expected. Instead of raising corn and milking cows as most young men of his generation did after leaving the army, Markham Cauldfell evidently roamed the streets of Siloam, causing trouble. Cauldfell wanted to fight, but not enemy soldiers.

The things I had learned from the newspaper articles kept me from relaxing. I got out of the tub, dried off and slipped into my pajamas. A computer search might bring to light other facts about the mysterious Cauldfell.

The possibility that he might have been married to my grandmother, even for an extremely short period of time, was hard to imagine. All reports indicated that she was a woman of strong moral beliefs and sterling behavior and expected everybody else to be the same. Of more importance was the fact that she and Grandpa George had been engaged to be married. Their plans from the first were to wait until he came home from the war and have that anticipated wedding. What had changed her mind? According to the records, she had married Markham Cauldfell, he went missing, and the next month she had married George Daniels.

What about the attitude of the Jenkins sisters? From their reaction, I would say they had heard something about Markham Cauldfell and their reluctance to even discuss it added weight to the idea that something was wrong. Burke Hopkins too, three of the oldest residents of Levi, had strongly suggested we forget whatever it was Cub found at Granny's old home place.

I sat down at my computer, prepared to uncover as much about Cauldfell, this shadowy figure from the past as the infinity of modern technology and the magic of the internet would allow.

Thirty minutes of searching through old files resulted in a stiff back and a dull headache. I rose from my desk and stared thoughtfully out my bedroom window at the winter scene below me. Snow completely covered the ground and the woods near our house looked like a Christmas card, a quieting picture in the midst of turbulent thoughts.

My electronic search of history had not produced the answers we had hoped for. Instead, like Mom's visit with the Jenkins sisters, it had pointed out more discrepancies. Military records revealed that Markham Cauldfell had enlisted in the winter of 1918, from Siloam Springs, Arkansas, and went to St. Louis for basic training. Less than six months later, on August 7 of the same year, he left the military under a dishonorable discharge. I could find no information about the details of that discharge. Three years was the usual tour of duty, not a few months. My first thought was of the worldwide flu epidemic. Even if he got sick and could no longer perform his duties, there would not have been a dishonorable discharge on record.

Considering what I now knew about Cauldfell's criminal record, I was forced to conclude that he had committed some crime or otherwise engaged in some violence as he had done in Siloam and the military had kicked him out. I could find no record of a court martial.

As I stood gazing out of my bedroom window, my mind wandered back to the world that my grandparents, Grace and George Daniels and this mystery person, Markham Cauldfell, must have known in 1918. Woodrow Wilson was President and we were engaged in a great war that was supposed to end all wars. A world-wide flu epidemic ravaged populations where medicines were limited and doctors were few. Had my grandparents experienced that devastating illness? What of Markham Cauldfell? The newspaper article said he disappeared. The newspaper reported

that his wife (Granny Grace) said he had gone hunting. Had he been ill when he left the house, become disoriented, died, and was never discovered? The trees even now, many years later, grew thickly at Granny Grace's old home place. It would be easy to lose one's way or stumble into a deep ravine and be covered over with leaves. In those days, the land must have been thickly forested. Perhaps mountain lions or other dangerous animals had roamed those woods. I had experienced a small encounter with a mountain lion a short time ago. Had Cauldfell gotten lost and fallen victim to a hungry wild animal?

Why hadn't I asked Granny Grace about that long ago time? I was only ten when she died, and certainly knew nothing of this mysterious period in her life, but hadn't I studied world history? She could have given me first-hand knowledge of life in Levi during World War I.

Even though she had been gone several decades, I missed our times together, the shared confidences and secrets that neither of us had ever shared with anyone else. I smiled, remembering a mealtime at her house, when I had accidentally broken one of her platters, a favorite dish that once belonged to her own mother. More than once, Mom had said she wanted that platter when Granny was finished with it. It was a work of art with tiny roses intertwined with gold leaves painted around the edge. I was horrified, thinking of how precious it was to my grandmother and how Mom would have treasured it.

I remembered crying and Granny putting her arm around me, drawing me close. "It was just an old dish," she said. "We must learn not to value 'things,' Darcy. They don't matter. It's people who are important."

"I am thinking of people," I said. "I'm thinking of Mom and what she's going to say."

Granny had wiped my eyes with her apron and smiled at me. "I don't think Flora will ever ask about it and that broken platter—well, it's just between you and me."

It seemed that most of my heart-to-heart chats with Granny Grace happened in her kitchen. She taught me how to bake cornbread and biscuits, how to make flaky pie crust and while we baked, we talked. I could have asked her so many questions but I didn't and now it was too late.

Granny had always been honest and open. It was no family secret, for example, that Grace and George had adopted my mother when they were well into their 40s. Mom had grown up with this knowledge and seemed happy and content with it. My mother had been the pampered only child of parents who were old enough to be her grandparents. Nobody had ever mentioned my grandmother's first husband or his disappearance.

Maybe a good night's sleep would help. It had been a long day and the same questions kept circling my thoughts like a restless wind. As I turned away from the window, a movement at the corner of the woods behind our house caught my eye. I froze and stared through the falling snow. A person moved within the woods surrounding our pasture. I blinked and he was gone. Rubbing my eyes, I searched those woods again. Had I just imagined that human shape? Surely not. Someone had stood watching, someone interested enough to be out on a very cold night, someone who did not want his presence known.

Chapter 9

In spite of getting very little sleep, I was up early the next morning. My purpose was to slip out the door and go to the edge of the woods where I had seen the watcher last night. Maybe I could find a trace of him if the snow hadn't covered everything. At the moment, the sun was shining and my mother's yard sparkled with a million icy jewels.

Mom was already up when I came downstairs. She was sitting at her old wood dining table, the sheepskin open and the gun and my interpretation of the Bible record in front of her.

"Coffee's in the pot, Darcy," she said, hardly looking up.

The steaming cup of amber liquid warmed me all the way down as I swallowed it. I sat down across from her. "Since the gun and certificate can't talk, Mom, I don't see how staring at them is going to help."

"I just don't know what else to do." She sighed and pushed them away. "What plans have you made for the day?"

As quickly as I could, I wanted to go look at the spot in the woods where I had seen the lurking figure. I delayed answering her question. Mom had enough to think about without adding that suspicious figure to her worries. It seemed to me that new lines had spread across her forehead overnight.

I took a second sip of coffee. "It's a wonderful brisk morning for a walk. I didn't sleep well and maybe some fresh air will clear my mind."

"If it works, let me know and I'll do the same. I didn't sleep much either. I just don't know when I've been so puzzled. Cub didn't do us any favors by sticking his nose in that old well. While you are out walking, I'm going to the attic and hunt for a book I put up there a few years ago. Don't know how I ever came to have it, but I think it's called *Farm Life for Boys* or something like that. It's an old book. Maybe it's in a box of Mom's things. Anyway, I thought it might give me some ideas on what to include in Ben's school. At least that school is something positive I can get my mind on. I want to go out before long and have a look at how it's progressing."

"Good idea. When you get ready, I'll go with you." I finished my coffee and went to the hall closet for my coat. "When you're ready for breakfast, I'll do the honors this time. How does bacon and French toast sound to you?"

"Perfect," she said.

As I went out the back door, she headed for the stairs.

A red bird sang his cheer-up song in the oak by the front gate. A hawk circled over the woods, doubtless hoping that he would see an unwary rabbit outlined against the snow. The out-of-doors was sunny, brisk and still. This beautiful, shining morning was in stark contrast to the dark, jumbled thoughts chasing themselves around in my mind.

I walked along the edge of the woods with my head down, my eyes searching the ground. Sure enough, at the tree line, the snow looked scuffed and trampled down. One or two actual footprints still showed, the indentations only partially filled with snow. These were the footprints of a man who wore cowboy boots and had rather large feet. That narrowed my suspects down to about 90% of the male population of Ventris County. At least I saw no spent cartridge shells. After all, just standing in our woods was not a high crime. True, he had been trespassing, but our

fence was pretty much non-existent in places. Anyway, I had proved to myself that my eyes had not been playing tricks. Somebody had been out in the snow looking at our house last night. How long had he stood there? Was he planning a break-in?

Was he actually someone who was concerned and trying to watch out for danger? Last night had been cold and hardly a good night for just standing around for the fun of it.

Although the trampled snow confirmed what I saw from my bedroom window, it didn't give any answers as to who had been there or why. Surely I could think more clearly after several cups of strong black coffee and the breakfast I had promised to make.

Mom met me at the kitchen door, her eyes sparkling.

"Darcy, you'll never guess what I found when I was rummaging through the attic."

I stomped snow from my feet and shrugged out of my coat. "Whatever it was, I'm glad to see you're happy about it."

She held up a notebook with a brown, faded cover. "A journal! It's my mother's journal. And Darcy, look at the date on the front—1918! Just think what this might mean. Maybe we'll find some answers to our puzzle."

"Wow! Where did you find it, Mom?"

"It was in the same box as the book on farm life. When Mom died, I brought all her things over and put them in the attic without looking through many of them. I think this box had been pushed back under her bed and I brought it out here and stored it without even opening it. I clean forgot all about it. It was under a bunch of other boxes and I haven't read it yet. I guess I'm afraid to."

"Well, give it to me! I'm not afraid to read it."

I took the journal, but before I could sit down, the doorbell pealed.

"Pretty early for a visitor," I muttered as I followed my mother to the front door.

On the porch stood Eileen Simmons, furry hat pulled over her black hair and her coat collar turned up to her ears. She carried a large manila envelope in her gloved hands.

"Darcy, Miz Tucker, you don't know me but I'm Eileen Simmons. I saw you in Grant's office. We need to talk. May I come in?"

Mom found her voice before I did. "Of course, Miss Simmons. Come inside."

This was the woman who had been so glad to see Grant! Why would she want to talk to us? I closed the door behind her.

Mom motioned toward the sofa. "Won't you sit down?"

Eileen pulled off her cap and unbuttoned her coat. Her hands trembled, whether with nerves or the cold. She handed me the envelope. "I won't stay long. In fact, you probably won't want me to. I don't know how much you know about your grandmother, Darcy, but I've found out a few things that I think you should know."

Mom's eyes narrowed. "You found out some things about my mother? I'm not sure I like the way you said that."

"I'm sorry, Miz Tucker. I should have said it different. The thing is, that's just my way. I blurt out stuff and I don't mean to hurt any-body's feelings."

Mom sat on the edge of the sofa, turned sideways toward Eileen, her arms folded across her chest. I pulled some pages from the envelope Eileen had given me. She had evidently copied them from a genealogical site. I glanced through and saw the name "Markham Cauldfell," then "Grace Wolfe" and the fact that they were married in Siloam, Arkansas, and lived in Ventris County, Oklahoma. I looked at the second document. It was a copy of a land description, a familiar land description. I felt as if someone had punched me in the stomach.

Eileen watched me; her face pale under the heavy make-up.

Mom fidgeted on the sofa. "Well, what is it, Darcy? Why are you looking like that?"

Dimly, I heard a cup clatter in the kitchen. Jethro must have been making the most of our absence to hop up on the table in a search for food.

My legs suddenly would not hold me up. I plopped down beside Mom. "Are you into tracing your ancestors, Eileen?"

She nodded and tried to smile. "Yes, yes, I am. We almost share a common ancestor, Darcy. You see, Markham Cauldfell was my great-grandfather."

"Markham Cauldfell is no ancestor of mine," I muttered.

My mother had taken the papers from my hand and was reading them.

"This old deed says that Markham Cauldfell owned some land here in Ventris County before he married my mother. And from the looks of this land description, I'd say that is my land that Darcy and I are building our house on."

Eileen nodded. "Yes, that's right. And as his direct descendant and the only living child of my mother, I think that land is rightfully mine." She twisted her hands together, the knuckles showing white.

Slowly, Mom stood. "How can you be a descendant of this Cauldfell person?"

"Way back before he met your mother, Miz Tucker, he got acquainted with my great grandmother." Her nervous giggle startled me. "I guess it was what you might call a close relationship. It didn't last but my grandmother was the result. I'm old Markham's descendant all right, and I can prove that land you've claimed all these years is mine."

"Prove it, my eye." I stood up beside my mother. I wanted this woman out of my sight. How dare she barge into our home and say these ridiculous things? "I think this conversation is over." I stalked to the door, held it open, and waited for her to leave.

She stood up. "You'll be hearing from me, Darcy, Miz Tucker. I think any court in the land will see that the land you've claimed for years is rightfully mine. So get used to it."

I locked the door behind her and glanced at Mom. She shook her head. "This Eileen person . . . where on earth did she come from, and why did she materialize right now? I just don't believe a word she said."

Mom might not believe Eileen's story but I did. It had the ring of truth about it. What it meant and why it was all suddenly coming to light, I had no idea. I trailed behind her back to the kitchen.

"Maybe my mother's journal will clear up some things," Mom said, heading for the dining table. "Where is it? It was here just a minute ago."

The dining table was bare except for our two empty coffee cups and the copy of the Bible record. The gun and the 1918 journal had disappeared.

I pointed at the kitchen door. It stood partially open. The noise I had heard had not been Jethro.

My voice sounded hoarse in my ears. "Someone has been here, Mom. While we were talking to Eileen, someone came through the back door and stole the gun and the journal."

The morning sunshine appeared to take on a brassy tinge. I had the feeling that I had stepped into another dimension. What was happening here? Who was the intruder and thief? Who would want an ancient gun and a journal written many years ago?

It was time to call Grant. These things were happening too fast. They were out of my realm. Since he was the law enforcement person in Ventris County and knew Eileen, maybe he would know what to do. I ran to the telephone.

Chapter 10

Grant and his deputy Jim Clendon came into the kitchen. Both men removed their hats and hung them over the posts of the straight-backed chairs. Grant shook his head. "We've looked the place over. Whoever was here came and left by this door, went to the driveway and evidently on out to the road. He must have kept to the ruts in the street and there's no way to trace which direction he went from there. The snow is pretty slushy by this time."

Mom took two cups out of the cupboard. "He didn't walk by the front room window or we would have seen him."

"I don't know. Would we have seen him, Mom? We were both pretty well zeroed in on what Eileen had to say."

Grant looked at me. "Eileen . . . who?"

Who indeed! I wanted to say, The one who threw her arms around you and was so very glad to see you? Instead, I smiled sweetly and said, "You know, Grant. Your friend Eileen Simmons."

Grant's blue eyes widened. "Eileen . . . she was here?"

Jim Clendon poked Grant in the ribs and was met by a frosty glare.

"Sit down, both of you," Mom said. "We've got a lot to talk about and problems seem smaller with a good cup of coffee."

Grant unbuttoned his jacket, pulled off his gloves, and sat in the chair where my dad used to sit. Clendon hooked his toe around a chair leg, pulled the chair out and lowered himself into it. "Your coffee can't be beat, Miss Flora," he said.

Mom smiled. "Why, thank you, Jim."

Grant took a long drink of Mom's famous brew. "I feel like somebody who came into a theater and the movie was half over. I know about your finding the gun and this marriage certificate that your intruder evidently didn't want. What else is going on?"

Jim Clendon leaned forward, his eyes boring into mine. For some reason I had never liked nor trusted Grant's deputy. I could almost see his ears twitching, ready for a juicy story. "There has been too much talk about what Cub dug up," I said. "I really hope this won't go any farther than the kitchen table."

Clendon frowned and Grant sighed. "Darcy, you know that neither Jim nor I would repeat anything you or Miss Flora tell us."

"Okay. Understood. In the first place, I think you have some answers to a few important questions. Who is this Eileen Simmons? She evidently is pretty well acquainted with you."

Clendon snorted and a slow red crept up Grant's neck. "I should have explained Eileen's visit before this. She's just an overboard kind of person, Darcy. She runs either hot or cold. She hugs everybody."

Jim swirled his coffee. "She didn't hug me."

"Shut up and drink your coffee," Grant muttered. "She's somebody I knew a long time ago, Darcy. In fact, she worked for a while as a dispatcher in the sheriff's office. That was before I was elected but I got to know her."

I didn't miss the sly look and grin that came and went on Clendon's face.

"So she used to live here in Levi?" Mom asked.

Grant nodded. "She didn't know many people here and seemed kind of lonesome."

“That didn’t last long,” Clendon added.

Perhaps I knew enough about Grant and Eileen’s relationship. I didn’t want to hear any more. Of course Grant had probably met many women during the time I was married to Jake. I was in Dallas, happily dividing my time between my home and my job as an investigative reporter at the *Dallas Morning News*. Grant was not the type to mourn a lost love or live the life of a recluse. However, he had never married. At least I didn’t think he had.

Grant shot Clendon a look that plainly told him he had said enough. “Why did Eileen come to see you and Miss Flora, Darcy? She told me that she was just passing through Levi and thought maybe she would look up some people she used to know.”

“We had never laid eyes on her before we saw her in your office,” Mom said. “She had a mighty strange story to tell us.”

Both men put down their cups. “Well, Miss Flora?” Grant said.

So Mom repeated to Grant and Jim the story of Eileen’s visit and what she had told us. It sounded even odder as she spoke. When she finished, I shoved the papers Eileen left across the table to Grant.

He read them and passed them on to Jim. “Pretty unbelievable,” Grant said. “This Markham Cauldfell is the man listed on the Bible page?”

“Yes. It is further proof, Grant, if we needed any more. Granny Grace really was married to this Cauldfell.”

Grant looked down at Jethro who was chummily rubbing his nose against Grant’s jeans-clad leg. “And Eileen’s saying she has some sort of claim to your land, or at least part of it, due to being Cauldfell’s great-granddaughter.”

“That’s what she said, Grant, but I think she is just saying that because for some strange reason, she wants our land.” Mom got up to re-fill cups. “Why, that’s plain ridiculous. There must be some sort of mistake somewhere along the line. It’s hard enough to believe that my mother was married to someone before she married Dad, but it’s even harder to think that nobody knew about it ’til now. You see, the thing I keep asking is why? And why is all this coming to light now? Sounds mighty fishy to me.”

“That’s what we’re going to have to find out, Miss Flora,” Grant said. “The only crimes that have been committed are the theft of that gun and an old journal you just found this morning. Add breaking and entering to that. Pretty serious crimes, but it looks to me like they were tied to something that happened a long time ago. Or maybe the person who came in was thinking of robbing your house and as luck would have it, found the kitchen door unlocked. Most thieves are pretty nervous and don’t hang around long. They don’t want to get caught.”

“Or maybe he was watching the house and when he saw Eileen come to the front door, he thought it was a good time to come in the back. Whoever stole the gun and journal could be working with Eileen,” I said. A niggling headache began between my eyes. I pressed my fingers to my temples.

“Nobody would be watching our house, Darcy,” Mom said. “Why would anybody do that?”

Grant would have to know that I had seen somebody near the woods last night. I had not intended to tell Mom, but there was no getting around it now.

“Yes, Mom, I’m afraid somebody was watching our house,” I said. “I glimpsed him from my bedroom window, but then he disappeared, and I thought I might have imagined him, but I didn’t. This morning, I saw some tracks along the edge of the woods, just out where the trees meet the corner post of our pasture.”

Grant set his coffee cup on the table so hard that coffee sloshed over the rim.

“And you were going to tell me this . . . when, Darcy?”

My face felt hot. I gripped my cup. “I’m sorry, Grant. I didn’t want to worry Mom.”

“Oh, Darcy.” Mom shook her head.

“We’ll go out that way and see if maybe we can find something your keen detective eyes missed,” Grant said. He and Jim got to their feet. When we were teenagers, Grant never spoke with such sarcasm. He had changed.

“Mom, do you still have a bottle of aspirin in the cabinet?” I asked, pushing away from the table. “My head is splitting.”

As I was reaching up to get the pain killer, Grant put his arm around my shoulders. “We’ll be going. We’ll keep in touch and let you know if something comes to light. And Darcy?”

The aspirin bottle in my hand, I turned to face him. At that moment, my heart began pounding as well as my head. I resisted the urge to lean against Grant’s solid warmth. “Yes?”

His eyes were troubled, and he spoke so softly that I doubted that either Mom or Jim heard him when he said, “It probably doesn’t do any good to tell you to be careful, but remember that I’m here if you need me. It looks to me like there’re several things going on concerning your land and that gun and marriage record. I’ll talk some more to Eileen. I wish you’d let me handle it, Darcy, but there’s no use asking you.”

He picked up his hat and left by the kitchen door. Jim took one last gulp of coffee and followed him. I swallowed two aspirins and stared out the kitchen window at the rose bush, rimmed in snow. What was going on in Levi and why were Mom and I in the middle of it yet again? And why did Mom’s usually warm kitchen suddenly seem cold and terribly empty?

Chapter 11

Jethro's loud purring woke me. I scooted him off my pillow and sat up. Last night's dreams must have been the result of all the strange happenings of yesterday. In my dreams, a journal had crumbled into dust when I opened it and a shadowy figure kept flitting through the house.

Shivering, I swung my feet to the floor and reached for my blue robe on the foot of the bed. "Thanks, Jethro," I said to the cat. "You did a good deed by rescuing me from those nightmares."

Downstairs, I could hear Mom fixing breakfast and soon the scent of fresh coffee made me realize I was hungry. I hung the robe back in the closet and pulled out blue jeans and a fleecy red sweatshirt. Maybe today Mom and I could decide upon a course of action concerning the missing gun and journal.

I ran a brush through my dark shoulder-length hair. The face looking back at me from my mirror held no trace of the turmoil going on inside. The older I got, the more I could see my mother's high cheekbones and square jawline in my own face. About the only thing I had inherited from my dad, Andy Tucker, was his stubbornness. That, I had in abundance.

Sunlight glinted on something bright outside and I glanced out my bedroom window. A black Tahoe came slowly down our road. Probably no more than half a dozen cars passed our house each day since there were only two other small farms south of ours and the road ended in a turnaround at the river. We were familiar with most of the cars which ventured on our road, so I noticed this car in particular. I was pretty sure I had never seen it around Levi. It was awfully early for someone to be cruising our street. Was the driver lost? How could anybody get lost in non-metropolis Levi?

The Tahoe moved on past, and I stood by the window a few minutes longer, thinking of how much I would miss the view of the fields and woods when we moved into our new house. Snow still clung to the trees and gate posts. The neighbor's mule in the pasture next to us trotted briskly along the fence, stopped and split the air with his raucous welcome to the morning. Yes, I would miss this dear, familiar place, but there was such an incredible sense of peace and rightness about building that dream home in a location where our ancestors' roots were planted deeply. Building that house was something I had urged my mother to do for years. She had always resisted, saying she could not leave this old house and all its loving memories.

Evidently she was okay with the project now. I could hear her in the kitchen singing *Amazing Grace*. This was a good sign. Hearing her sing or whistle always meant that she was not worried because she had realized anew God is in charge. I wish I could just leave all my troubles in the arms of the Lord. Maybe one day my faith would be as great as my mother's.

The Tahoe came back into view just as I started to turn from the window. It crept slowly along the street as I watched, curious about this stranger. It stopped in front of our mailbox where the driver sat for a full minute, apparently talking on a cell phone, then he made a sharp right turn and pulled into our driveway.

The man who stepped out of the vehicle was tall. He wore gray pants and a brown leather jacket. He stood for a moment in our driveway, studying his surroundings through dark glasses. Then he reached back into the Tahoe, pulled out a briefcase and headed for our broad front porch.

As I went down the stairs, I heard my mother open the door and the stranger's deep voice. "Good morning. I'm looking for Mrs. Flora Tucker. Would that be you?"

"Yes, it would," Mom replied as I came up behind her. "And this is my daughter, Darcy Campbell."

"I thought that might be the case. My name is Stuart Wood, and I'm here to discuss a real estate matter with you."

He handed each of us a business card that read: Innovation Technology, Inc., Stuart V. Wood, Regional Manager.

My mother frowned. "I don't understand. What do you mean by 'a real estate matter'?"

He reached into his briefcase and pulled out a folded piece of paper that looked like a survey plat. "I understand that you, Mrs. Tucker, are the owner of approximately 340 acres of land just north of Levi near the Ventris River."

Cautiously, my mother nodded.

"My company is prepared to offer you a very handsome price for a piece of that property. If I might step inside, I can spread out this plat and make sure we're talking about the same area. I can point out exactly the location of the land we're interested in."

I interrupted. "But none of that land is for sale."

He removed the dark glasses and dropped them in his jacket pocket. "No, not publicly, but it might be if the price were right."

A stranger coming to our door wanting to buy land that wasn't even for sale seemed awfully suspicious to me but apparently Mom and I decided at the same time there would be no harm in listening to his spiel. She opened the door wider and I stepped to one side and motioned to a chair by the coffee table.

He did not sit down, but spread the plat out on the coffee table and smoothed it with both hands. The print was obviously professionally done, the result of a recent survey. I had looked at county records before we began building our new house so we would know its exact location on our land. My mother inherited a piece of a quarter section from her ancestors, a square marked on the map as "Daniels land." Then, early in their marriage, she and my dad had purchased an adjoining farm in order to give them access to the river. The result was a T-shaped piece of real estate marked clearly on the plat as "Part of the Northeast Quarter of Section 23, Township 31, Range 19."

"Now here," Stuart Wood pointed with his pen, "is the Ventris River, and here is your property boundary, and here is the location of your new home, only about half a mile from the river."

He looked at me, evidently believing that Mom would not understand real estate descriptions.

I nodded. "Yes, I've seen the county records."

Mom's glare said that she was not to be dismissed from this conversation. "As have I, Mr. Wood."

"And here," he drew a square on the print which cut off the main part of the bottom of the T-shape, "is the land my company is interested in. It's approximately forty acres."

I had only one question for him. "Why? Most of that part is hills and rocks. Lee Creek flows through it."

"Well, my company, as you may know, specializes in very sensitive high technology equipment, and we want to build a plant here, away from the prying eyes and news media in the

big cities. That's so no-body will know what we're working on until we're ready to provide a news release."

I had never heard of Innovation Technology. My eyes followed the path of his pen. "But then your facility would be next to our new house."

"Yes, but we're prepared to pay you two hundred thousand dollars for that small piece of your property."

I closed my mouth before I could say "Wow!" That was a stupendous price for a small chunk of Ventris County. Stuart Wood and I gazed at each other across the coffee table. That's when my mom, who had been completely silent during this exchange, made her pronouncement.

"No, no, no, sir!!! I don't care if your high flying company is willing to pay two million dollars for it; that property is not for sale. It's been in my family for years and will never be sold as long as Darcy and I are living."

She grabbed up the plat and pushed it toward the man. "You know where the door is. Now get out!"

Chapter 12

“This is getting too deep for me,” I told Mom. “I know a little about the law covering real estate and inheritance, but all this stuff that happened years ago and the documents; are they authentic? I just don’t know how we can tell for sure if they are real or if they are fakes.”

She put down her coffee cup and gazed out the kitchen window. “You’re right. We need legal advice and I don’t know of anybody better to give it than Jackson Conner. It’s already nine o’clock and I imagine he has a room full of clients, but I’ll give it a try.” She pushed back her chair and headed toward the phone.

Punching in Jackson Conner’s number, she covered the mouthpiece and said, “Probably he won’t be able to see us until the end of next week. Everybody has a tight schedule nowadays.”

She turned back to the phone. “Hello, Mary Ann. This is Flora Tucker. Darcy and I have a problem and need to talk to Jackson as soon as possible. Do you think you can work us in on Monday possibly?”

There was a short pause. Then, “Well, sure, we can come this morning, but I didn’t think . . . of course. We’ll be there in about thirty minutes.”

She replaced the phone and turned to me, one eyebrow lifted. “Mary Ann said Jackson told her he would see us as soon as we could get there. What do you suppose that means?”

I suppressed a grin. My suspicion was that the lawyer wanted to see my mother any time he had the chance. That was OK with me. He was a good, honest man and it would be nice for Mom to have an old friend she could talk to and confide in.

“I think that means that somebody around here has some pull with Levi’s most popular lawyer,” I said.

We didn’t get to Jackson Conner’s office in thirty minutes; it was more like forty-five. Mom came downstairs sporting a dark green velveteen pantsuit I had never seen before. She wore a trace of pink lipstick and had fluffed her naturally curly hair until it framed her face.

In old jeans and sweatshirt, I didn’t look stylish but felt, oh so comfortable. However, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity for a small jab at my mother’s meticulous appearance.

I feigned a huge sigh and looked at the clock. “Well, it seems that we are going to be a little late for that appointment. I hope Mr. Conner is not in conference with another client when we get there, and I do hope he appreciates that pretty green outfit.”

Mom slipped into her coat and grinned. “I’m not worried.”

Three other people waited in Jackson Conner’s outer office, but Mary Ann rose and beckoned us to follow her down the hall. She tapped lightly on a closed door before she opened it. Conner had been sitting behind a huge oak desk. He rose immediately and came toward us, hand outstretched first to Mom and then to me.

“Flora, Darcy, it’s mighty good to see you. Come in and have a seat.”

I glanced around. Jackson Conner’s office was a comfortable, masculine-looking room. The cedar paneling and dark leather furniture was like the man himself: solid, dependable, and attractive. What I remembered most from past visits was the scent of his cherry-flavored pipe tobacco. Although Jackson’s pipe lay unlit on his desk, that fragrance lingered.

His hand rested lightly on Mom's shoulder as he guided us toward our chairs. Then he rounded the big desk, sank down into the leather swivel chair behind it, and propped his elbows on the desktop. "Now, what can I do for you ladies today?"

It took fifteen minutes for me to explain our bizarre situation. It took him twice that long to explain the nuances of the law to Mom and me.

He steepled his fingers under his chin. "First of all, the law on inheritance of property is pretty clear cut. The legal heirs of the original owner of a piece of real estate have every right to that piece of property in a line of progression that goes from a husband or wife to children and on to grandchildren. If none of those exist, then the owner's brothers and sisters and their heirs would inherit. That would be pretty simple in your case if everything was legal and recorded. This Cauldfell man owned the property originally. If he was, in fact, married to Grace for only a short period of time, and there were no children from this union, Grace would be the legitimate heir." He frowned. "Of course, that all depends on being able to prove there actually was a marriage between the two."

I nodded. "Yes, and that's one of the things that I haven't yet been able to establish to my mother's satisfaction, but I believe it must be true. I spent most of one day searching through records and newspapers, and it looks like there was a marriage."

Mom looked down at her hands. "I guess it's a case of my mind realizing the facts say my mother was married before she married my father and my heart refusing to believe it's true. It just seems disloyal to accept it."

"Let's consider for a minute that it did indeed happen, and they were only married for a couple of months."

"Yes, we can assume that," Mom said, "even though it makes my stomach twist up in knots."

I glanced up at the framed motto which had graced Jackson's wall for as long as I could remember: "If God brought you to it, He will take you through it." Was it God who had brought us to this dilemma? I fervently hoped that He would take us through it.

"At any rate," Jackson continued, "if this Eileen does prove to be the offspring of Cauldfell, she might very well be an heir, depending on when her grandmother was born. If that happened before he was married to Grace, then Eileen would be a primary heir. If it happened afterward, then Grace's claim would come first."

He paused and picked up his pipe. "Do you ladies mind if I smoke?"

We both shook our heads.

"So, you've got a couple of problems here that are going to be hard to resolve because of the length of time involved, and because it can sometimes be really difficult to prove the authenticity of the birth certificate. Occasionally, in the past, doctors made our birth certificates on the information given to them by a member of the family. And there have been cases where that information was false."

Mom asked, "How can we prove what happened in the past if we have no way of knowing which documents are real?"

Jackson patted Mom's hand. "Because it happened so long ago, it may be difficult. I'll do a little investigating, but what we may have to do is file a petition with the court to determine ownership of the land. That would involve a lot of time and a lot of people, that is, assuming we can find enough people who recall hearing things from parents or grandparents." He nodded his head.

"Yes, that might work." Jackson puffed on his pipe. "But, you see, we're talking about events that happened almost a

century ago and there may not be much in the way of written records. So many who might have known something about the case have died or moved away.”

I shifted in my chair. “We realize we are sort of groping in the dark. We thought we might find some answers in Granny Grace’s journal but it was stolen.”

His blue eyes sharpened. “You don’t say.”

Reluctantly, I told him about the theft which happened during Eileen’s visit.

“You see Mr. Jackson, that journal of Granny Grace’s may possibly help us understand what’s going on now, nearly a hundred years after it was written. And the gun...well, surely the gun and marriage certificate and journal are tied together in this strange tale,” His pipe had grown cold while I talked. He tapped the ashes out in the glass tray on his desk.

Mom fidgeted. “What do you think, Jackson?”

He shrugged. “Somebody didn’t want you to see what was in that journal so whatever it is must be important. But the fact that Flora and her immediate ancestors have been paying taxes on that land and have been using it for several years is a point in your favor, unless, of course, the information in the journal flatly contradicts everything you believe about the land.”

He turned to my mother. “You have been using that land in some manner for the last several years, haven’t you, Flora?”

“Yes, most of it I’ve been renting to the Staffords and Bruce Dowell for pasture.”

“Let me do a little research and we’ll see what we can find out. In the meantime, Darcy, you might tie in to your information sources and see what you can find out about this Eileen. Seems mighty odd to me that nobody knew anything about her and then she shows up just when that piece of land is getting to be in high demand.”

I nodded. “I’ll let you know, Mr. Conner.”

He blew a perfect smoke ring toward the ceiling and turned toward my mother. His voice lost none of its brusqueness as he said, “I was considering, Flora, that you and I might go over to that new restaurant on Highway 94 on Sunday evening and give it a try. What do you think?”

Mom blushed like a school girl. She glanced at me, smiled, and looked back at Jackson. “I think that’s a mighty fine idea.”

On that surprising note, we all rose to our feet.

Jackson walked with us to the door of his outer office. “And I’ll try to study the law on real estate a little bit more between now and then. If we’re lucky, I might even have some information for you by that time.”

We shook hands all around then Mom and I strode past the waiting people and climbed into my red Ford Escape.

Chapter 13

I felt more secure, knowing that our problems were in the hands of a competent lawyer. I even dared hope Eileen had given up on her quest for land so it was with a sense of surprise two days after our visit with Jackson Conner that I put the telephone receiver back in its cradle and turned to face my mother. “That was Eileen Simmons,” I said.

Mom slid a pan of cornbread into the oven and straightened up. “Eileen? Didn’t she say enough already?”

“She wants me to meet her at Dilly’s for lunch.” The hands of the kitchen clock pointed to 11:45.

Mom frowned. “Lunch will be on the table here in about twenty minutes. If you want to go talk to that woman, why not wait ’til after you eat? Did she say what this is all about?”

“Of course! The land and her dear departed ancestor. She said she thought maybe we could make some sort of deal. She said she thinks we should be friends because we are very nearly kin.” I shuddered.

Mom actually stamped her foot. “I wish she would quit saying that. We certainly are not related to that Markham Cauldfell. Just forget her call, Darcy, and maybe if we ignore her, she’ll go away.”

I went to the hall closet for my coat. “She doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. I think I’ll meet her just because I’m curious about her incredible story. Remember, we have the advantage of having talked to Jackson Conner,” I said over my shoulder.

“It gives me a good feeling to know just where we stand legally. Jackson is in our corner, however this turns out,” Mom said.

Yes, Jackson Conner and Mom were certainly in the same corner. Were things getting serious with those two? I waved at her and walked out to my Ford Escape.

Eileen Simmons could surely have picked a better day for meeting me at Dilly’s. The lunch crowd was larger than usual because of the roast beef special. People were waiting to be seated, but when I stepped inside, Eileen stood up and waved at me from a booth halfway down the wall. I wove in and out between arriving and departing customers and Tony, who was going from kitchen to tables at a brisk trot.

Eileen’s shiny black hair was done up in a twist. Dangling earrings brushed against her face. Her large, brown leather purse sat beside her on the bench. “Sorry about the crowd,” she said as I slid into the seat across from her. “This place must have good food.”

“It does,” I said.

“I haven’t ordered yet. Would you like to eat? My treat.”

“No, just coffee. Mom will have lunch waiting for me when I get back home. Feel free to order whatever you’d like,” I said.

Tony arrived with menus.

“I want your roast beef special,” Eileen said. “And black coffee.”

I handed him my menu. “Just coffee for me, Tony. Make mine black too.”

Eileen and I stared across the table at each other. “Have you thought any more about those papers I brought you?” she asked.

Had I? I hadn't thought about much else. Well, yes, I had . . . the intruder and the visit from the man wanting to buy our land, and the information from Jackson Conner. I nodded.

Her eyebrows drew down. "Well?"

Tony brought our coffee and saved me from answering. "Roast beef special for you, Ma'am, coming up in a minute," he said to Eileen. "I hope you enjoy it."

"Look, Eileen, I don't know what to tell you. Mom and I have consulted a lawyer—"

She seemed surprised. "You did?"

"Certainly. Surely you have done the same."

She gulped her coffee, said, "Whew!" and fanned her mouth. "Hot."

"You said maybe we could make a deal. What do you have in mind?"

She shifted in her seat and fiddled with her coffee cup. "Not actually a deal, Darcy, but a hope that we can come to an understanding. You will have to admit that I've got a pretty good claim on that land. And I won't quit. I know where I stand and that land, the part that old Markham had, that is mine."

I felt heat rise up my neck, but before I could answer, Tony appeared again with Eileen's roast beef and a message for me. "Somebody over at the door is wanting to talk to you, Darcy," he said.

I turned around and tried to see past the crowd of people. "Who? And why don't they just come on over?"

"He said it was private. He asked if you'd go talk to him."

Strange request but maybe it was important. "Okay. Be right back, Eileen."

She grinned. "I'm not going anywhere."

I threaded my way around Tony's customers until I got the front door of Dilly's cafe. The bench by the door was crowded with people waiting for an empty table. Nobody seemed interested in my presence except for one or two people I knew. Pat Harris, Mom's friend and secretary of the Goshen Cemetery board, smiled and waved.

"OK, where is he?" I asked as Tony bustled past.

He scanned the faces of those seated and shrugged. "If that don't beat all. He's not here."

"What did he look like?"

"I don't know . . . little short guy, needed a haircut. Hair stuck out under his ball cap. I didn't notice what he was wearing, Darcy. I'm kind of busy here."

I slowly walked back to Eileen. Why would somebody want to talk to me and not come to the table? And how did he know I was here? The only people who knew I was coming were Mom and Eileen.

I slid into the booth and stared at the woman across from me. "Good beef, Darcy," she said, chewing busily. "You should have some."

I shook my head. "I don't want anything but coffee. Did you tell someone you were meeting me?"

She looked up. "Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"Because no one knew I was here. No one but my mother and you."

"Maybe somebody called your house and she told them."

"Sure. It could have happened. Maybe."

"The coffee is good too, Darcy. Better drink yours before it gets cold."

I turned my half full cup around in its saucer. Something was not right. Who was the man who had wanted to talk to me? What caused him to leave?

I pointed to my cup as Tony bustled past with his Pyrex pot. "Could I have more coffee please?"

"Sure thing," he said. As he started to pour, one of the departing customers bumped against him. His pot rammed my cup, pushing it against Eileen's cup and sloshing coffee onto the table.

"Watch what you're doing!" Eileen snapped, snatching her napkin and dabbing at the spill.

"Sorry," Tony muttered. He grabbed a cloth from his apron, moved our cups out of the spill and cleaned up the mess then he moved the cups back in front of us and left.

Eileen snorted. "Clumsy man."

"It actually wasn't Tony's fault," I said. "Somebody bumped him."

"Well, he should have been more careful." She popped the last bit of beef into her mouth, chewed, swallowed, and drained her coffee cup.

"So, Darcy, what do you think about the documents I brought to you and your mother? Are you willing to deed the land to me?"

This woman's manner so rankled me that I had a tough time controlling my voice. "If the land is yours already, Eileen, do I need to deed it to you?"

"Just to be sure there is no question farther on down the line, I think that might be a wise thing to do." She squinted and leaned toward me. "You look a little pale, Darcy. Are you feeling well?"

That took me by surprise. "Of course I do. I don't feel pale. Why should I?"

"If you aren't going to talk sense about a deed, you might as well go home," she said.

That floored me. "Look, Eileen, it was your idea to meet me here and I was hoping you'd have some light to shed on this strange story of yours but you haven't said one thing that was worth my time and effort in coming."

She picked up her purse and scooted toward the edge of her seat. "Well, do what you like. I'm leaving."

She had started to rise when she grabbed her throat and gasped. Her face looked flushed and her lips pulled back against her teeth.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Are you all right?"

She coughed into her napkin. "No. I don't feel well. I've gotta get out of here." She struggled to her feet and reeled toward the door.

Eileen lurched past Tony, bumping into him and sloshing more coffee from his pot. She staggered toward the door, knocking people out of the way as she ran.

"Wait!" I called. I slid from the booth and hurried after her. As I reached the door, I saw Eileen totter and lurch into the seat of a green Chevrolet truck parked at the curb. The man at the wheel wore a ball cap, hair sticking out from under it in all directions. I ran toward the truck but with a squeal of tires, it sped away.

The truck's license plate was smudged with mud and unreadable. I stood on the curb, staring after it. What was the meaning of this? Eileen was decidedly ill but why? Was it something in the roast beef she had eaten? We both had drunk coffee so if anything in Dilly's had made her sick, it must have been the roast beef. Other diners in the café had not been affected by eating the food.

If I were as ill as Eileen seemed to be, I would head for the hospital as fast as I could. I was betting that was the destination of the green truck.

I fumbled in my pocket for my cell phone and dialed a familiar number. Grant picked up on the first ring.

“Grant, Eileen and some guy left Dilly’s in a hurry. He’s driving a green Chevy truck. They may be heading for the hospital. Eileen—she’s in a bad way.”

Grant’s voice crackled in my ear. “What do you mean ‘in a bad way’?”

“We were eating and—”

“Wait, wait. You and Eileen were eating together?”

“I’ll explain, but in a word, yes. At least she was eating here at Dilly’s. She had roast beef and she started to leave but all at once, she didn’t feel well.”

“Did she get choked on food? What?”

“No, she didn’t get choked. Actually, Grant, she had finished her roast beef sandwich and coffee. Since I wouldn’t talk about giving her the right to our land, she started to leave and...”

Like a light bulb going off, I remembered being called away from the table and Tony’s coffee spill. Had someone bumped into him on purpose and used the distraction to slip something into Eileen’s coffee cup? My neck muscles tensed and a cold shiver of fear ran down my spine as another thought froze my blood. Could the man who disappeared from Dilly’s have been a ruse to get me away from the table while Eileen put something in my coffee? Would she actually stoop to causing me physical harm?

“Actually, Grant, I think she might have been . . .” I remembered that Eileen had grabbed her throat and coughed. I whispered the word, “poisoned.”

I explained to Grant what had happened; the man who wanted to talk to me, the coffee spill and the possibility that Tony might have accidentally switched cups. Grant hung up abruptly. I did the same

Chapter 14

My hands shook so hard that I had to try three times before I could get the key into the ignition of my car, but it took only a few minutes to drive to Levi's hospital. The green truck sat in the parking lot. The truck was empty. I jumped from my car and ran to the ER entrance.

"Was a black haired woman just admitted?" I asked the receptionist at the desk. "She may have been complaining of stomach pain or having breathing problems."

The middle-aged woman behind the glass partition looked up. "Are you a relative?"

"No, no. I'm just um . . . I just happen to know her."

She stared at me for a full five seconds then said, "I'll have to check." She left the desk and disappeared somewhere down a hall.

I paced the floor. The hands of the clock seemed to be stuck in one position. When at last the receptionist reappeared, Grant was with her. I ran to him. "Grant, do you know anything about Eileen?"

"The doctors are doing what they can, Darcy. You'd better tell me what you know about this."

He took my arm and guided me to two chairs situated beside a large potted palm.

"Doing what they can? So, was I right? Did she drink poison?"

"Maybe. Maybe she just choked on a piece of food. Tell me again how all this went down."

So I re-told Grant about the visit to Dilly's, the message from a stranger that took me away from the table, the coffee spill. As I talked, Grant scribbled in a pocket-sized notebook.

"And that's it," I finished. Honestly, it was warmer outdoors than in here. I crossed my arms over my chest and shivered.

Grant got up, went to the coffee dispenser, and brought back two Styrofoam cups of the hot drink. I held it in both hands, trying to stop shaking.

Grant ran his hand through his hair. "So, do you think Eileen put something in your coffee while you were gone and then drank it by mistake?"

My teeth were chattering. "I don't know. Maybe."

We stared at each other, trying to absorb the awfulness of the situation.

A man stopped in front of us and I looked up into a fiery red face topped with hair sticking out from under his baseball cap like tufts of straw. "You!" he thundered, pointing a finger at me. "You are the one who killed her. She's dead and you're a murderer."

Grant stood up and placed himself squarely in front of me. His voice was low. "Hold on and quiet down. I need some information from you, and I need you to come with me to my office."

The man was breathing hard.

When the man showed no inclination to move, Grant jerked his thumb toward the door. "Now," he barked.

He looked at me and in a much quieter voice, said, "Darcy, go home and stay there."

I nodded and stumbled out to my car. It was only when I reached the door of the Escape that I realized I still held the Styrofoam cup as if I were grasping a lifeline.

Chapter 15

I went home as Grant told me to do and when I got there, I did some-thing I hadn't done for a while—put my head down on my mother's table and cried. Mom, bless her heart, was the strong one. She kept patting my shoulder and saying, "Oh, my goodness!" and "It's going to be all right, Darcy, you'll see." She didn't spout platitudes nor offer advice but her reassuring presence did more for me than any nerve pill. She even brought me a cup of hot cocoa after supper and sat by the fire with me until we both decided to go upstairs to bed.

Across the hall, Mom tossed and turned as much as I did. I heard her noisy springs squeak each time she turned over in bed. Finally, I switched on my bedside lamp and read my latest cozy mystery, "A Nest of Starlings." When I awoke the next morning, the book was on the floor by my bed and the lamp was still shining.

Mom had coffee waiting in the kitchen. I sat down, drank a cupful and smiled. "Thanks, Mom. I feel better than I did last night. How about you?"

"I'm fine, Darcy. I'm going to stay in today but why don't you go visit your friend Amy Miller? It might do you good to see those beautiful twins of hers."

I stood up and stretched. "Great idea, Mom."

"Just be on the lookout, Darcy. I know that we can't be intimidated by evil people but keep your eyes open."

"You can count on it, Mom," I said.

I showered, dressed in blue jeans and a burgundy sweater, pushed my hair under a knit cap, slipped into my boots and parka, and walked out to my Ford. Blustery, gray clouds scudded before an icy wind but at least the roads were dry.

Getting out of the house and into God's great out-of-doors was the tonic I needed. I switched on the car's radio. It was set at my favorite Easy Listen' station. A love song, "I Warm My Heart Around a Memory" was playing. Even though the song's theme was sad, it had a strong bass that made me want to tap my feet. Since I was driving, foot-tapping was out, so I sang along with the male artist, "*I think of you and what you meant to me, And warm my heart around a memory.*"

And who was I thinking of as I sang, Jake or Grant? Abruptly, I switched off the radio and concentrated on driving. Ahead a weathered sign swung from a wide pasture gate. *Miller Ranch* was burned into the wood and my friend's lovely home appeared beyond the gate.

"You have a beautiful house, Amy," I said, as I slipped out of my parka and gloves. "It is comfortable and inviting but it looks pretty classy." I gave her a hug. "I can see your personality in the way you've decorated. Criss-cross sheer curtains, red-print sofa and this cream-colored carpet, all pure Amy Smith Miller."

Amy hung up my coat and caught my hand. "I'm so happy you came,

Darcy. We don't get to see each other often enough."

I followed her through to her family room where a fire crackled on the hearth.

We had talked several times on the phone since my return to Levi but actually met only once, at Dilly's for lunch. Today I had a special reason for driving out to my high school friend's ranch that sprawled over 300 acres of Ventris County.

"Maybe things will be a little less hectic in my life now," Amy said, "and we can get together more often. Rex, Jr. is in college in Norman so that just leaves the twins here at home.

You would think that two-year old twins wouldn't consume all my time and energy but they seem to."

"Where are Drew and my little namesake Darcy?" I asked. "I haven't met them yet."

"Napping, thankfully. I wouldn't take anything for them, but I tell you, I had forgotten how tired a mom of toddlers gets."

"Well, you and Jack just would start a family," I said, teasing her. "We are the same age, Amy, and I'm quite sure I would have neither the patience nor the physical stamina to take on the responsibility of eighteen years or so of motherhood at this stage in my life. You have my undying respect and admiration."

"Only eighteen years?" Amy scoffed. "Believe me, although Rex is away at the University of Oklahoma, he still needs his mom for many things. Money seems to top the list." She grinned at me. "When you meet the right man, you just might change your mind about having a family."

"Are you and Jack doing well?" I asked. "Still madly in love I suppose?"

"Oh, Darcy, after my divorce from Rex, I thought I was through with being a dutiful wife, but that was before I met Jack. He is so different, such a wonderful man." Her eyes shone. "I've never regretted risking marriage again. I'm the luckiest woman on planet earth."

Amy brought a cup of coffee to me as I sat on the loveseat facing the fireplace. She sat across from me. "So, what about you? Are you feeling stronger and more able to cope concerning Jake's death? And, Grant? Do you think you two will get back together? You were quite the item all through high school. What happened there anyway?"

I swallowed a sip of the steaming drink and sighed. "We had great plans, Amy, but we were so very young and that was before Jake came into my life. After that, nothing else mattered."

"And you regret that?"

"Not a bit. I don't regret Jake and I don't regret Grant. Jake was a wonderful husband but now that I'm back, it seems the part of my life that involved him was just a dream, and Grant is what is real. I must be a really shallow person."

Amy shook her head. "No, you're not shallow. If I didn't have Rex as the physical proof of my first marriage, I might believe I dreamed the whole thing too. How about that book I suggested you write? You know—the one about legends and mysteries of Ventris County. Have you started it yet?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm too busy living some of those mysteries. I'll tell you all about the current one later."

"Speaking of mysteries reminds me, Darcy, of what Jack said the other night. He had been driving that old road that runs by your grandmother's place out on the river and he saw some lights moving about, sort of like more than one person was out with a flashlight." She laughed. "He said it looked kind of spooky and made him think of those ghost lights that are seen out there occasionally. That's one of the things I want you to put in your book, Darcy, once you decide to write it: the ghost lights of Ventris County."

I shook my head. "I don't know, Amy, whether ghosts are real or not. Those lights Jack saw may have been a phenomenon caused by rotting logs or something. Actually, since you have been here in Ventris County all your life and I've only recently returned, I thought you might be able to fill me in on a few details about Grant."

Amy raised her eyebrows.

"If Grant knew that I had gotten out of the house, he would be upset. He wants me to stay close to home until he can investigate the death of Eileen Simmons. Have you heard about that?"

Amy nodded. "Yes, but I'm afraid I don't understand. Grant is just being protective, isn't he?"

"I guess saying he is protective sounds better than saying he's really bossy. This woman who died, her name was Eileen, had a friend who seems to blame me for her death. Grant thinks the man may want to get even with me. I'm sure Grant just wants me to be safe but I'm not used to somebody making decisions for me, such as staying in the house out of fear that something might happen."

"That's Grant. He takes seriously his job of watching out for every citizen although I'm thinking he has a personal interest in taking care of you."

She grinned and patted my knee. "I'm concerned too, Darcy. Should you have driven all the way out here by yourself today?"

"I'm not afraid and I'm blessed if I'll stay home cowering. It's only a 15-minute drive to your ranch, Amy, and the doors of my Escape stay locked."

She nodded and picked up one of her twin's balls from the floor. Sitting in her rocker recliner and pushing it with her toe, she absent-mindedly turned the ball in circles.

"You know that I'm glad any time you can come to visit. What can I tell you about Grant that you don't already know? He's a fine man, honest and hard-working."

"Yes, I realize Grant is a wonderful man and I know he cares for me. Ready or not, I believe I still care for him, but what about all those years, Amy, those years when I was in Dallas, married to Jake? Did Grant stay in Ventris County?"

Amy brushed a minute piece of lint from her jeans. "I don't know whether you'll like what you hear, Darcy. After you left him, Grant was pretty broken up. He became a recluse for a while, didn't go anywhere, didn't want to see anybody, then all of a sudden, he changed and started dating this one and that one. I believe he was trying to forget."

My conscience tweaked me and I winced. "I can understand. How about this woman who died, this Eileen Simmons. Do you remember her?"

Amy blew a wisp of short blond hair off her forehead. "I didn't know her well. We didn't exactly run in the same circles but I think Grant may have dated her for a while. She sort of appeared in town then disappeared. I didn't know she was back until I heard of her death."

My friend didn't pry into how I could have been involved with Eileen but I knew she was curious. Later I would share the details of Eileen's death. But not today. Today the whole disaster was too raw and confusing.

We were interrupted by the sound of children's voices coming down the hall. Little Darcy and Drew appeared in the room, their eyes sleepy and their faces rosy from their nap. They stopped when they saw me.

Amy went to them and led them to where I sat. "This is your Aunt Darcy. You were named for her," she said to the little girl.

Their shyness evaporated and they climbed up on the sofa. One sat on each side and looked me over.

For the next fifteen minutes, I played ball, wound a pop-up clown, and admired Drew's latest wound, a scratch on his knee. Then I pulled two small packages from my purse. I gave one to each child and rose to go.

"Please come again soon," Amy said as she followed me to the door. "And do be careful, Darcy. I treasure you and your friendship."

I smiled. "Same here, Amy."

Waving good-bye to the three of them, I went down the walk and climbed into my Escape. Amy and her children stood in the door waving, a calming scene in this storm that raged around me.

Chapter 16

Pat shivered. "That wind sounds like a wild animal trying to get into the house."

Pat Harris, secretary of the Goshen Cemetery Board and my mother's best friend, sat with Mom and me in front of our fireplace. The stack of logs blazed, but still the room seemed chilly. The north wind found every crack in our hundred-year old farmhouse. Mom pulled her green afghan around her shoulders.

"We'll just have to make the best of the cold," Mom said. "It's winter. January days in Oklahoma are usually cold." She picked up the poker and jabbed the logs, sending sparks showering.

Gray clouds seemed to almost touch the bare tops of trees. Truly the sky seemed to be lowering. "The weatherman doesn't think more snow will get here until this afternoon," I said.

Pat set her coffee cup on the floor and leaned back against her chair. "I'm hoping I'll have time to get home before the streets get slippery. But before I leave, I want to know what's going on with you two."

Mom looked sharply at her old friend. "What do you mean? Is something going on?"

Pat laughed. "Flora Tucker! You never could fool me, even when we were girls. Of course there's something going on. All of Levi knows about Cub finding that box and everybody's guessing what's in it. I know deep in my bones that there's a whole lot more that you're not telling. I also know that some girl from out of town died at the hospital a couple of days ago and the rumor is she was poisoned. So, come clean now. Out with the story!"

Mom looked at me and gave a tiny shake of her head. While it was true that Pat was Mom's good friend, she loved to talk and sometimes without meaning to, let something slip. I had known Pat all my life and was well acquainted with her kindness as well as her liking of a good piece of gossip. How much should we tell her so she would be satisfied that she was in our confidence?

Pat crossed her legs and leaned forward, looking first at Mom, then me. I thought I could see her ears twitch.

Mom fiddled with the fringe on her afghan. "I hope you understand, Pat, that we can't say too much about what Cub dug up. It was a parcel, I guess you'd say, and not a box. That's just the tale that's making the rounds. I don't know how the "box" thing got started. We've told Grant all about it and also Jackson Conner. We're going to let them take care of it."

Jethro rubbed against Pat's leg. She reached down and scooped him onto her lap. "Well, fiddlesticks! I don't see why you can't tell me or at least let me see that confounded parcel or whatever it is."

"We don't have it at the moment," I said. "We don't know who has it."

Pat's mouth dropped open. "You mean it was stolen?"

Mom nodded.

"Well! What a muddle. So that mysterious "thing" is important enough to somebody that they risked thievery?"

"Afraid so," I agreed.

“Pat,” Mom said, “your family has lived in Levi a long time, probably as long as mine has. Do you remember hearing your parents or grandparents talk about what went on here in Ventris County during the time of World War I?”

Pat wrinkled her forehead and tugged at her ear lobe. “I’d have to spend some time thinking about that. It was a lot of years ago and, of course, most of the old folks who would know are already dead and gone. I guess about the oldest ones in this area are the Jenkins twins. From what my mama told me, their father was a judge in the early 1900s, a real strict, stern person. He was responsible for sending several men to the gallows. I remember hearing Mama say that Miss Georgia and Miss Carolina are so strait-laced because that’s the way they were raised.”

Mom went to the wood basket and pitched another log on the fire. “Yes, I’ve been to see the Jenkins sisters. They were friendly enough but they were close mouthed about giving out answers to any questions.”

“That’s just their old-timey way. What about that girl who died? Somebody said Darcy was right there when she was stricken or whatever happened to her.”

I squirmed in my chair. The investigation into Eileen’s death might involve me, if I were called upon to testify. That whole episode of possible poisoning sounded fantastic even to me. I could only imagine how a coroner’s jury might perceive it.

“I don’t know what happened to Eileen,” I said. “Yes, I was there when she started feeling bad but no decision has been reached in the cause of her death. Hopefully, the whole sad thing will be straightened out before long.”

Pat glanced at the clock. “If you’re going to be so close-lipped about everything, I might as well go. Jasper will be in for lunch. Honestly, I don’t see how that boy stays out in this weather. You know, I believe he’d rather roam through the woods than be in a warm house. Just between us, I’m kind of worried about him. He’s always liked secrets, but he has been real quiet lately and I wonder what he’s up to.”

“Jasper is a good boy, Pat,” Mom said as we all stood up. “He may not do everything the way other people do but he means well.”

“Sure. I know that. I just wish he’d talk to me.”

Pat started toward the door then turned to Mom with a grin. “By the way, was that you and Jackson Conner I saw at the new restaurant the other night?”

Mom sniffed. “Could have been.”

I retrieved Pat’s coat from the hallway. Mom and I walked with her to the front door. After she left, I turned to my mother.

“We sure didn’t get any help from her, did we?”

“Pat doesn’t know anything about our dilemma, Darcy. She’d be willing to help if she could. Somebody in this town knows some answers, but I sure as the world don’t know who. I just know it isn’t Pat.”

Chapter 17

Grant was on the phone later that afternoon when I hurried into his office. He lifted one hand in greeting.

“Yes, I know we’ll have to get specifics from the state lab, but you’ve been in the business long enough to make a pretty good guess, and you say you saw none of the indications of a sudden heart attack?”

He was making notes as they talked. “So it had to be a poison since it worked so quickly, and if it was a poison, you think it may have been one that was made from a rare tropical root?”

He paused, then said, “Yes, I’ll check back with you tomorrow.”

He replaced the phone, rose from his big leather chair and came around the desk to sit down beside me and take my hand. He was obviously very concerned.

“Darcy, Doc McCauley believes Eileen ingested some kind of poison that worked very quickly. He said he had only read about cases where the victim was poisoned like Eileen was. We’re just guessing here, but until somebody confesses to killing her, and I don’t think that’s likely, I’m saying Eileen put that poison in your cup when you went to find the man who gave Tony the message. Then Tony accidentally swapped cups when somebody bumped him.”

Sudden tears stung my eyes. I had just escaped death by a hair’s breadth. “I can’t believe Eileen really meant to kill me.” My voice sounded shaky to my own ears. “What could she hope to gain by that? Didn’t she know she couldn’t get away with murder?”

He reached for my other hand. “Let’s assume she wanted you dead for reasons of her own. Or maybe she didn’t want you to die, just to get sick. Doc McCauley said that this plant is volatile and sometimes reacts more violently on one person than it would on another. It looks like she and the bushy haired guy, whose name, by the way, is Jude Melton, may have been working together. Now, tell me exactly how you came to be having lunch with her. You didn’t know her from before, did you? Maybe from the time she was the dispatcher here in Curtis’ office back when he was the sheriff? Or maybe even before that?”

I shook my head. “No, I never saw her before that day here in your office.” I couldn’t resist adding, “The day she hugged you and seemed so friendly.”

“Yes, well, believe it or not, that was the first time I’d seen her for quite a while, too.”

“She phoned and wanted us to have lunch, Grant. She said we had something to talk about. She was already at Dilly’s when I got there. The place was jam-packed. We both had coffee, but I didn’t plan on actually eating. I couldn’t imagine she’d have anything new to say since I thought she said it all when she came to the house. Just a few minutes after I sat down, Tony came and told me that a stranger at the front door had asked to speak privately to me, but when I reached the entryway, the man Tony described was not there. Tony said he had been busy and all he remembered about the fellow was that he wore a cap and his hair stuck out all around it.”

Grant frowned and looked down at my hands. “And then right after you got back to your booth, somebody bumped into Tony and he knocked your coffee cups around?”

My mouth felt dry. I didn’t even want to remember how close I had come to drinking the poisoned coffee.

I thought back to my first meeting with Eileen. “I didn’t like or trust her from the very beginning, you know? And her new-found friendliness by inviting me for lunch seemed false.”

Grant stood up, strode to the window behind his desk and spoke with his back toward me. "This meeting at Dilly's happened shortly after that guy from Tulsa stopped at your house and talked to your mom about buying some of her land that wasn't really for sale?"

"Yes. His name was Stuart Wood." I dug in my handbag for the card he'd given us.

Grant took the card and turned to his computer. After five minutes of pressing keys, he said, "That's strange. I don't find any record of an Oklahoma company called Innovation Technology, but according to this card, it's located on Irwin Street in Tulsa."

He reached for the phone and punched in the number on the card. He listened, then replaced the receiver. "And this confirms it. AT&T says this number has been disconnected."

"So the guy didn't really represent a company and he was lying?" I rubbed my temples. My head ached from trying to make sense of the gun, marriage certificate, Eileen's death and now it seemed that Innovation Technology was a front for some kind of scheme to grab my mother's land.

Grant dropped into his desk chair and stared at a spot over my head. He raised his index finger. "Fact number one: these strange things seem to have begun when you and your mom started building your new house."

He lifted a second finger. "Cub found that very old gun with one bullet missing and the remains of an old marriage document in an abandoned well."

A third finger joined the first two. "And then Eileen suddenly puts in an appearance after an absence of five or six years and begins to make efforts to contact you and your mom with a rather unusual request that she 'needs to see you about something important'."

"Yes, it all seems to have started when Cub dug the foundation for our house. It's like Mom said, that package containing the gun and record is like Pandora's box. When we unwrapped it, trouble began. Whatever the gun and Bible page mean, they must be somehow connected with Eileen."

Grant nodded. "Then the clincher: it appears that she had a partner, and the reason she needed to see you was because she wanted to get rid of you or frighten you."

"You mean the bushy headed guy, that Jude Melton?"

"Uh-huh. And I'm betting that if her plot to kill you had succeeded, your mother would have been next."

My breath caught in my throat. "Oh, no."

"All this stuff can't be coincidental, Darcy. I don't like it at all. It appears to be tied to the land your mom owns, and we need to find out why that land is so important to Eileen and her companion."

He rose from his chair and went to a filing cabinet at the back of his office. "I'm going to contact somebody I know at the university and see if he can think of any reason why that piece of property might hold a secret we know nothing about."

I stood up. My legs felt shaky. I held onto the chair back until I was sure I could make it to the door without wobbling. "And I'm going to go home and start some research into the background of the woman who apparently had every intention of sending me to the cemetery."

As he held my coat for me, I said, "Grant, I know personnel files are usually confidential, but this is an unusual situation. May I have a copy of whatever Eileen had in her file when she started working here as a dispatcher?"

He shook his head and shrugged. I loved the way his eyes crinkled and he ran his hand through his short-cropped hair when he was perturbed. "Darcy, you know I can't do that. In the first place, I need those files here so I can refer to them."

“And in the second place, that would be unethical?”

“Among other things.”

He walked me to the door, his arm around my shoulders. “And I would like to keep a deputy at your house around the clock, beginning tomorrow.”

“Not necessary, Grant.”

He drew me into a tight hug. “Listen, Darcy, I can’t stand the fact that I almost lost you. Now, please go home and think about something else for a while, maybe your house plans or that new school Miss Flora is building . . . I’m ordering you to let me handle this. Whatever or whoever is at the bottom of all this is a dangerous person.”

“Yes, Grant,” I murmured obediently to his shirt pocket. “I’ll go home and just relax for a while.” I snuggled against him, loving the feel of his arms around me. I had come home to Levi to find peace and healing after my husband’s death. So far, I had not found much peace. Instead, danger seemed to dog my trail. Although peace eluded me, I had found a second chance at love with the sheriff of Ventris County.

As it turned out, I did go home but relaxing was not on my agenda. In fact, that cold night was one of the few times in my life I did not sleep at all. I spent the night alternately getting up to peer out the window, and sitting down in front of my computer to search the internet for any information on the mysterious Eileen. Before the sun peeked over the hills to the east, I learned that Eileen Simmons had worked as a file clerk for a trucking company in Tulsa and a receptionist in a dentist’s office before she was hired as dispatcher for Ventris County’s previous sheriff. She currently owned a five-year-old Chevy Tahoe and had two speeding citations in Oklahoma. She had never been married, and I could find no documentation of her birth. In fact, so far as I could determine in a sophisticated electronic search, the woman had not existed until the day she was hired by McLean Trucking in Tulsa.

More pressing questions circle in my mind, including why any law enforcement office anywhere would hire her without a comprehensive background check. But a more pressing question, at least in my mind, was what was so important about Granny Grace’s land? Was Eileen in any way connected with Stuart Wood? It had been a while since I had explored the back acres of Granny Grace’s land. Maybe I should take a little trip out there in the morning and see if I could find any reason why there was a sudden interest in buying that piece of property. Weather permitting, first thing tomorrow that is just what I would do.

Chapter 18

The snow that had been in yesterday's forecast still hadn't materialized the morning after my visit with Grant. At breakfast, I told Mom my plan to drive out to Granny Grace's acres and look around.

"I'll come with you, Darcy," she said.

"No, please don't. I'm going to walk a lot and maybe climb over a few fences and up a few hills. It would be rough going for you, Mom."

"I worry that something may happen to you. I guess a mother never gets over worrying about her children, especially a child who is as danger prone as you, my dear daughter."

I grinned and ruffled her curls. "I'll be fine, Mom, I promise. I believe the Lord is watching over both of us."

"Yes, I'm sure He is but I'm going to say an extra prayer for you this morning," Mom called as I went upstairs. "Couldn't hurt anything."

I pulled on a pair of my most comfortable blue jeans, a yellow sweatshirt topped with a button-down-the-front green and yellow plaid flannel shirt, and stepped into my brown hiking boots. That, and a denim jacket would do fine for this day. Although the temperature was forecast to be in the low 40s, the sun was shining and there was little wind. I pulled my dark hair into a pony tail and noted a new gray hair. Time was surely marching on, and I was starting to feel the wear and tear of all this intrigue. Maybe Grant was right. Maybe I was a magnet for mysteries. And Mom was right too...if the happenings had been accidental.

I drew a line of rose-tinted lip gloss across my mouth, moved Jethro off my bed, and decided I was ready for a trip into the country.

Mom had a bulging brown paper lunch sack waiting for me downstairs. "Here's a sandwich and a piece of pie, Darcy, just in case you don't get back by noon."

I shook my head. As she said, mothering must be a lifelong process. Amy had said the same thing. "Thanks. Stay close today and be watchful," I said over my shoulder as I opened the front door.

Mom snorted. "Ha! Look who's talking."

Sunlight shone through the windshield of my Escape. Dressed as I was, I didn't need the car's heater. The road to Granny Grace's acres led through some of the prettiest country in Ventris County. In every season but winter, it was striking with the tree-covered hillsides and the glimpses of the river in the distance. In winter, it was not as beautiful but certainly spectacular enough. Gray rocky bluffs shone through pines and the dark limbs of deciduous trees. Cardinals and blue jays flashed across the road, and high in the cloudless sky, a hawk circled.

Is it possible that when we leave this earth, some of our emotions are left behind in places that are particularly dear? Granny loved her home here in the hills with Grandpa George, and when I returned to these hills, I felt a bit of the contentment and sheer joy that she must have felt. It was a peaceful feeling, as warm as the sunshine. With a jolt, I remembered a different emotion on the day that Cub discovered the package in the well. That day Granny's old home place seem lonely and even desolate.

I decided to drive the back way to those acres, and save visiting the place where our new house was going to be for a later time when Mom could view it with me. Now I wanted to take a

little-used road that would necessitate my crawling over a fence and scrambling on rocks across a small creek. I had the feeling that if there were anything out here more desirable than the land itself, it would be along the bluffs or small hidden hollows of the back part of the woodland.

Parking my car on the grassy edge of the dirt road, I scooted out and straddled a sagging wire fence. A little creek, old-timers called it Lee Creek, flowed lazily along the bottom of a knoll. The spring-fed stream was so shallow that it was easy to hop from one flat rock to the next and get across Lee Creek without getting wet. Clumps of water cress poked out of the water. Breaking off a piece, I savored the tangy, sharp taste. I paused under a tall pin oak and gazed at the forest of trees and azure sky, listened to the gurgle of the creek, and basked in the feeling of coming home. Tree, sky, creek, all seemed to soak into my very bones, a part of me and I, a part of my surroundings.

The air had a crisp, damp smell to it, as old as time and as new as the morning. I filled my lungs with the fragrance of pure air. Leaves rustled in the pin oak and an acorn dropped to the ground by my feet with a soft thud. Gazing up, I saw a squirrel glaring at me from a high limb.

"Sorry to disturb your peace," I called.

Getting out of town, soaking up the feel of the country invigorated me. At that moment, I could hardly wait to make the move to our new house and have all this wildness at our doorstep.

Another sound broke the stillness of the morning, a noise that clashed with the rhythm of creek and leaves. I held my breath and listened. It sounded like metal striking flint rock. Maybe a pickax biting into the side of the cliff somewhere?

The ringing of the pick seemed to come and go with the breeze and echoed off the high sides of the bluff. Ducking under tree limbs, I moved toward the sound. Thickets and tangles of briars grew under the trees and the low-hanging limbs had cobwebs dangling from them. I brushed them aside but the webs grew heavier and covered my face to the extent that I could not see. I squatted down on the ground and wiped the sticky threads away with my gloves.

The noise began again, closer this time and I cautiously raised my head and strained my eyes to see its source, but the cobwebs hanging from the trees completely obscured my vision. What was this? I had never seen so many webs. Had I blundered into a colony of spiders? A gust of wind brushed past me, causing the webs to do a wild dance, like white sheets hanging on a clothes line. The sound of the pickax stopped.

Once again, I dropped to the ground with my back against a tree trunk. The spider webs did not reach this far down. It was only when I stood up that they covered my face. I was trying to think of an explanation for the webs. No spiders were visible but my progress had been stopped by a mass of tangled silky threads.

I was leaning back against the tree, looking up at the webs when Grant found me. He knelt beside me. "Darcy, are you hurt? What's wrong?"

I was so surprised to see him that it took several seconds for me to be able to speak.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I phoned your house. Miss Flora said you were coming out here. I saw your car parked on the road."

I took his hand, his warm, strong, reassuring hand. "I'm glad you are here, Grant. I heard a noise, like someone digging into rocks, and when I tried to find out where it was coming from, I kept running into spider webs. They were so thick I couldn't see."

Grant turned my head from side to side and brushed my shoulders. "I don't see any webs on you now and I don't see any on the trees."

"Well, they were there! Maybe I swiped all of them off the trees. I've never seen so many."

“You really shouldn’t be out here alone, Darcy. If there is actually somebody digging on your land, that isn’t good. A trespasser digging? What would he be hunting for?”

“That’s what I would like to know, Grant. Come on, let’s go look along the bluff.”

Grant’s keen blue eyes searched my face, and he slowly shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. You can call me superstitious if you want, but those spider webs might have served a purpose. I’ll come back another time with Jim, and we’ll look along the creek and the bluff, but right now I think you should go back home.”

I didn’t argue. Perhaps he was right. I suddenly didn’t care who was digging or what they were finding. It was enough that Grant was here with me.

He slipped his arm around me as we sat with our backs against a cottonwood. “I’ve always liked this area of Ventris County,” he said.

I nodded.

“Darcy, it is too soon after Jake’s death for you to look very far into the future, but do you think we might start where we left off more than twenty years ago?”

“No.”

He turned my face toward his. “No? Why not?”

“We were kids then, Grant, with kids’ emotions. Now we’re all grown up, and I wouldn’t want to go back to those early days for anything. I like where we are now, you and I, and I like these grownup feelings.”

“I love you, Darcy Tucker, do you know that?”

“Campbell,” I managed to mutter just before his lips met mine.

Chapter 19

Pat Harris had called my mother and asked if she and I could come out for a visit.

"If it isn't urgent, Pat, this would be a good time for Darcy and me to swing by and take a look at my school," Mom told her friend. Pat agreed that the visit could wait for a bit so, on this sunny, blue-skied but nippy afternoon, we were driving along a country road south of town toward the beautiful area in Ventris County that once was Ben Ventris' farm.

Since yesterday I was two people; one was going about doing the usual things; the other was back with Grant at Granny Grace's place. He had told me he loved me. My heart sang, and everything else dimmed in comparison. Mom looked at me thoughtfully now and then, but she didn't ask any questions.

A valley opened up before us, and there was the school. Mom had kept the original homestead that belonged to Ben and his wife, but she made additions and internal changes to it. The farmhouse looked almost the same as when Ben lived there with the exception of an ell added to the back and a new coat of paint. The red barn had been updated, re-roofed and repainted. The most outstanding addition was the school building. When the architect designed the school, he kept the farmhouse look, painting the walls a cream color and adding a green roof and green shutters. Mom insisted on a wrap-around porch so boys and house parents could sit and watch the sunsets. She wanted it to look as unthreatening as possible to youngsters who had a preconceived notion that school was an unfriendly place.

My mother's plans called for the school to be equipped to handle boys from kindergarten through sixth grade. After grade six, they would ride the bus in to the Levi city schools. She continued to work with the state department of education to be sure the curriculum was up to state standards.

I stopped in the driveway, and we gazed at this dream child of my mother's. The sun's rays slanting over a western hill lit the windows, causing them to shine with a golden glow. Everything was peaceful, as I imagine it was when Ben and his wife lived here. Nothing hinted at the explosive events that occurred here months ago, that nearly ended our lives.

Mom smiled. "Darcy, it almost looks as if there's a light on inside those windows. Doesn't it look homey? Don't you think the boys will feel comfortable here?"

I patted her arm. "Indeed I do, Mom. You've put so much of yourself into this school. It's going to be a wonderful place. Ben would be very proud of you for using your inheritance in this way."

"You know, Pat said she would be the cook, but that will mean she'll have a drive to work every day. Of course, she doesn't live far so maybe Jasper can take his meals here too. And maybe she and Jasper can keep that old truck running. She is a good cook, that's for sure. In the summer, the boys can swim and fish in the river. In the fall they can pick apples and chop firewood for the fireplace."

"That is too funny, Mom. Have you thought that maybe the boys will not equate picking apples and chopping wood with swimming and fishing?"

She sniffed. "Well, you know what I mean."

"You will probably have a daily events schedule worked out next week, Mom. Is Hiram Schuster still over-seeing things?"

"He is, Darcy. Hiram Schuster and his wife are going to be house parents when school starts. I hope everything is completed so we can kick off the new school year next fall. I admit I get too enthusiastic. I think Ben would be happy with how this is turning out."

I nodded. "Such a beautiful place, Mom. So quiet and peaceful." I looked at the surrounding low hills, the generous yard where flowers would grow and the trees whose limbs were meant for climbing. "The boys who will call this home will be lucky indeed."

"Yes, and it's all because of Ben Ventris. I think he would be pleased. Well, I've seen what I came to see so let's go on to Pat's and find out what is so important. She sounded kind of secretive on the phone."

"I guess that's better than sounding hysterical. I have heard her when she was so overwrought, she made no sense at all."

I turned the Escape around and headed down the driveway toward the country road leading to Pat's place.

"This is a rough old road. Slow down, Darcy." Mom grunted and grabbed the door handle as I turned at a corner sign that read "Old String." A skeleton of a house appeared between leafless trees in the distance, the house where Old String had lived.

"This is Pat's driveway," she added, pointing to some narrow ruts leading off through the trees. A neatly painted mailbox with the words "Pat Harris" stood on a post next to the ditch. I rounded a curve and there was Pat's little white frame house.

"It looks lonely," I said as I came to a stop.

"She probably does get lonesome. No neighbors close, just her and Jasper all by themselves out here. But she's lived here a long time, and I'm sure she's used to it."

"Do you think she asked us to come because she was feeling blue?"

"No, I think she wants to talk to us about something that's troubling her."

We climbed out of the Escape and started up the short pathway to Pat's front door. The hedge roses bordering the walk looked beautiful in spring and summer, but now they were just gray bushes without a sign of green.

Murphy, Ben Ventris' red hound that Jasper had adopted after Ben was killed, came down the walk to meet us, voicing his welcome. Mom stopped to scratch behind his ears. He tossed his head, his tail going a mile a minute.

Pat opened the door before we could knock. "Come in out of the cold," she said, beckoning us inside. She took our coats and we sat down on her gray sofa.

"I'll bring some coffee. Despite that sunshine, it is cold enough to freeze the horns off a brass monkey."

"I don't know anything about brass monkeys, but I imagine your wood stove keeps the whole house snug, doesn't it?" I asked.

"Sure does," Pat called from the kitchen. In a few minutes she reappeared with a tray bearing three steaming cups. I gratefully sipped and felt the hot drink travel all the way down to my stomach. Pat's coffee was second in flavor only to Mom's.

"Thanks for coming," Pat said. "My old truck wouldn't start this morning, or I would have come to your house. I've called Hiram Schuster and asked him to take a look at it. He's bringing jumper cables. It's probably just the battery."

Mom swallowed her coffee and put the cup and saucer on her lap. "Why Pat, we're always glad to come see you. I'm sorry about your car but I am always glad to come for a visit. You know that."

"I appreciate it because I found something and wanted you to have it right away." Pat fished around in the sewing box next to her chair. "While I was sweeping Jasper's room yesterday, I swept this from under his bed, and I just don't know what to make of it. I think it must have fallen out of something, and he didn't notice it because the bedspread was covering it."

She handed Mom a photograph so old that the edges were yellowed and bent. I peered over Mom's shoulder. An attractive, dark-haired girl smiled at the camera. She looked like she was straight out of the 1940s. A wide brimmed, floppy hat was pulled down over one eyebrow. Tight waves cascaded across her forehead. She wore a two-piece suit, the hem just below her knees. A blouse peeked discreetly above the collar of her jacket. Strappy shoes with chunky heels finished off her stylish ensemble.

The dark hair and eyes, the square jawline and the high cheekbones were unmistakable. "Why, Mom, that's you!"

Pat nodded. "It sure is. It's Flora when she was a mite younger. Only thing is, what was that picture doing in Jasper's room? Where did he get it? You didn't give it to him, did you, Flora?"

"I love that outfit, Mom. Why were you dressed in those retro clothes?"

Mom's hand shook as she held the picture. "That's not me," she said quietly.

Pat slapped her knee with her hand. "Of course that's you, Flora. Or if it's not, it's your twin, and I've never known there to be but one of you."

I looked at the photo more closely. "If it's not you, then who? Maybe it was taken so long ago that you've forgotten."

My mother frowned at me and rose hurriedly. "I guess that I would know if I had my picture taken in clothes like that. Thanks for giving me this, Pat. Darcy, we'd better go."

"Are you all right?" I asked. Her face was pale and she definitely appeared unwell.

Pat looked surprised and uncertain. "Well, OK, if you've got to go, but you just got here. I was hoping you could help me figure out how in the world your picture came to be on Jasper's floor." She took our coats from the peg in the hall and handed them to us.

"And I'm telling you, Pat, that is not my picture," Mom said, pulling her coat around her and opening the door.

"Thanks, Pat," I said, as I followed my departing parent. "Sorry we weren't more help."

Mom didn't even stop to say good-bye to Murphy. She trotted to the Escape and was in the seat and buckled by the time I opened the driver's door.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I asked as I backed down Pat's driveway.

"That picture, Darcy. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was me, but it's not, and I don't have any sisters. If you'll remember, I was adopted."

I turned onto Old String Road and headed back to Levi. "Yes, I remember. You said Granny Grace told you that your birth mother was a young girl who had gotten into trouble."

"That's the term people used in those days. Nobody ever came right out and said an unmarried woman was pregnant. But Darcy, I think that may be a picture of my natural mother."

She put her hand to her eyes and wiped away tears. "And the picture looks so familiar. I'm afraid I might know who it is. But how? Oh, I don't know. When we get back to the house and I've had time to think, maybe I can puzzle this out and decide what we should do next."

The face in the picture was familiar to me too. But if it wasn't Mom, I couldn't think who it might be. And as Pat said, why did Jasper have it? The drive back to town was silent while we were busy with our own thoughts. Who was that smiling, attractive woman from the past, and what was her photo doing on Jasper Harris' floor?

Chapter 20

Mom sat down in front of the fireplace. I moved the screen back and tossed on another log. She looked ill, and although she still clutched that picture, she stared at the fire. I put her old green afghan around her shoulders and sat down on the footstool at her feet.

We hovered in front of the warmth of the fire listening to the pop and crackle of the logs. It seemed that every day, we were being pulled deeper and deeper into a mystery that became ever more complex. Did the picture have anything to do with Eileen and her attempt to murder me? Did the picture and Eileen and the bushy-haired man have something to do with our land? Was the secret of Mom's birth somehow tied in with all the other things; the gun, the marriage, Eileen's death? Surely somebody could shed some light on this murky business, but that somebody certainly was not me.

At last Mom spoke. She handed me the photograph. "Look closely, Darcy. Try to imagine what this person would look like, sixty or seventy years after the picture was taken. Suppose her hair is white and pulled away from her face in a bun. Imagine that square jawline is sagging, the face wrinkled. Try putting a pair of wire rimmed glasses on her."

I squinted. The girl in the photograph was young and beautiful. How might she look if she were now an old woman, much older than my mother? At last, like an electric shock, the answer came. "It's . . . Mom, could it be one of the Jenkins twins?"

A slight smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "I do believe you are right, Darcy. Anyone can see the resemblance to me, but I am sure that it is a picture of one of the Jenkins twins several decades back. I think, Darcy, that you may be looking at a picture of your natural grandmother."

My face felt stiff and I could hardly speak. "Oh, but surely not. Surely . . ." I couldn't think of anything to say. Was it possible that my natural grandmother had been right here in our home town all this time? How could she have kept something like that a secret? Did things like this really happen?

As if in answer to my thoughts, Mom said, "We never did see much of the Jenkins family. They live on the other side of town. They go to the Methodist church, not our church. And they hardly get out. Real recluses. So I guess it would be possible to live in the same town as my birth mother and never know it. But why did everybody keep me in the dark? Why didn't Mom or Dad tell me?"

"So," I said slowly, gazing into the dancing flames. "So, I guess maybe it would be possible." Levi, my small home town, was deceptively calm on the surface but under its peaceful appearance, secrets swirled like hidden currents in a river. During my growing up years, I was completely unaware that Levi was a town touched by intrigue or dark secrets.

"How did this picture get out to Jasper Harris' room? Where did it come from?" Mom held the photo under the table lamp, her eyes devouring it.

I shook my head. "If anybody had the picture, it would have been the Jenkins family. Or . . ."

"Or maybe Mama, your Granny Grace? Maybe Miss Georgia or Miss Carolina, whichever one this is, gave it to Mama?"

"I guess. But we've never seen it before. If she gave it to Granny Grace, where would it have been all these years?"

"If Mama didn't want me to know the identity of my birth mother, I imagine she would have hidden it somewhere out of sight; maybe stuck back in something."

I thought about Mom's Bible. Inside that Book were newspaper clippings, pictures, and a few obituaries. In fact, it was a suitcase of interesting tidbits she had gathered through the years.

"Or maybe she slid it within the pages of a book that she thought no one would look into, like her journal?" I asked.

"My thoughts, exactly," Mom said. "But would that mean that Jasper was the one who took the journal and the gun from off my table?" She drew a quavering breath. "Oh, Darcy, what a muddle."

"All right, let's just assume for a minute that Granny Grace put this picture in her journal for safekeeping. The journal is about twenty or thirty years older than the picture. Maybe she stuck it in there about the time you were born."

Mom pulled the afghan tighter around her shoulders. "Could be."

"We didn't know about the journal 'til the day it went missing. While we were talking to Eileen, both the journal and the gun disappeared from your dining table."

"That's right."

"Then this picture shows up at Pat's house. Yes, I'd say it's a pretty good bet that Jasper is our intruder."

"That boy is odd. He has never been a thief, and I'd hate to think that of him. But somehow that picture got to his room."

"If he took the journal, it must be at his house yet. And the gun would be there too. But why?"

Mom tossed the afghan off her shoulders and stood up. "Why indeed? I'm tired of all these questions, Darcy, and I'm ready for some answers. One riddle I'm going to solve right now. We're going to pay the Jenkins sisters a surprise visit."

"Okay, that's probably the thing to do, but shouldn't we call them first? Remember, these are old ladies. What if they are so shocked that one or both of them has a heart attack when we come barging in demanding answers?"

Rarely had I seen Mom's eyes shoot daggers, but that's what they were doing now. "Oh, I think somebody who could give away her baby probably has a pretty strong constitution. My heart stood the shock of finding my mother's picture, and I imagine I inherited a healthy heart from her . . . whoever she is."

I grabbed my coat and followed my mother out to my car. Whether the Jenkins ladies were ready for us or not, we were going to take a little drive to the other side of town.

Chapter 21

The Jenkins house was a far cry from Pat's humble home. A wide porch wrapped around the house. Gingerbread trim decorated the second story, and the fanlight above the front door was set with colored glass. I rang the doorbell and listened to it echo inside.

Miss Carolina Jenkins opened the door. Her eyes widened. "Why, Flora! And Darcy too! What an unexpected pleasure. Come in."

I followed my mother into the living room. Heavy red drapes covered the tall windows. Lamps with fringed shades cast pools of light on polished table tops. I tried not to stare at this tiny, frail spinster or Miss Georgia who scurried into the room. Was one of these women the lovely young girl in the picture my mother carried?

"Look, Sister," Carolina said, turning to her twin. "Flora is back for another visit and this time she brought little Darcy."

It had been many years since I heard myself referred to as "little."

Georgia caught Mom's hand, then mine. Her voice was shaky. I didn't know if it was from age or our unexpected visit.

"Do sit down," Georgia said. "It is cold out. May I offer a cup of hot tea?"

Mom answered before I could speak. I hardly recognized her stiff, formal voice. "No, thank you. This is not strictly a social visit, I'm afraid. I need to talk to you about something mighty important. At least, it's important to me."

I'm sure that neither of the Jenkins women missed the edge to her tone. Carolina's eyes held a question as she said, "Let me take your wraps and sit yourselves right down there on the divan."

Georgia perched in a red-upholstered chair, facing us. A smile quivered on her lips. "If it's important to you, it's bound to be important to us, too. How can we help?"

Carolina hung our coats in the entry then settled down on the edge of the polished piano bench. She leaned toward us, her hands clasped.

The room felt chilly and I was sorry Carolina had taken away my coat. "Do you remember Mom here to see you a few days ago and asking questions about World War I?"

Carolina nodded. "Of course, Darcy. Neither Sister nor I are senile yet. As I recall, I told Flora we do not go back quite as far as the Great War."

Mom brought the photograph out of her purse. "No, I realize that. What I want to talk to you about is a picture I found, a picture that was taken long after that war, probably in the 1940s."

The two women glanced at each other. Mom handed the picture to Miss Georgia whose hand trembled as she gazed at the image. Carolina got up and stood beside her sister's chair. Both women peered silently at it. In the stillness of the room, the wind moaned across the chimney, sounding eerily like a human in pain.

At last Georgia handed the photograph back to Mom. "Where did you get that, Flora? And why are you showing it to us?"

Mom gazed at Georgia. Her voice was so low I had to strain to hear as she said, "A friend found it and thought it was me. But it isn't. I think it is one of you and I want to know why my mother had it and why I look so much like that girl in the picture."

Georgia's shoulders drooped. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and buried her face in it. Carolina patted her arm and said, "There, there, Sister. You knew this day might come."

Georgia sniffled and hiccupped. "I just hoped when it did, I'd already be gone to Heaven." She took off her glasses and wiped her eyes. They looked huge in her ashen face.

"I told you this might be too great a shock," I said to Mom. Then, to Miss Georgia, "May I get you a glass of water?"

"No, no. Sherry, please, Sister," she said, looking up at Carolina.

Carolina hurried from the room. We all sat silently until she came back with two glasses. She handed one to Georgia and carried the second one with her to the piano bench.

"I didn't think . . ." began Carolina. "Would either of you like a sherry?"

Mom and I shook our heads. I wanted to scream, "Get on with it! Drink that sherry or whatever you need to do because we've got to have some answers here!" Instead, I waited politely while Georgia sipped and some color returned to her face.

At last I could stand the silence no longer. "To be blunt, Miss Georgia, we want to know two things. Is that a picture of you when you were younger, and are you Mom's birth mother?"

Georgia Jenkins pressed both hands against her cheeks. Her dark eyes never left my mother's face. "Yes, that is a picture of me when I was much younger and, oh, so foolish. And yes, my darling granddaughter, I gave birth to your mother."

The old house creaked as a sudden gust of wind battered it. From the hallway, a grandfather clock chimed eight times, its tone solemn and measured. My heart thudded loudly in my ears. Then, Mom asked one question, "Why?"

Georgia drew a quavery breath. "It's a long story."

"And one that's very hard on my sister," Carolina said. "Could you come back another time, perhaps tomorrow?"

Georgia shook her head. "No, no, that's quite all right. This is a secret I've carried for nearly seventy years and I'd like to be shed of it."

Her gaze shifted to the door, as if she expected to see someone else come walking through. A board creaked somewhere in the old house and a loose shutter rattled. I glanced over my shoulder. Did Miss Carolina lock that solid oak door after we came in?

"It was so long ago that sometimes it seems like a dream, but I know that it happened because you are real, Flora. You are the proof that I didn't imagine the whole thing." Georgia took another small sip of sherry. "You asked about World War I. Well, your story began in another war, World War II with a young American soldier named Jefferson Thorne. My father was a judge, Flora, Judge Jenkins was known and respected—"

"And largely feared," Carolina interrupted.

"Yes, he was quite stern."

Carolina nodded. "Oh, he had a terrible temper!"

"He ruled my mother and us girls. But, I met Jeff and rules suddenly didn't matter. I loved him with my whole heart and he loved me. But he was a soldier and World War II was going on and Jeff had to leave me and go overseas. He . . . he never came back. They said his plane went down . . ." her voice faded away.

Carolina fidgeted. "Drink your sherry, dear," she said.

"Anyway, after he left, I found that I was going to have a child . . . that child was you, Flora. I didn't tell my father until I had to. Mother kept my secret, too, while we tried to think of what to do. Then she thought about her dearest friends, George and Grace Daniels. George and Grace had been married a number of years and had no children. Father went to talk to them. You see,

Miss Grace's parents and my parents had known each other for a very long time and they had some sort of bond. Carolina and I believe that something must have happened in the past that sort of forged a deep trust between them."

"What was the bond?" I broke in.

Carolina shook her head. "That's something we only guessed about. We think we might know but anyway, it isn't pertinent to this story."

"The thing that's important is that Father asked George and Grace if they would take you, Flora, adopt you and raise you as their own. And, he made them promise they would never reveal my identity."

Mom pulled a tissue from her purse and wiped her eyes. A lump in my throat made it difficult for me to ask the next question. "If they were to keep it a secret, why did Granny Grace have your picture?"

"Oh, I had this lapse from sanity, I suppose. For a time there, I tried to think of ways to get my baby back. I hated giving you up, Flora. Finally, I gave Grace my picture and told her to keep it and maybe one day she would want you to know."

Mom blew her nose. "You didn't want to give me away?"

Carolina answered for Georgia. "She almost went crazy. She'd find some excuse to go by your house, hoping to catch a glimpse of you. She would go by the school and watch you on the playground. I think even our father was worried that she was going to lose her mind."

Georgia rubbed her upper lip with her index finger, a gesture I had seen Mom do many times. "Well, I finally got hold of myself and realized it was much better for you if I just kept quiet. And then later I came to be afraid that you *would* find out, and you would hate me for giving you away. But at least I had the privilege of staying in the same town where you lived."

Carolina smiled. "And we got to see little Darcy grow up, too. So, you see, life has its compensations."

"Life has its compensations," I repeated. Life also has its complications, sometimes so complex that they never did get sorted out. This tiny woman sitting across from us turned out to be my own grandmother, a woman I had glimpsed around town from time to time. Never would I have guessed that we were related.

Mom drew a shuddering breath and stood up. I rose, too, as did the Jenkins sisters. My mother squared her shoulders. "I guess we got what we came for. We came for answers and we have them. Thank you, Miss Georgia. I am sorry for all the hurt you've been through. Darcy and I are going to go back home now and try to digest what we've learned here."

"I . . . I hope you don't hate me," Georgia whispered. "I think George and Grace gave you a good life."

"I could never hate you. And yes, Mom and Dad loved me and I loved them. It must have taken a lot of courage for you to give me to them. You did what you thought was right. That was a very unselfish act and I thank you."

Georgia set her glass on the floor. "It wasn't necessarily what I thought was right. I didn't seem to have any choice. I haven't held you in my arms since that day I wrapped you in a pretty pink blanket and handed you to my father. Do you mind if I hug you just once?" She came toward Mom, her arms outstretched.

Mom gathered her close. I turned away, tears clogging my vision.

We slipped into our coats and the Jenkins sisters followed us to the door.

The cold winter wind had blown away the clouds. Stars glittered above us. Before getting into my car, I turned to look back at the Jenkins house. Light from the living room behind

Georgia and Carolina, framed them in the doorway, the two small figures were silhouetted against the backdrop of the imposing house. Slowly, Georgia raised her hand and waved.

Chapter 22

After we got home from the confrontation with Georgia and Carolina, Mom and I again huddled in front of the fireplace. The flames had burned down while we were gone. Jethro jumped up on my lap, rubbing his head under my chin and purring mightily. I don't know how, but that cat always seemed to know when either Mom or I was troubled.

"Are you cold, Mom?" I asked.

"No. Well, yes, I guess I am, but it's not something that coffee or this old afghan could help. I feel cold inside. Do you know what I mean?"

I patted her hand. "Yes, I understand."

"I just simply don't know what to do with all this trouble that's coming at us." She shook her head and repeated, "I don't know what to do."

"Who would, Mom? This mystery isn't about other people. This is about our family; it's about us."

She stood up and sighed. "It certainly is. It seems like one thing leads to another, and I can't puzzle out any of it. I'm going up to bed, Darcy. I'm going to get under the covers and read my Bible. Maybe things will look better in the morning."

Maybe things will look better in the morning—those words I had heard from Mom and Dad all my life. They made sense to me. Although Granny Grace had died when I was very young, I remembered many things about her and many of the things she had said. She had a hard and fast rule which I tried to put into practice as an adult: never make an important decision when you're so tired or worried that you can't think straight. Wait until morning.

Yet this quiet, wise woman I knew as my grandmother had carried more than one secret with her to her grave. I never would have guessed the depths of my Granny Grace nor the trouble she had faced in life. I wished I could talk to her and beg her to shed some light on a few things.

"Good night," I called as Mom trudged toward the stairs.

I lifted Jethro from my lap and settled him onto his cushion in front of the fire. The snug room seemed too confining. I needed fresh air to clear away the cobwebs in my mind. Hopefully, sitting on the porch for a while would help me think more clearly. I hadn't hung up my coat since our visit to the Jenkins' home, so I pulled it off the kitchen chair and slipped it on again.

The porch swing moved gently in the wind. Other nights, summer nights long ago, Grant and I sat in this swing, holding hands and dreaming of the future. What a lot of things had happened since then. Jake came into the picture, lives had changed, and different paths had been taken. How strange that no matter what plans we mortals made, life stepped in and rearranged things. As Robert Burns said, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

The night air felt crisp and I filled my lungs with it. I gently pushed the swing with my toe. My heart and mind felt muddled. Too much was happening too fast. I could not wrap my mind around these disturbing recent events. The gentle rhythm of swinging was in direct contrast to the thoughts running roughshod through my mind.

It was unbelievable that Granny Grace had been married to someone before she married Grandpa George, but evidently she had, whether I wanted to accept it or not. Somehow, the disappearance of that first husband was mixed in with the troubling events of Mom's birth, Eileen Simmons, and our new house. How were they all connected? It seemed to me that the

World War I soldier Granny had married, Markham Cauldfell, was the key to unlocking the whole thing. If I could just find out what happened to him! Tonight Mom and I found that another soldier had played a direct part in our lives. Because of a young man named Jefferson Thorne, my mother and I existed. Someday I wanted to ask Miss Georgia (would I ever call her Grandmother?) about this man who was my grandfather. Perhaps she had pictures or a letter, something that would let me get acquainted with this link to my past.

I prayed silently, asking the Lord to help me sort through the confusion of recent events. Why had my Granny Grace kept her first marriage a secret? Who had ripped the record of that marriage from a Bible and why? Who put that page and gun where they hoped they would never be found?

Opening the bundle that held the gun and the proof of a secret marriage had indeed been like opening Pandora's box. If Cub hadn't found it, would Eileen still be alive? Would we even have met Eileen?

Where was the quiet, peaceful time of healing I had yearned for when I left Dallas? My life was as full of knots as a tangled ball of yarn and instead of smoothing out, it became ever more snarled.

Shivering, I burrowed my hands deeper into my pockets. Why had Eileen appeared just as the old sheepskin and its secrets were discovered? Had she heard the gossip Cub had started circulating? Why did she question Mom's ownership of the land? Was she really a descendant of the elusive Markham Cauldfell? Grant was working on Eileen's connection to the bushy-haired man, Jude Melton, but what was their purpose in coming to Levi at this time? How about Stuart Wood, the man from Innovation Technology who wanted to buy some of Mom's land and offered an exorbitant price? Why did he want the land badly enough to pay three times more than its value? I had lots of questions but, as yet, no answers.

Pat's discovery of the old picture and Georgia Jenkins' admission that she was my grandmother had left Mom and me shaken to the core. This was the most mind boggling fact of all. How would I deal with this truth? How would my mother handle it? We had always known that Mom was adopted by a middle-aged Grace and George, but never would we have guessed that Mom's birth mother was the tiny, soft-spoken Miss Georgia. In fact, Mom had not seemed to be curious about the woman who had given her life. That is, not until Pat had handed her the picture.

An owl hooted somewhere in the trees behind the house, and near the pasture, a dog barked and howled as if he were in trouble. Was he injured?

I jumped up from the swing and hurried down the porch steps. If an animal was in trouble, I would try to help. Opening the back gate, I stopped and listened. The bark and howl came again, perhaps from the edge of the woods bordering the back pasture. I ran toward those dark trees.

Something zinged past my cheek. Simultaneously, I heard a loud crack. A shot! Somebody had shot at me and narrowly missed. I dropped to the ground. Another bullet sprayed dirt and gravel against my cheek. My thudding heart threatened to burst through my parka. Who was out there in the woods? Who was shooting at me? Would he shoot again? I had no weapon and no defense against someone who was out in the darkness, someone who evidently wanted me dead.

Running footsteps pounded across the ground. They came closer. I groped beside me for any kind of weapon. My fingers closed around a good-sized rock, a poor protection from someone with a gun, but it was all I had. I jumped to my feet and drew back my arm.

"Miss Darcy, wait! I won't hurt you. Are you all right?"

The frightened face of Jasper Harris appeared out of the darkness.

“Jasper!” I shouted. “Why did you shoot at me? What’s wrong with you?” He grabbed my hand and took the rock. “I didn’t shoot at you, Miss Darcy. Honest. I don’t have no gun anyhow. But somebody shot at you. I heard him running away after he fired. He saw me and took off.”

“Thank God you came, Jasper.” My legs felt like water and I leaned for support against his shoulder.

“You’ve got blood on your face. Did he hit you?”

I swiped my forehead and looked at my hand. “I guess it was the splinters of rock that sprayed my face. He came that close, Jasper.”

My befuddled brain settled on a question. “What are you doing out here? It’s cold and dark. Why aren’t you home with Pat?”

Jasper scuffed his toe against the ground. “Aw, Miss Darcy, you know I like being out in the woods. I kind of like slipping around, keeping an eye on people when they don’t know I’m near.”

Now was no time to get into a discussion about Jasper’s snooping. What if the man who had shot at me were to return? Perhaps he was in the woods at this moment, looking at me through the sights of his rifle.

Jasper must have been thinking the same thing because he suddenly grabbed my arm and started tugging me toward the house.

“Come on, Miss Darcy. You’ve got to get inside. That guy might be back. Hurry.”

No further urging was necessary. I trotted as fast as my shaking legs would go, through the pasture toward the safety of the house. Jasper hurried along beside me.

Chapter 23

At last the front porch appeared out of the shadows, and I ran up the steps, across the porch and full tilt through the door. "Come on inside, Jasper. We're safe now."

The darkness behind me was empty. Jasper had disappeared into the night.

I locked the door and leaned against it, gasping for breath. Mom hurried down the stairs. "What's wrong, Darcy? Where have you been?" A chair was within reach. I sank into it and leaned my head on my knees. "Someone...someone out there, by the woods, shot at me. Jasper found me and helped me get here."

Mom rounded the chair and hugged me. "Shot at you? What were you doing out there in the middle of the night and why would anyone shoot at you?"

I raised my head. "I would say that someone around here doesn't like me very much. I went out to sit on the porch swing, Mom, to see if being out in the fresh air would help me make sense of all the things that have been happening to us. I heard a dog barking and it sounded like it was in pain. I went to investigate and somebody shot at me."

Mom shook her head. "Oh, Darcy, this is awful. If someone was really shooting at you, why they might have...might have..."

"Yes, Mom, except for the Good Lord's protection, they might have. Gotta call Grant," I said, stumbling from my chair to the phone.

It took only a few seconds to reach Grant. His voice sounded groggy, and I was sure my call had awakened him from sleep. When he heard my story about being shot at, he immediately snapped into alert mode and told me he and Jim were on their way.

True to his word, fifteen minutes later, a siren wailing down our street and a strobe light flashing through the window told me the Ventris County sheriff and deputy had arrived. I ran to the porch to meet them.

Grant and Jim jumped from Grant's truck.

Grant's voice was clipped. His face looked pale in the light from the window. "Where did this happen?"

"I'll show you," I said. I led the way to the pasture, Grant's flashlight lighting the ground before us. "It was right about here," I said, pointing.

"Okay, Darcy, we're going to search the area. The guy is probably long gone by now. You go back to the house, lock the door and stay there. Understand?"

Meekly, I nodded and turned back toward the safety of the house.

I walked into the kitchen and sank into a chair. Mom was measuring water into her old yellow coffeepot with hands that shook. I sat down on a kitchen chair and watched her.

"Grant and Jim will need coffee," she said. In every emergency, she turned to prayer and her old yellow coffee pot, in that order. My mother firmly believed a good cup of hot, strong coffee helped solve all ills. She even told me once that if the leaders of two feuding nations would sit down and talk about their differences over coffee and doughnuts, there would be far fewer wars. Made sense to me!

I went to the bathroom and washed blood off my face where the bits of rock struck me. The mirror showed a few scratches but nothing, thank the Lord, any more serious. My eyes looked like huge black holes in my usually tan face.

Mom sat down in front of the dying embers of the fireplace to wait for Grant and Jim to come back to the house. I pitched another log on the fire, stirred it with the poker, and held out my hands to the warmth.

She drew a cotton handkerchief from the pocket of her robe and wiped her eyes. "Maybe we should just pack up and move."

"What? Mom, it isn't like you to run away from trouble."

She leaned toward me and grasped my hands. Hers were icy cold. "Darcy, that person, whoever it was, almost killed you tonight. I don't know how to go about solving this puzzle and whatever the solution is, it's got the best of me. What do you want us to do, wait around until this crazy person shoots at you again? The next time, he might not miss."

She had a point, but it didn't seem to me that hiding out would help solve the mystery of the shooter or Eileen's death or whether any of it was related to my Granny Grace's first marriage decades before.

An hour later Grant and Jim knocked at the back door. I got up to unlock and let them in. A puff of cold wind blew in with them. Both men removed their cowboy hats. Jim stomped his feet, probably to increase circulation. Grant reached for me and pulled me against his chest.

His heart was beating so loudly I could feel it all the way through his denim coat. He released me and ran his thumb over my chin.

"Those scratches...did that happen when the guy shot at you?"

I nodded. "Yes, but the point is, he missed, Grant. I'm all right. Did you find any sign of him?"

Grant shook his head. "Not one sign. But we did find where the bullet hit."

"Got that little sucker right here," Jim said, holding up a squashed bit of lead.

"Did you find a dog?" I asked. "That's why I went out there in the first place. I heard a dog."

Grant shook his head. "We didn't see or hear a dog, Darcy."

"Oldest trick in the world," Jim said, "Barking like a dog or crying like a baby to lure somebody out in the open. You shoulda known better, Darcy."

Never had I met anybody with less sensitivity than Grant's deputy.

"We're not all as smart as you, Jim," I muttered.

"You said Jasper found you and helped you get home?" Grant asked.

I nodded.

"Where is he now? Why didn't he wait for me? And what was he doing out there at that time of night?"

"I don't know. Jasper is just that way. He likes to roam the woods. You know that, Grant. I was glad he was there. He scared off the shooter and helped me back home."

Clendon's eyes narrowed. "Mighty strange that he would be at that exact spot so late. Also mighty strange that he didn't want to talk to us."

"Take off your coats and sit down. I'll pour coffee." Mom hurried to take cups from the cabinet. "Now Jim, don't you and Grant go accusing Jasper of anything. That boy is odd, I admit, but he means well. I think he considers protecting his friends his purpose in life, whether those friends are animals or human."

"Mighty good coffee, Miss Flora," Jim said, taking the first sip.

"Thank you, Jim. I just don't want you boys to waste your time going off on a wild goose chase. Jasper had nothing to do with shooting at Darcy."

"Wind's picking up," Jim said, turning his head to listen.

A branch of the rose bush scratched at the kitchen window screen.

“I’m afraid we’ll have more snow,” Grant said. “If we get enough to cover the ground, we might not find anything at all in the woods tomorrow.”

I swirled the amber liquid in my cup. “It’s hard to believe that someone hates me enough to try to kill me.”

“He may not hate you,” Grant said. “You may be in the way of something he wants. Whatever his reason, you’ve got to be careful, Darcy. No more late night jaunts anywhere.”

Outside, the wind moaned around the corner of the house, sounding like a person in pain. I shuddered and put thoughts of night prowlers and guns out of my mind. Tomorrow, perhaps, we would find the one thing, the one key, which would unlock this mystery.

Chapter 24

As Mom and I stepped out of the house two days after my close brush with death, a strong north wind struck us. She pulled her cap closer over her ears. "Are you sure you want to go to Eileen's funeral?" she asked.

I opened the passenger door of the Escape, and she scooted in, then I hurried to the driver's side. "Br-r-r. What a relief to get out of the cold. Yes, I'm sure. Grant gave me directions; a small cemetery about ten miles from Siloam Springs. He said Eileen's aunt had claimed her body."

Mom snapped her seat belt around her. "Such a bad day for a funeral; but then, I guess there are no good days."

I backed out of the driveway and turned toward the highway leading out of town. "Grant isn't going. He's planning to try to talk to Jasper, if he can catch him."

"I don't think even Pat knows where he is. It's not helping Jasper for him to run off like that. Makes him look guilty and I just know in my heart he had nothing to do with the shooting."

Grant had talked to Pat and scoured the woods for Jasper for two days. So far, he had not located him. If Grant had found any clue of the man who shot at me, he hadn't told me.

I glanced in the rear view mirror. A car or truck followed quite a long way behind us but it turned off before we got on highway 412. I breathed a sigh of relief. There was nothing like being shot at to make a person jumpy.

"I am so glad Grant spent the last two nights on our sofa," Mom said. "I felt a lot more secure, just knowing he was in the house."

"Me too, Mom. Grant wanted to assign a deputy to guard us, but on a small town force, that just isn't possible. We don't need to be looked after as if we were children."

"I don't know, Darcy. Maybe we do." Mom turned the heater on my Escape up a notch.

"I really think the shooter is miles away by this time. He is if he's got any sense. He has to know that Grant and Jim are looking for him and that they've sent out alerts to all the surrounding counties."

Mom sighed. "I hope you're right."

"Grant told me it's to be a graveside service, according to Eileen's aunt. From all the information I could find on the internet, Eileen was not married. She just sort of appeared out of nowhere. Not much of a record of her anywhere that I could find, only snippets of information here and there."

The Escape's windshield wipers swiped at a light mist that started falling as we headed east toward Siloam Springs.

"I've never seen such a winter," Mom said. "Snow, sleet. Makes it mighty hard to do anything but sit in front of the fireplace."

I sincerely hoped the rain would not freeze before we got safely back home but going to this funeral was important enough to risk it. Eileen was a strange woman! Why hadn't we known about her long ago? Why had she surfaced at this particular moment and laid claim to land we had considered ours for generations? But then, why hadn't we known about Markham Cauldfell? What was the reason Granny Grace had kept that first husband a secret?

Evidently Mom was thinking about the same thing. "It's odd, Darcy, that all of these happenings are coming at us at once, like a nest of hornets. I don't know what started the whole thing. Was it finding the package in the well? Was it our plans to build a house? And who ever in all this world would have thought that Miss Georgia Jenkins is actually my birth mother? I just don't know what to make of it all."

Mom pulled her cap from her springy curls and ran her fingers through them, trying to fluff them back into shape.

"How do you feel about that? Are you angry with Miss Georgia or Granny Grace? Do you wish somebody had told you the truth a long time ago?"

She shut her eyes for a second then looked at me. "No, I'm not angry with anybody. If I had known the truth when I was a child, think of how confused I would have been. Miss Georgia and Mom and Dad did what they felt was best for me. I grew up in a happy home and didn't know any of the grief that Miss Georgia suffered. She let me alone and didn't impose her hurt upon me. I think that must have taken some courage."

Bare trees bent before a gusty wind which tossed handfuls of rain at the car as if warning us to turn back. This was a gray, grim day suitable for a grim, sad occasion.

"You know, Mom, Miss Georgia said something about Granny Grace and Grandpa George having some kind of pact with her parents, Judge Jenkins and his wife. I wonder what she meant."

My mother shook her head. "I have no idea. I don't know if we'll ever know what she was talking about. I'd say the Jenkins twins are pretty good at keeping secrets."

"I agree with that!"

"Someday when we have time, Darcy, would you research these new-found relatives of ours on the internet? Judge and Mrs. Jenkins, my birth father, Jefferson Thorne. And just think, Darcy, somewhere out there were his parents, that would be, let me see, my grandparents. Oh, my goodness, it makes my head hurt. Maybe we don't want to go down that path after all."

"Oh, I do, Mom. Ancestry is a fascinating subject."

"If only we could get that journal back," Mom said. "I think it would answer a lot of questions."

"Pat Harris found Miss Georgia's picture in Jasper's room. I've thought and thought about why it was there. Might it have fallen out of something? The journal is missing, Mom, and if Granny Grace stuck things in books as you do, maybe she put that picture in between the pages..."

"Yes, that could very well be. And it was probably Jasper that was watching our house when you saw somebody in the woods the other night. He may have been somewhere nearby the next morning when Eileen paid us a visit. He could have slipped in and got those things from the table while we were talking to her."

"That's about the only scenario that makes sense," I agreed. "But why would Jasper want an old gun and journal?"

"Everyone in town knows Cub found something; they think it was a box of treasure of some kind, thanks to his loud mouth. Jasper may have decided he wanted to see for himself what was in it."

The hour's drive from Levi to Siloam Springs passed quickly while we rummaged around in our thoughts, trying to piece together the strange bits of information.

"Here's the sign that says Piney Vale Cemetery," I said, slowing down as we approached a turnoff.

The paved surface gave way to gravel and became a narrow road leading between a forest of pine and scrub oak. Why had Eileen's aunt chosen such an out-of-the-way cemetery for her niece's final resting place? Even on a sunny day, I doubted that much light filtered through this dense grove of trees.

"I believe we've reached our destination," I muttered. An even narrower lane branched off toward a cemetery. At the end of the lane, a familiar green tent marked the place of a new gravesite.

"Why, there's only a few cars," Mom murmured. "What a pitiful looking place."

I brought the Escape to a stop between a Jeep and a black Tahoe. "I'm sure the bad weather has kept a lot of people from coming. Too bad they couldn't have had her service inside a church or a funeral home."

We hurried for the protection of the tent. A solemn-faced man in a black suit greeted us and indicated two vacant chairs. I sat down beside a tall, slim woman dressed completely in black with an old-fashioned pillbox hat atop her gray hair. She turned to me and half smiled.

Two younger women shared the shelter of the tent with us and at the end of the row of chairs sat a well-dressed man.

I touched Mom's arm and leaned toward her. "Don't look now, but I think that's the same person who wants to buy our land."

Mom gasped and leaned around me to gaze at him. He glanced our way, then quickly looked back at the preacher. Why was Stuart Wood of Innovation Technology in Tulsa here? What was his connection with Eileen?

"We are gathered here on this sad occasion," began the man who had greeted us, as he launched into a eulogy which told us nothing that we didn't already know about Eileen. The woman sitting beside me wiped her eyes and sighed loudly. Was this Eileen's aunt, the one who had claimed her body?

The tent flapped in the biting wind, sounding for all the world like I imagined dry bones would sound. This was not a cozy thought to have in a graveyard on a bleak day. I pulled my coat closer and tried to burrow deeper inside it. Beside me, Mom was shivering.

At last the preacher asked us all to bow our heads for the dismissal prayer. I could hardly wait to stand up and start my blood circulating again. After the preacher's "amen," I raised my head and looked toward the end of the row of chairs. I wanted to talk to Stuart Wood but he was already backing his Tahoe toward the road. I hurried toward the car, but before I could reach it, he sped away.

The black-garbed woman next to me touched my arm. "Are you a friend of my niece?" she asked.

"Um, well, I only recently met her," I hedged.

The woman shook her head. "So sad, her untimely death. They said she had drunk some kind of poison. I don't understand it. She wanted so much and ended her life with so little."

"You are Eileen's aunt?" I asked. "I'm Darcy Campbell and this is my mother, Flora Tucker."

"Yes, I'm Fern Eldon. It's very nice of you to come out on such a bitter day. Eileen would have appreciated it."

I sincerely doubted that. "Were you close to Eileen?" I asked.

Fern Eldon wiped away a tear, whether from the icy wind or from sorrow, I didn't know. "I wish I could say I was, but I hardly knew her. I live in California and hadn't seen the poor child for twenty years. But, I guess I'm all she had. Her mother died a long time ago."

Mom and I looked at each other. Fern Eldon would know little more about Eileen than we already knew.

“We’re sorry for your loss,” Mom said, patting Fern’s hand. “Darcy, we should be getting back to Levi before the roads get bad.”

I smiled at Mrs. Eldon. Mom and I hurried away from that desolate spot toward the welcome warmth of my car.

Chapter 25

In Oklahoma, the temperature can change abruptly from one extreme to the other. A bright sun shone in a cloudless sky, trying to lull us into thinking that winter had packed up its bags and moved on when in actuality, cold weather would be here for at least another month. Nevertheless, I opted for the comfort of my red sweatshirt over blue jeans to get me through the day. Although the sunshine looked warm and inviting, I didn't trust it. I glanced in the mirror, decided to wear my hair down instead of in a ponytail, and headed for the dining room and that cup of hot coffee I could smell. No matter how early I started my day, Mom usually had coffee made by the time I opened my eyes. She liked to begin her day with a quiet time of Bible reading and prayer.

Fifteen minutes later, I polished off the last bite of oatmeal pancake and drained my glass of orange juice. Jethro sauntered over and rubbed against my leg.

"And what are you going to do today, old friend?" I asked, getting up to pull his box of Kibbles from the pantry. "You say you're going to sleep on your cushion and keep an eye on the birds? Have a good time!"

He arched his back, favored me with a silent meow and tiptoed to his food dish.

I shook food into Jethro's dish then glanced at Mom. "How do you feel about going out to the acres and checking on the progress of our new house?" I asked.

"That's a good idea! Maybe getting out in the countryside and fresh air will clear our minds off Eileen and you getting shot at and that old gun and Mama's first marriage. Whew! What is going on, anyway?"

I carried our dirty dishes to the sink, rinsed and stacked them in the dishwasher. "It's just me, Mom. None of these disturbing things would be happening if I were still in Dallas. Maybe I'm what Grant said I am, a magnet for danger."

Mom sniffed. "Oh, pshaw! I don't want to hear that. Better wear a coat, Darcy," she said, heading for the hall closet. "The sun looks nice, but I'm sure the wind is still nippy."

"Yes, dear," I called in a singsong tone. At times my mother forgot that I had grown up long ago and still treated me like I was a child.

As we hustled into my little SUV, I glimpsed a pick-up truck turning the corner, heading away from our house. Was it the same vehicle I had seen yesterday? Was someone watching our movements? The truck disappeared before I got a good look at it.

As I drove out of town, I kept an eye on the rearview mirror for any sign of someone following. Maybe I was paranoid. If we did have a stalker in a vehicle, it couldn't be Jasper because he didn't drive. Surely the man who had shot at me wouldn't be so bold as to venture out in daylight. Grant was scouring the countryside looking for him.

We left the highway and turned onto the dirt road leading to the edge of Granny Grace's acreage. As we neared the house place, I grabbed Mom's arm.

"Look! They've actually gotten up part of the frame. Oh, my goodness! It is starting to take shape."

Mom grinned. "It sure is. I'm beginning to get excited about it."

We walked around our future home, imagining what the living room, kitchen and bedrooms would look like. I was pleased to see the openings for two fireplaces, one in the living room and

another in the dining room, a plan Mom had suggested and with which I agreed. The old hand dug well, located behind the house, had been cemented over, so Cub must have decided he was not going to find any more hidden treasure in it.

The wind in the bare tree branches lifted my spirits. A cardinal sang his cheery song from a high cedar. I was reminded of an old verse I had learned as a child: "A cozy cottage, snug and warm, With four strong walls to shield from harm."

"I want to sit here on this rock and look at our beautiful house," Mom said, sinking down on a gray boulder. "I think my mother would be pleased that we are building out here on her land. I just wish she could see the house when it's finished."

I put my arm around her. "Who is to say she won't, Mom? We really don't know how near Heaven is, and I don't believe it has locked doors; so perhaps Granny Grace is free to go where she pleases."

Mom looked at me in faint alarm. "Now, Darcy, don't let your imagination run away with you. I don't know if that is biblical."

I ruffled her springy curls. "I'm going to walk around. I imagine all the snow and rain we've had this winter has caused the creek to rise. It's a good day for me to stretch my legs and get some exercise. Today almost feels like springtime."

Although I didn't mention it to her, it was also a good time for me to listen for any unusual activity such as the sound of someone digging. The sun seemed brighter as I recalled my earlier explorations and how Grant had found me, cowering on the ground, terrified of the ghostly webs that stopped my progress. Since that day, my heart had been singing the same refrain: Grant Hendley loves me.

"Don't go far, Darcy," Mom said. "There are lots of trees around here, and when you're out among them, they all look the same. A person could get lost."

"Lost on Granny's land?" I laughed. "I don't think so, Mom."

The crisp air smelled of river and creek and that mysterious, elusive fragrance of damp woods. I breathed deeply as I walked through a clearing where, at one time, Granny Grace and Grandpa George's house stood. I ambled on past that vacant house place, to the old apple orchard. The trees had lost branches and the limbs twisted in strange shapes from lack of pruning. However, each spring and summer, those limbs still bowed low with shiny red apples.

The orchard bordered an area that had been cleared of trees a long time ago and used as a burying ground. Early day people had no way of traveling except by horse and wagon. Funeral homes were few and far between, so there were many family burial plots or cemeteries behind churches. Granny and Grandpa and various family members were buried at Goshen Cemetery, not here. This lonely place had been deserted for many years. Briars and thickets covered the ground. A few leaning headstones pushed above tall brown grasses.

When I was a young child and spent the night at Granny's, I would stare out my bedroom window at the moonlight dancing across these grave markers and shiver. Did ghosts flit above the resting places of people who died many years ago? I gazed at the cemetery until my childish imagination overpowered me, then I would duck under the covers and feel deliciously safe from whatever evil lurked on the other side of the orchard.

After Mom and I moved into our new house, I planned to have the area cleared of all the undergrowth. I would try to restore and preserve the orchard as well as the cemetery.

A dead bough had fallen from a cottonwood and sunk into the soft ground. The limb had been there for quite a while from the looks of it. The branch must have landed with some force because it was deeply embedded in the earth. I tugged the limb until it suddenly loosened its grip

on the ground, causing me to stagger backward. As I started to toss it aside, I noticed something clinging to the sharp end that had been underground.

Bending closer to the object, I rolled it between my fingers. Small bits of a rotting cord crumbled onto the ground. I dropped to my knees for a closer look.

The scrap appeared to be a remnant of a braided cord, frizzled ends sticking out from three thick threads twined together. Most of the color had faded long ago but where the strands crossed over each other, I could detect a faint tint of olive or brown.

Sunlight glinted on an object beside the hole created by the displaced limb. It appeared to be aluminum, an oval shape maybe two inches in diameter. A few threads, similar to the ones on the end of the tree branch, clung to a hole near the edge of the oval.

Perhaps the oval was a maker's label from an old piece of farm equipment. I rubbed the label against my jeans and held it up to the sunlight. Faint letters appeared through the mud. I could make out an M, R, K. I turned the aluminum piece around and breathed on it, brushing it against my pants again. With my fingers, I traced the indentations of letters stamped into the aluminum. The letter C emerged then A, U, L, D, F, E. The small of my back felt as if a hand gripped it in an icy vise.

I scrambled in the dirt for something to dig with, something more than my hands. Frantically, I grabbed the fallen branch. With the branch, I lifted debris that had lain in this spot for a very long time. Sweat trickled down my face. My breath came in short bursts. Finally, a long, narrow depression in the ground lay before me, an oblong shape that sank five or six inches lower than the surrounding graves. The limb, blown from the tree and shaped like an arrow, had landed directly in the middle of this depression. This indentation was the size and shape of a grave but if so, this grave was unmarked by any headstone.

My breath came in gasps. I could go no further. This scar in the earth was revolting to me. Fear gripped me, terror of what must lie beneath the layers of leaves. My arms and legs felt like water as I sank back on my haunches.

Once more, I held the aluminum oval up to the sunlight, turning it until I could make out all the letters. The letters were faint and parts of them had been obliterated but the name, but after nearly a hundred years, the name was still there: Markham Cauldfell.

The wind in the cottonwoods above me seemed to cease. Because a tree limb had plunged to the ground in this, the twenty-first century, I was transported back to a turbulent time of war and death and a dark secret.

My chest ached. I didn't realize I was crying until I saw tears falling on the cold disc that seemed to burn my hand. I stared at this name from the past, my grandmother's past. In my hand lay the identification tag of a man who had played an unexplained part in the life of my family, the dog tag of a World War I soldier. I closed my eyes until the trees around me stopped spinning.

I stumbled to my feet and sense a presence beside me, slipping an arm around my shoulders. My eyes flew open and I looked wildly around. The only living things I saw were the trees and a hawk riding the air currents in slow circles above me. No one was near, yet I could have sworn that for a brief instant someone stood close.

I convinced myself that a lonely, deserted cemetery had created the impression of a presence beside me. Surely that was the answer to the nearness I had felt. My imagination must have been working overtime.

"Oh, Granny Grace," I whispered to the wind that lifted the lifeless leaves of the cottonwood. "Oh, Granny, I think I've found the grave of your husband."

Chapter 26

My legs felt shaky. An overpowering sadness gripped me. I turned to retrace my steps up the hill toward my mother. What would she say when I told her of my experience and the dog tag I had found? Would the tag provide an answer to our questions or create more confusion? I wanted to go home, sit down with a cup of coffee, call Grant and ask him to help us make sense of this shocking find. I gripped the oval in my fist, the tangible proof of a long ago secret.

The closer I got to our new house, the faster I walked. I was jogging by the time I reached the boulder where my mother had decided to rest. She was gone.

"Mom!" I called, "Where are you?"

I didn't see her in the Escape but I opened the doors anyway to check, thinking that perhaps she was ill and had lain down across the seats to rest. Her purse sat on the floorboard where she had left it. The car was empty.

The wind had grown colder during the time I knelt at Markham Cauldfell's grave. Holding my breath and straining my ears, I listened for the sound of my mother's voice. Had she gone into the woods and lost her way?

Gulping back the panic that threatened to choke me, I slipped Markham Cauldfell's dog tag into the pocket of my jeans and ran into the woods, searching and calling. Thirty minutes later, there was still no trace. It was as if the ground had opened and swallowed my mother.

Grabbing my cell phone from the pocket of my jacket, I punched in Grant's office number. A little sign popped up that said "No Service. The only thing to do was get in the car and try to find higher ground. Perhaps the phone would work atop the next hill. Should I leave the area? It seemed to me that by driving away I was deserting her. Surely she was somewhere near. Had she heard or seen something that piqued her interest? Had she fallen and hit her head? Was she lying unconscious somewhere, and had I walked past her?

Tears stung my eyes. Taking a deep breath I prayed, "Dear God, help me find my mother." That was the only prayer I could think of, the only words that kept circling in my mind like that hawk overhead. I hoped the Lord heard.

I scooted behind the wheel of my car and backed out of our newly graded driveway, all the way down to the road. The image of Mom did not appear in my rearview mirror although I kept glancing at it, hoping to see her come out of the woods and wave at me to stop.

Trees grew thickly along the road and I drove slowly, searching for any sign of a small, gray-haired woman in jeans and denim coat. Atop a rise in the road, I flipped open my phone and pushed "redial." Grant answered on the first ring.

At the sound of his warm, familiar voice, I started to cry.

"Darcy, slow down. It's all right. Take a deep breath and tell me what's wrong."

I gulped. "Grant, I'm at Granny Grace's place, and I can't find Mom. She's gone."

It took only a few seconds to tell him what had happened, about finding Markham's Cauldfell's grave and Mom's disappearance.

His voice hard, his tone, professional. "I'm on my way. Stay there, Darcy."

I put the phone on the seat beside me and slowly backed the Escape down the road and into our driveway. Everything looked exactly as it had a few minutes ago. There was still no sign of Mom.

Could she have fallen somewhere and broken her leg? I slid out of the car and stood still, listening. The wind rattling the tree limbs carried the chill breath of snow. "Oh, no," I breathed. "Please, Lord, no snow yet."

Going back to the boulder where she had sat, I searched around its base. There was no evidence of a struggle, nothing dropped on the ground. I walked around the big rock in a widening circle, my eyes combing the ground for anything that might show me where she had gone.

Grant's truck roared to a stop beside my Escape. I ran to him and grabbed his arm. "She's gone, Grant. I've looked and looked. Something has happened to her. Somebody must have taken her."

Grant gripped my shoulders. "Darcy, just get in the car and wait a bit. Jim is on the way. We'll look until we know what happened to Miss Flora, I promise you. Now get in out of the wind, all right?"

I nodded and stumbled toward my car. Grant knelt beside the boulder, scrutinizing the ground. Jim Clendon's truck, spraying gravel, screeched to a stop beside Grant's.

Nervously, I sat in my Escape, the rising wind rocking it now and then. Sunshine pouring through the glass warmed the interior, but I could not stop shaking. The cold I felt had settled in my bones. Surely I could do something or think of where she might be, but my brain seemed numb. I couldn't get beyond the chilling fact that she had been sitting on the boulder when I left her, and now it was as if she had never been sitting on that big gray rock.

The hours passed slowly while I worried and prayed. At last, Grant and Jim reappeared coming toward me through the woods. I opened the door and slid out.

"Well?" I said. "Did you find anything?"

Grant opened his right hand. A small blue handkerchief edged in white lace lay in his palm. "Do you recognize this, Darcy?"

I grabbed it and pressed it to my cheek. "It's Mom's, Grant. Where did you find it?"

Jim awkwardly patted my shoulder. "Now, Darcy, don't get all worked up. This is a good sign. It tells us she probably dropped it to give us a clue. Now we'll know where to start searching."

Grant gently pulled the handkerchief from my fist. "I'll need that, Darcy. It'll give the dog a scent to go on."

"The dog? Are you going to get bloodhounds out here?"

"Ben Ventris' hound, the one that Pat and Jasper took in, he's part bloodhound and I remember Ben telling me once that he was really good at trailing. We're going to Pat's right now."

For the first time, I felt a twinge of hope. At last there was something to go on, some solid clue. Surely Ben's dog Murphy could find my mother.

"I'll go with you, Grant. Come on, hurry!"

Grant put his arm around me. "No, Darcy. You can't come with us. The most important thing you can do is go back home and stay by the phone. Miss Flora may try to call you. Or, if she's kidnapped for ransom, the kidnapper may call. She might possibly return on her own. When you get home, phone all of Miss Flora's friends. Ask if any of them have seen her. I'll check back with you as soon as I know something."

I swiped at my eyes with my coat sleeve. "But Grant..."

He frowned. "I mean it, Darcy. Let us handle this, please. For Miss Flora's sake."

Defeated, I trudged to my car and drove slowly down our long drive. As I reached the county road, I looked back. Grant and Clendon were getting into their trucks, doubtless to go to the home of Pat and Jasper Harris and get Ben's hound, Murphy.

Chapter 27

So began the longest afternoon and night of my life. The old farmhouse was empty without my mother in it. Jethro rubbed against my legs, meowing. I carried him with me as I walked through the empty rooms. Common sense told me Mom wasn't in any of the rooms but I checked every nook and cranny including the closets. My cat's furry warmth in my arms was somehow comforting.

Putting Jethro down on his cushion, I went to the phone and began dialing my mother's friends. I heard the fear in Jackson Conner's voice and had a feeling that Grant was going to have company in his search, whether he wanted any or not. The list of those who loved Flora Tucker was long. I called all of her church friends, even people considered to be only acquaintances. Our pastor, Don Huggins, said he was going to set up a prayer chain immediately and would join the search party.

I hesitated before calling Georgia and Carolina Jenkins. I didn't want to alarm them but at this point, my concern for my mother outweighed concern for their aging hearts. Miss Georgia wanted to come right over but I told her there was a slim chance that Mom might show up on her doorstep. She seemed satisfied with that. Last, I called Burke Hopkins. The phone rang ten times but Burke didn't answer. Hanging up, I decided I would try again later.

The old yellow coffee pot was half full. I poured a cup, microwaved it for a few seconds, and sat down at the table. Something hard pressed against my leg. I ran my hand into my pocket and pulled out the dog tag. In the shock of my mother's disappearance, I had forgotten about it. Now I sat with it in my fingers, turning it over and over. This relic from World War I had once been worn by a young soldier named Markham Cauldwell. I tried to visualize this first husband of my grandmother's. Was he tall? Dark? Had he loved Grace Wolfe and had she cared for him? Surely this was so, else why had they married? Since she was engaged to George Daniels, Markham must have been a dashing sort of person who swept Grace off her feet.

I slipped the dog tag back into the pocket of my jeans. Sitting alone in an empty house, waiting for the phone to ring or someone to knock on the door was driving me crazy. I scooted back my chair and went to the drawer where we kept our notepads and pencils. Carrying them back to the table with me, I sat down and started to write. I had always been able to think better with a pencil in my hand and if I could force my thoughts away from my mother for a few brief minutes, perhaps time would seem to pass faster.

I jotted down names and recent occurrences which had turned my mother's and my lives topsy-turvy.

- Digging the foundation for our new house
- Finding the gun and Bible record
- Stuart Wood's offer to buy our land
- Mom finding the old journal
- Eileen's visit
- Disappearance of gun and journal.
- Eileen's death
- Pat finding the old photograph
- Confrontation with the Jenkins sisters

10. Someone shooting at me
11. Finding Markham Cauldfell's grave
12. Mom's disappearance

I looked at the list and willed my racing thoughts to slow down. I had to concentrate. The series of calamities began with Cub Dabbins excavating for the foundation of our new house. Somehow, building it was a threat to somebody. Who? Eileen? Maybe. If we built it, she would lose her right to the land, wouldn't she? Stuart Wood? He didn't want us to build because he had offered an astronomical sum to tempt us to sell. But why would that matter to him, a complete stranger? None of it made any sense to me.

I couldn't think straight. The specter of Mom's disappearance crowded out all other thoughts. I threw down my pencil, pushed the paper and cold coffee away, and began pacing.

At 7 o'clock that night, I was still pacing the floor, alternately praying and crying when someone knocked. I ran to the front door, nearly tripping over Jethro.

Pat Harris stood in the halo of brightness from the porch light. "Come in, Pat. I am so glad to see you." I held the door wide.

Pat carried a bowl in her right hand but she hugged me with her left arm.

"I figured you might need company. Have you had supper?"

"Um, no, guess I haven't even thought about it."

"That's what I was afraid of. I brought some of my good potato soup."

"Oh, Pat, I couldn't eat it. Thank you, though. You're a wonderful friend."

"Now, Darcy, I'm telling you what Flora would say if she were here. You should eat. You don't want to get sick just when your mom needs you to be strong."

That made sense. I followed Pat into the kitchen. She set the covered plastic bowl on the table and pulled two soup bowls out of the cabinet. I opened the silverware drawer and put spoons beside the bowls. We sat down and silently began to eat.

Amazingly, the hot soup was good. I ate every drop in my bowl.

"Thanks, Pat," I said. "I guess Grant and Jim came to your house to get Murphy?"

"Yes, they took the dog and told me a little about what happened. Jasper isn't home. He's out wandering again and I knew you shouldn't be alone at a time like this. I'm going to spend the night."

"You don't have to do that. I appreciate it but I'll be fine."

Pat carried the empty bowls to the sink and rinsed them. "No arguing, young lady. I'll make a bed on the sofa."

I got up from the table and hugged her. Although I had cried most of the afternoon, I found more tears sliding down my face. "I can see why you are mom's best friend."

Pat sniffled and patted my shoulders. "We'll get her back, Darcy. Flora is going to be all right."

I went to the linen closet, pulled out a pillow and blankets, and put them on the sofa. "Your bed is ready when you get tired, Pat, but feel free to read or just sit with me and watch the fire."

"I'll sit for a while, Darcy, thanks. But before I do, I want to give you something else. I found this under the mattress in Jasper's room. I can't tell you how ashamed I am to admit my son must have taken it from your house."

She reached into her over-sized handbag and pulled out a book. On its faded brown cover, in big numerals was the date "1918."

I swallowed twice before I could croak, "It's Granny Grace's journal."

She nodded. "That it is." Her voice was grim. "I just read the first page, Darcy, to be sure it was the one that Miss Grace wrote. I'm sure you aren't going to sleep tonight so I thought you might want to read it. Maybe it'll have some answers for you."

I clutched it to my heart and nodded. I couldn't speak. Pat sat down in Mom's recliner. I opened the journal and at once was transported back into the past century. The blaze in the fireplace cracked and popped, a log fell, and the fire burned down to smoldering embers. None of it mattered to me. I was lost in another time, in the lives of other people. I didn't even know when Pat left the chair and lay down on the sofa.

Chapter 28

Pat was right. I read all night long. The last time I remember looking at the clock, it was 5:30. Then, although I thought I couldn't sleep at all, I dozed, and woke again at 7:00.

Pat had gone home by the time I woke up. She left a note on the dining table, telling me coffee and a bowl of oatmeal waited for me. I stumbled to the bathroom and showered. A heavy blue sweatshirt and blue jeans would work for the day before me. I pulled on thick socks and stepped into fleece-lined brown leather boots. No more sitting at home and waiting. My mother was out somewhere, maybe cold, maybe hungry. I would do my best to find her.

Even after eating, I felt empty inside. The house was too quiet, too big, and the hurting around my heart would not go away.

Granny Grace's journal lay on the floor where I dropped it sometime during the early morning. I picked it up and gently placed it on the counter. Now I understood about Markham Cauldfell and why Grace had married him. The journal made clear how he had died and why. But it did not shed light any on the current questions of Eileen or the bushy-haired man or why Stuart Wood had offered us such an inflated price for our land.

The phone rang as I was brushing my hair. I ran to pick up the receiver. Caller ID told me that Grant was on the other end of the line.

"Any word?" I sounded breathless to my own ears. "Have you found her, Grant?"

"Nothing, Darcy. Sorry. Are you doing all right?"

My heart plummeted. "I'm fine, Grant. Didn't Ben's dog pick up on her scent?"

He hesitated before answering my question. "Yes, yes he did. But he lost it."

"Where did he lose it? Tell me, Grant!"

"Murphy trailed her to the river, then the trail stopped."

The river! My hand felt stiff as I replaced the receiver. Did that mean for some reason, Mom had gone to the Ventris River and drowned? Had she heard someone in trouble and tried to help?

I poured another cup of coffee and willed my racing thoughts to slow down. A boat! I needed a boat to explore the river. But who had one I could borrow?

Immediately Burke Hopkins came to mind. Burke fished on the river a lot. He would have a boat. Burke was the one friend I hadn't been able to reach last night. I looked up his number in the phone book and dialed.

The phone rang twice, three times. I waited for ten rings then hung up. Maybe he was outside both times I called. He had chickens to tend to, dogs to feed. Burke didn't have an answering machine. So the best thing would be to drive out to his house. I knew that he would want to join the hunt for Mom, if he were not already a part of that search.

Jethro rubbed against my ankles so I checked his food bowl. Still full. He would be fine while I was away.

I pulled a stocking cap over my head and buttoned my coat as I jogged to the Escape. The threatened snow had not materialized but heavy gray clouds looked as if they could open at any moment with snow or sleet.

If I remembered correctly, Burke Hopkins lived south of town so I headed toward Deertrack Hill. The long, windy incline was at least dry this morning. When wet and icy, going down the steepest hill in Ventris County was an adventure. But I would have tried it even if it had been

treacherous. Somewhere in Ventris County, a small, gray-haired lady needed to come home. Who had her and why? The only scenario that made sense to me was that someone had kidnapped her. She would have contacted me if she had been able. I refused to consider other possibilities—she might even now be lying out in this weather, unprotected and injured or worse.

At the bottom of Deertrack, I made a right turn and headed up yet another hill. Old String Road branched off to the right. To the left was an unnamed narrow gravel road which led to Burke's house and to the river beyond. I turned onto it. Twenty minutes later, neat white letters on the side of a black mailbox told me I had reached my destination. I turned into the driveway, rounded a curve, and there was Mr. Hopkins' small frame house.

His old pick-up truck sat at the end of the driveway. I remembered Burke saying he had two dogs but they didn't run to meet me, wagging their tails in welcome or barking a warning. In fact, house and yard had a quiet, deserted look. Everything was eerily still.

I opened my car door and slid out. Nothing moved around me except the limbs of a giant cottonwood which stood as a sentinel in the front yard. Something about this was not right. I had a feeling that an unseen someone or something watched me. The hair on the back of my neck rose.

I stepped up on the wood floor of the porch and knocked at the door. And knocked again. I gave the doorknob a tentative twist. The door swung open.

"Mr. Hopkins!" I called. "Are you here? It's Darcy Campbell."

The living room was dark. I found the light switch beside the door and flipped it up. Brightness from an overhead fixture flooded the area.

It was a neat room, gray fabric-covered sofa, burgundy recliner, easy chair, a coffee table, a bookcase in one corner, and in the opposite corner on a small stand, a television. All in all, Burke's living room looked clean, comfortable and completely empty of life.

A black cast-iron wood burner with stove pipe going through the ceiling, stood out from a wall. I went to it and placed my hands on its top. Cold. Opening its metal door, I peered inside. A few coals glowed among the ashes, like red eyes awakened from sleep.

I spoke aloud, maybe to break the dead silence, maybe to give myself courage. "Nobody has been here for quite some time, certainly not since yesterday. But Burke's car is here. And where are his dogs?"

Perhaps he had heard about my mother and had already gone to search for her. He may have left on foot or if he heard about her trail ending at the river, he might have taken his boat.

I ran into the next room, the kitchen where clean dishes waited in the drainer. The bathroom was spotless too. A hand towel was draped, dry and unused, over a glass rod. In the two bedrooms, spreads were unrumpled; closets, empty of anything suspicious. The whole house looked as if Burke had stepped outside and forgot to come back in. I could not see one clue, not one thing out of place, that would point to a hurried departure.

Somewhere a rooster crowed. Chickens! Could something have happened to Mom's old friend as he was going about his chores outside?

I raced out the back door and to the large, fenced-in area where several brown hens and a colorful rooster wandered about, pecking at the ground. Water stood in the cast iron kettle leaning against a tree, evidently put there for them to drink but the long metal feed trough was completely bare.

The chickens were the only living, breathing things on Burke's farm as far as I could see and they gave the scene a touch of normalcy. Except, why hadn't he fed them yesterday? I went into the small lean-to chicken house in search of grain. Just inside the door stood a barrel with a lid.

Lifting the lid, I saw a scoop atop a sack full of corn. I quickly filled the scoop and took it outside. The chickens excitedly clucked, flapped their wings, and came running as I poured the corn into the trough. They didn't lift their heads as their bills beat a rapid tattoo on the metal.

Now what? If Burke Hopkins had joined the search wouldn't he have locked his doors or fed his chickens before he left? Judging from the lack of a fire in the stove and the hunger of the chickens, he had not been home since yesterday.

If I could find where he kept his boat and somehow maneuver it to the river, I would be able to check out coves and shore lines that searchers on land might miss.

Latching the chicken yard gate behind me, I looked over Burke's acreage, wondering where would he keep a boat? Several yards behind the house was a carport with attached shed. Perhaps his boat was there. I hurried over to get a closer look.

The door to the shed did not budge when I pulled on it. The hinges wore a coat of rust and dead grass grew in clumps in front of the door. I tugged and yanked until finally the door creaked open. The only thing inside were some empty baskets, probably not used until springtime when garden produce was ready to be harvested.

Hurrying back to the carport, I noticed that a large area of the dirt floor looked darker than the ground around it. It was dry, not damp from the snow or sleet. Burke's boat must have rested there until recently.

A logical explanation was that he had heard about my mother and taken his boat to do a water search.

Wind whipped around the corner of the shed as I stepped out of its shelter. Pellets of sleet stung my face. Sticking my cold hands in my pockets, I found my leather gloves. I pulled them on and meandered back toward the Escape. What should I do now? My mother had disappeared on Granny Grace's land while inspecting our new house. Had I missed a clue there? Returning to our empty farmhouse and waiting was not an option. I had no idea of any new place to search; my only thought was to retrace my steps. Maybe if I went back to our new house, I could uncover some tiny clue that Grant and Jim and I had missed yesterday. Chances of that happening were slim but I didn't know what else to do.

A small movement caught my attention where the yard met the woods. The wind ruffled a dark shape lying on the ground. Dread clamped like a hand around my middle as I walked closer. A dog lay on its side on the ground, the brisk wind stirring his fur. This must be one of Burke's dogs and explained why I wasn't met with barking. The dog's beautiful head bore a bullet hole. My throat constricted and I swallowed hard, fighting the urge to throw up. Who shot this animal? Why? Burke's absence had been alarming but now it became chilling. Somebody, some heartless unknown person had intruded here and murdered a man's pet, but what had happened to Burke? Surely, his disappearance was associated with Mom's. As an old friend once told me, it was too much of a coincidence to be coincidental.

I squatted beside the dog and ran my hand across his brown and black coat. Who was this, Wolf or Ranger? Had he threatened an intruder? Did the killer of the dog shoot Burke too? Was the old man even now lying dead in the woods or been kidnapped? The death of the dog lent a chilling aspect to the disappearances of these two, my mother and her friend. I bowed my head and tried to pray but fear and desperation paralyzed my thoughts. God is in charge, I told myself. He knows where Mom is, even if I don't. That was the bit of comfort I held onto.

Chapter 29

Tears stung my eyes as I rose to my feet and stood looking down at the lifeless shape of Burke's pet. A questing muzzle poked into my hand. My heart did a flip and I stumbled backward. A second dog stood beside me, his tail wagging slowly. One of Burke's dogs was dead but the other was very much alive and was looking at me as if I were the last friend he had on earth. I dropped to my knees beside the black and tan hound.

Stretching out my hand toward him, I spoke softly. "Who are you, big fellow? Wolf?"

The dog nosed his dead companion then looked up at me, his eyes pleading.

No, maybe not Wolf. "Ranger? Are you Ranger?"

He jumped up on my leg, his tail beating furiously.

"Ranger, then. What happened here, Ranger? Where is Burke?"

At the sound of his owner's name, Ranger grabbed my coat between his teeth and pulled. I stood up. The dog trotted toward the woods then loped back to me and tugged again.

"You want me to follow? Do you know where Burke is? Lead on, fellow. I'm right behind you."

The dog ran toward the river. I jogged behind him, tripping over rocks, ducking under limbs. I heard and smelled the river before I glimpsed it through the trees. Gray water and gray sky seemed to meld together.

Ranger stopped at the river's edge, whining and looking back at me. Skid marks along the muddy bank showed that this was most likely where Burke's boat had been pushed into the water.

Bending over, I searched the mud and gravel of the bank, hunting for a piece of fabric, a glove, or anything that would let me know Burke had been here and was still alive.

Ranger had no patience with that. He came to me, growled and struck off again, through the briars and sumac thickets that crowded close to the river. Tree branches snagged my cap and thorns tore my coat as I ran to keep the dog in sight. He had a destination in mind but where we were going, I hadn't a clue.

I ran until I gasped for air. Sleet pellets pinged and bounced off trees and rocks.

Ranger barked in the distance, calling encouragement. Willing my tired legs to move, I pushed myself up. The barking grew louder and finally through the bushes I glimpsed my guide. The river cut in close to the woods here, making a natural cove. There in front of me, pulled up out of the water, sat a rowboat. Ranger had his front feet on the boat's bow. When he saw me, he put his nose to the ground and began sniffing the damp earth.

My heart thudded. Cautiously, I stepped nearer and peered into the boat. Empty. Burke may have been here, but he was here no longer. Ranger kept nosing the ground. At last, he bayed once, and, his nose close to the earth, began trotting up a hill at right angles to the river.

Following was easier now because the dog went at a much slower pace. He was simply going where the scent led him and I tagged along behind.

Sleet came down harder, stinging my face and peppering the rocks and brown leaves with grains of white. I wiped moisture from my eyes. Once again Ranger had disappeared.

If the killer of Burke's dog Wolf was within earshot, it would be unwise to call to Ranger so I ran on and at last glimpsed a movement. Hurrying forward, I saw him heading down a steep

ravine. At the foot of the rocky gully was a tumbledown structure. At one time it might have been a small barn but now all that remained was a ragged roof covering four walls so ruined they looked as if they could collapse inward at any moment.

Ranger trotted to my side and whined. Whatever or whoever he had been following must be inside those weathered boards.

I crept from tree to tree, keeping my eyes on the ramshackle building. Once again Ranger disappeared. It was amazing how his presence gave me courage and how alone I felt when I could no longer see him. My breath sounded loud and rasping in my ears, louder than the sleet rattling around me or the wind that sighed in dead leaves. Within 100 feet of the old building I sank down behind a large cottonwood. From that vantage point, I could see the area surrounding the barn. A short distance away, the skeleton of a house appeared through the trees. It looked oddly familiar. At last I knew where I was. I had passed the remains of the house many times on the way to Pat Harris' home. Ranger had found the decaying homestead of the legendary Ventris County hoarder, Old String. Because today I had approached the place from the back instead of driving past it on the road, I had not recognized Old String's abandoned home place.

A flash of tan through the trees showed Ranger was still nearby. He was sniffing around the perimeter of the shack, moving his head from side to side as if to catch every smell. I wanted to call to him but didn't dare.

Crouching behind the tree, dampness seeping through my jeans, I tried to decide what to do next. Somehow, I must have a look inside Old String's barn. Evidently Ranger thought Burke was within those ramshackle walls for surely the dog had been trailing his owner. But who else was in there? Was Burke's captor standing guard?

My cell phone registered the time as 11:00. It seemed like a week since I had eaten the breakfast Pat left for me but in reality, only a few hours had passed. The darkness of the day was due to the lowering clouds. Surely, the heavy clouds carried snow or rain and would add to the misery of anyone who did not have shelter.

The "no signal" sign was on my phone again but I clicked it off just to make certain it wouldn't ring. Was Burke inside the barn and if he were, was his captor standing guard? Stealth, I told myself. Stealth and patience are what matter. Although I ached to run down the hill and try to get inside the shed, it would certainly be unwise to make my presence known.

Should I wait until night and then slip up to the building? I mentally counted my options. There weren't many. In fact, I thought of only three. I could keep hidden and see if anyone entered or left the barn, I could go for help or at least to a place with cell phone reception, or I could see for myself if anybody was inside. The cold penetrating my clothes decided for me. The longer I sat, the colder I became and by night I would probably be well into hypothermia.

I faced an unpleasant but inescapable fact: it was up to me to see what Ranger found so interesting and there was no better time than now.

Bushes and rocks offered scant cover but they were all I had. I crouched as low as I could and scrambled from thicket to tree to boulder on the way down the hollow. Finally the weathered walls were within arm's length. Cracks between rotting boards were so wide that I could see through them into the shadowy interior. A kerosene lantern cast a small halo of light within.

"When do you think he's coming back?"

I almost stood up and yelled with relief and sheer joy. The voice asking that question on the other side of the wall belonged to my mother.

"No telling, Flora. He's been gone a long time."

And the second voice was Burke's. If I could have reached Ranger, I would have hugged him. In guiding me to his master, he had led me to my mother. Had she been here all night? Was she well? Injured? Who had done this and why? Did I dare call to her?

Evidently she and Burke were alone but for how long? I would have to work quickly to get them out before the crook, the person who had shot Burke's dog, returned.

I crept around three sides of the hut and at last, on the fourth side found the door. It was secured with a heavy, shiny metal lock.

Confident now that Mom and Burke were the only ones inside, I put my nose to a wide crack and hissed, "Mom! I'm here. I'm going to try to get you out."

Silence for a few seconds then my mother called, "Darcy! Oh, Darcy, thank the Lord you found us. But don't stay, Darcy. He'll be back. Go get Grant. Hurry! Hurry!"

I swallowed the lump in my throat. She sounded weak or tired.

"Have they hurt you, Mom? And Burke, are you all right?"

"We're all right, Darcy. Your mother and I are hungry, we haven't had anything to eat for a while and that lantern doesn't give off much heat but we're alive. Do what Flora said. Get out now. Get help. It won't do us any good for you to be caught."

"Can't do that. Can't leave you two. You might not be here when help arrives. Who did this to you?"

"Oh, Darcy, it's a long story. A complicated, unbelievable story. Please go. I don't think he will shoot us. Just go get help."

I looked around for something to break the hasp to the lock. Rocks aplenty poked from the ground. I picked up a big, heavy one and prepared to bring it down on the lock. That's when I felt something hard prod my back and a voice said,

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you."

Chapter 30

The rope binding my arms behind my back cut into my wrists. A second rope wound around my ankles. The dirt floor of Old String's barn was not my preferred seat but all this dimmed in significance because I had found my mother. She was alive! The relief I felt warmed me like a blanket.

Mom moaned. "Oh, Darcy, why didn't you run for help?"

"Cause she's just like you, stubborn and dumb. You could all be out of here, free as the air if you'd just sign on the dotted line, old woman."

Jude Melton, Eileen's bushy-haired friend stood above us, shaking a paper at my mother.

"I'll not sign it, ever, you rat," Mom spat out. "If you kill us, who'll sign it then? You should have thought of all this before you added kidnapping to your list of crimes."

I nudged my mother. "Shhh," I whispered. Now was not the time to indulge in name calling, not when a man had a gun pointing in our direction.

I cleared my throat and nodded toward the paper in Jude's hand. "What is that?"

"It's a deed giving me ownership of the forty acres you claim as your land. The land that rightfully belonged to poor little Eileen. And you..."

Jude leaned toward me, giving me an up-close view of stubbly chin and tobacco-stained teeth. His eyes shone with pure hatred. Jude had eyes the color of topaz with whitish flecks in them. "It's not fair that Eileen is dead and you're still alive, walking around and causing trouble. Well, there's more than one way to do things, if one way doesn't work. You shoulda been scared off after I shot at you," he hoarsely.

Hatred was written all over Jude's face, such violent, potent hatred that I cringed. "Did you—are you the one who shot at me?"

"I'm glad to tell you that I was. I didn't mean to kill you though. If I had meant to do that, I wouldn't have missed. I wanted to scare you and let your mother know that she needed to cooperate. And that coffee—there in the café. It shouldn't have had enough poison in it to kill anybody. The poison was supposed to just make you sick. Eileen must have been allergic to it or something." He shook his head from side to side like an animal in pain.

Then he rose to his feet and swiped his hand across his face. "Murderer, that's what you are."

For some reason, maybe it was a defense mechanism against hard reality, I found his accusation funny and I laughed.

"I cannot believe anyone would be so stupid! You are calling me a murderer but *she's* the one who tried to poison *me*."

His mouth twisted in a snarl. "Why, you little..."

"Careful there. Maybe you ought to watch your mouth, friend," Burke said softly.

I smiled at him then looked back at Jude.

"Eileen is gone. You don't have to carry out this mad scheme. If she cared anything about you, she wouldn't want to see you in trouble. You are your own worst enemy."

"I don't know what you mean and I don't want to know. Just shut up so I can think."

Jude shoved his pistol into his coat pocket and held his hands out to the kerosene lantern.

I looked at my mother. "How did this happen, Mom? How did you come to be here?"

She drew a shaky breath. "I just wasn't expecting anybody to be at our new house, Darcy. I was sitting on that big rock, looking at the house and trying to think of how it would be to live there after all the years in the farmhouse. Before I knew he was anywhere around, Jude slipped up behind me and clapped his dirty old hand over my mouth and yanked me to the ground."

A red haze swam before my eyes and I struggled against the ropes, needing with a physical ache, to punch Jude squarely in the nose. "Did he hurt you, Mom?"

"Not really. He bent my arm behind my back, kept his hand around my mouth and half carried me toward the river. That's where he had Burke's boat. He said if I tried to get away, he'd shoot you. He knew you were down at the old graveyard."

"He had been to my house earlier," Burke said. "He told me Flora was in trouble and needed me. That sounded fishy 'cause I didn't know him from Adam and I figured if Flora needed help, she wouldn't send no stranger to get me. I was out in the yard, just about to ask him some questions and Wolf jumped him. I guess that dog knew human nature. Maybe he didn't like the smell."

Jude grabbed his pistol again and waved it under Burke's nose. "Watch it, old man. I shoulda shot you when I shot the dog but you were useful in helping me get the boat to the river." His lips drew back in a sneer. "Besides, I'm such a kind-hearted gentleman."

Burke ignored him. "He shot poor Wolf. Shot him dead right in front of me. He pointed that gun at me and told me to get my boat. He made me paddle down the river a piece and then brought me here to Old String's place and tied me up."

Sleet rattled against the worn boards of the barn and a cold wind blew through a crack in the wall directly behind me, sending a shiver down my back. The weather was taking a turn for the worse. If Mom and Burke had been here since yesterday, I didn't think they could take much more of this.

Somehow, before another frigid night, we had to escape from our prison. Jude had hurriedly tied the ropes that bound my wrists. Could I possibly work the knots loose? Would a little subterfuge confuse him? Maybe if he thought Mom or I would sign his deed, he would at least untie our hands and we would have a chance to grab his gun.

"Um, Mr. Melton." Jude had been staring out the open shed door. When I spoke, he turned around and glared at me.

"Perhaps if you told us what there is about our land—"

"Eileen's land," he growled.

"OK. Suppose you tell us what's so important to you on that land. Maybe we can reach some sort of compromise."

Mom bumped my side with her elbow. "Darcy!"

"We've got a lot more than forty acres, Mom," I said, winking at her with the eye that was away from Melton. "We probably wouldn't miss it. You ought to know, though, Mr. Melton, that we've already been offered a hefty price and now you're asking us to give it to you? Think about that."

I'll never know what Jude would have answered because at that moment, his partner strode through the door.

Mom gasped and my mouth fell open.

Burke's low laugh was without mirth. "Bruce Dowell," he muttered. "I knew you ran with a mangy bunch but I didn't suspect even you would stoop this low."

Dowell's bulk filled the doorway. He glanced at Jude Melton then stood grinning down at the three of us. He spoke to Burke. "You think you're so smart, don't you, old feller? Slippin'

around all quiet-like, always knowing more than the next man. Well, who's so smart now? You and your friends are all trussed up like turkeys." He threw back his head and laughed.

"And you!" He turned his hard eyes on Mom. "You're always keeping secrets, telling a fellow just enough to whet his appetite. I know you found a box out there on your land. Cub said he dug it out for you. I'm betting he found some of that 1930s money from the bank robberies. He has been looking for it for years and so have I. My cows pasture on your land and I pay you rent for the privilege. I figure that I should have as much right to it as you do. I want to know what's in it and what's more, I want that box."

Melton was half Dowell's size but he bristled up like a bull dog pup. "Back off, Dowell. I don't care about a box. I just want one of these women to sign this deed. Then as far as I'm concerned, I'm out of here."

I licked my dry lips. "What do you mean you're out of here? What about us?"

Melton grinned. "You can go on back home if you want to; I don't care. Oh, I forgot. You're all tied up. Well, maybe your boyfriend sheriff will find you before you freeze to death. If you're lucky."

An odd light flickered in Jude Melton's eyes. At that moment, I realized he was not entirely sane. Surely he should know that even if the deed gave him ownership, he would never be able to enjoy those forty acres. After kidnapping charges were brought against him, he wouldn't dare show his face in Ventris County. Besides, what court would uphold a deed signed under duress? It made absolutely no sense. He had an odd fixation on Eileen, a mindless attraction. The fact that she had tried to kill me didn't seem important to him. It was almost as if Eileen had mesmerized him and he was just an automaton following her command.

Shock registered on Bruce Dowell's face. "Wait a minute. The deal was we'd make them give us that box and we'd split whatever is in it. I don't care about Miss Flora's land and you somehow failed to mention it. But we can't just leave them out here. In this weather, they might freeze to death."

Melton pulled the gun from his coat pocket and turned it over thoughtfully. "You were useful to me in keeping an eye on these three. Very helpful in letting me know when Darcy and Flora were alone out there by the river but don't start getting balky on me now. That's up to you to find out what's in some old box if that's what's worrying you. I don't care a hoot about it. There probably ain't nothing in that box that amounts to anything. All I want is for one of these women to sign me a deed. 'Cause I know what's in that land. Yes Sir, I know. And I want it."

Bruce's eyes widened. "Where'd you get that gun? I sure don't want murder on my record. Put that fool thing away."

Burke's quiet voice contrasted with Bruce and Jude's loud bluster. "You should have thought about that a long time ago, my friend, long before you got mixed up with this jaybird."

Jude swung his gun toward Burke. "I don't need you at all. All I wanted from you was your boat and now that I have that..."

"Get him, Ranger!" called Burke.

A black and tan fury hurled itself through the door of the shed directly at Jude Melton. Ranger's jaws clamped around Jude's arm that held the gun, sending him crashing to the floor at our feet. The gun spun out of his hand and thudded into a far corner.

"Get off! Get away!" screamed Jude, flailing and kicking at the snarling dog attached to his arm.

Jude and Ranger rolled across the floor. Jude kicked over the lantern, spilling kerosene and flames into the leaves that had blown in between cracks in the walls and now littered the dirt

floor. In only a few seconds, fire flicked through the murkiness of String's tumbledown shed, eating hungrily at the splintered board wall.

My pulse beat in my ears like a drum. That fire would soon demolish this tinder-dry building.

"Darcy," Mom yelled. "We've got to get out of here. We'll all be burned to death."

Smoke clogged my lungs and blurred my vision. I heard Burke beside me, coughing. Already the smoke was so thick, it was hard to see anything except the rectangle of daylight through the open door.

Somewhere in the barn, Jude's screams rose above the crackle of the flames.

Chapter 31

Bruce Dowell ran to my mother, pitched her over his shoulder and staggered out of the hut. I was rolling, bound as I was, toward the door with Burke right behind me when Bruce returned. Smoke filled the shed, and flames licked high along the wall boards toward the rafters. If the roof fell in, we'd be killed.

Bruce pulled a knife from his pocket and sliced through the ropes around my feet. When they fell away, he cut the ropes binding Burke's ankles then we three lurched outside. I coughed and sputtered and filled my lungs with cold, fresh air.

Once outside, Bruce cut Mom's ropes and the ones around Burke's and my wrists.

"That man—that Jude! He's still in there. And so is Ranger," Mom cried, pointing at the crackling inferno.

"No, they're all right. Look!" Burke said. The smoke-darkened shapes of a man and a dog reeled out of the barn.

Jude fell to one knee, coughing and gagging. Ranger struggled over to Burke and flopped down at his feet, feebly licking the old man's hand.

Burke patted Ranger and told him what a good dog he was. Mom and I held onto each other, shaking from cold and excitement. We looked up at Bruce.

Mom's voice was hoarse. "You saved our lives. We would still have been in there except for you."

The fire roared and the roof collapsed, a blazing inferno shooting sparks high above the dead branches of the surrounding oaks.

Bruce stood staring at the fire, slowly shaking his head from side to side like a bull trying to clear his vision. "I just didn't know, Miss Flora. When Jude talked me into it, it seemed like a good joke, a way to get even..." His voice trailed off.

A familiar red hound bounded into the clearing and trotted over to Ranger.

"It's Murphy!" I said. "But where is Grant? I thought he was using Murphy to try to pick up your scent, Mom."

Two figures emerged from the woods. They were slightly rimmed in white from the sleet but I would know that pair anywhere. "Grant," I called, running toward him. "Grant, we've found Mom and Burke. They are all right."

At that moment I didn't mind the sleet nor the icy raindrops sliding under the collar of my coat. Grant's strong arms closed around me and he pulled me up against his chest. The world stopped spinning for a brief instant and everything was well.

Then he released me, tilted my chin toward him with one finger and asked, "Darcy, are you and Miss Flora well? Are you hurt?"

Mom walked to us and Grant wrapped one arm around her. She smiled.

"We're fine now, Grant. Darcy and I are safe and so is Burke."

Jim Clendon stopped beside Jude and stood looking down at the coughing, choking man. "What happened to that old barn?" he asked. "Did somebody set it a-purpose?"

"Well, I think I'll just be going on home now, folks," Bruce said, edging away from the group.

“I think you won’t, Mr. Dowell,” Grant said. “Stop right there. I’ve got a bunch of questions to ask.”

Jude rose to one knee and pointed a shaking finger in Bruce’s direction. “Don’t let him get away. He’s in this as deep as I am.” A fit of coughing interrupted him.

Burke Hopkins nodded. “He was in cahoots with that jaybird,” he said, nodding toward Jude. “But he saved our lives, Grant. I’ll not forget that any time soon.”

“Jim, radio for help,” Grant said. “We’re going to need medical assistance for Melton and I think that dog of Burke’s could use some looking after. Better ask for the fire department too. We can’t count on the rain to keep that blaze from scattering. Looks to me like Jude is going to have to go to the hospital for a bit but I believe Bruce is well enough to go back to the office to answer some questions. Darcy, can you and your mother get home by yourselves?”

Mom and I nodded. “Wild horses couldn’t keep us away,” she said.

Chapter 32

The sleet and rain that helped put out the fire at Old String's place turned to snow. Giant, cotton ball flakes fell softly for three days and when the snow ended, Ventris County lay under 20 inches of white. During this time my mother read and re-read Granny Grace's journal. She cried, I cried, and we talked about little else. Our own family mystery was resolved and we were at peace with it. According to a phone call from Grant, he had wrapped up the loose ends having to do with Eileen, Jude, Bruce and our land. He said he would explain it all when the storm let up and we could talk face to face.

"Darcy, we need to get everyone together. I feel that our friends and the people involved in this mystery we've been embroiled in should know the story in my mother's journal," Mom said as we sat at her old wooden table eating oatmeal and toast and sipping coffee.

I glanced out the kitchen window at her rose bush gently brushing the screen. A cardinal flew down on one of the limbs, a brilliant crimson accent that reminded me of a rose against the snow.

"That's a good idea, Mom. Why don't we phone everyone and see if they can be here tomorrow? It's Saturday, Grant's day off."

So that's how it came about that six people sat around the fireplace the next day, coffee cups in hand. Grant, Jackson Conner, Pat, and Burke all came. Mom and I were sorely disappointed when Miss Carolina turned down our invitation.

"Too stressful on sister," she had told us on the phone. "Why, she just might die of a heart attack right there when that journal is read."

So Mom swallowed her frustration and prepared to go on without the Jenkins twins.

"Most of you know that my mother, Grace Daniels, was married before she married my father, George," Mom said.

Surprise registered on Pat's face, further evidence that this good woman truly had not read the journal. Burke must have learned about my grandmother's secret from his father, the minister who performed the wedding ceremony for Grace and Markham Cauldfell because he did not change expressions. I had told Grant about the journal and Mom told Jackson the sad story it recorded but neither man knew the details.

"I've asked Darcy to read my mother's journal aloud. I'm afraid I'd just bawl and couldn't even see the words. So, Darcy, go ahead," Mom said as she settled down on the sofa beside Jackson and picked up the purring Jethro.

Lord, please help me through this, I prayed silently. A lump that felt like the size of a walnut was in my throat. It would be hard to talk around it.

"Remember that my grandmother wrote this journal in 1918. World War I ended on November 11, 1918. The journal was written in the final days of the war and shortly after. I've researched this period in our area so I'd like you to think about life during that time as I read, sort of put yourself back in time. People were growing Victory Gardens and trying to conserve and cut back on expenses. They had "meatless Mondays" and "wheatless Tuesdays." Flu killed many people and then a smallpox epidemic broke out. Granny Grace began the journal when Grandpa George joined the army," I told my audience. "I am skipping those pages. I'll begin reading in the summer of 1918."

I glanced at Mom for support, opened Granny Grace's journal, and began to read.

August 1, 1918—I haven't gotten a letter from George for many weeks. Is he injured? Why haven't I heard? Mama and Papa tell me not to worry but this is such a terrible war, how can I not? I think daily of our plans for a life together as soon as he is home. Papa is going to give us a few acres. We will build our house on those acres. I can hardly wait. Thank goodness we have missed the flu that took a toll on so many of our neighbors.

August 20, 1918—I spoke too soon about the flu. First Papa, then Mama took that terrible disease. I nursed both of them but feel healthy and hale, physically. Spiritually, I'm shattered. I pray every day for George but still no word from him. A new person has bought 40 acres close to our farm. His name is Markham Cauldfell and he is recently released from the army, on a medical disability, he said, but he looks healthy. He showed me his dog tag, he called it, that the army uses for identification. He keeps it in his pocket. He calls it a proud possession. In fact, he is a good looking young man, tall and dark with a quick smile. He is not encouraging about George. He said I would not believe how hard it is to "dodge all those bullets," his words.

September 1, 1918—I have not been able to write for several days. I barely even know how to go from day to day. The dreaded news came August 21. My George was killed in action in some horrible place in France. My dreams are gone and my heart is shattered. I care for nothing in this world. Please, God, let me die and go to be with my love.

September 30, 1918—I go through each day as if I'm in a trance. I can't remember things that I've always known. I feel so numb. Surely it cannot be true. Surely George is not dead. Markham keeps asking me to marry him. He tells me he loves me and that marriage is the best way to forget my pain. Maybe he's right. Maybe I need to forget the past and move on. I don't love Markham Cauldfell but perhaps I could learn to love him. Nothing matters to me anymore. I know I will never be happy but if I could make someone else happy, my life might have meaning.

October 21, 1918—I have made the worst mistake of my life. On October 7 I married Markham Cauldfell. My parents warned me that I had not known him long enough but would I listen? No! Not the stubborn Miss Grace Wolfe! We went to Siloam Springs to be married. His parents live there and are still weak from recent bouts with the influenza. Oh, how could I have been so wrong? Markham drinks. He drinks a lot and when he is drunk, he is mean and abusive. I dare not tell my father for fear he would kill Markham. I cover up the bruises on my arms with long sleeves but I do not know how much more of this I can take. The little house on Papa's land where we live has become a hell on earth. I hear him coming home now. I've got to hide this journal!

I paused to wipe my eyes and gulp some coffee. My audience seemed to be spellbound. I noticed Mom was sniffing and had her head on Jackson's shoulder. Pat looked horrified and Grant was sitting forward, his elbows on his knees. Burke's mouth was a thin, straight line across his dark face.

At that moment, someone knocked at the door.

Mom got up to open it and Jackson went with her. Women's voices came from the front hall and I heard Mom offering to take our visitors' coats. Miss Carolina and Miss Georgia came timidly into the room. At once Grant, Jackson and Burke sprang to their feet.

Jackson seated them on the sofa.

"Would you like some coffee?" Mom asked.

Georgia smiled. "No. No, thank you, dear. We're tea drinkers but don't fix any for us. We've both drunk tea all day. One more cup and I'm afraid I'll go floating away."

Carolina placed her large handbag on her knees. "We are sorry to interrupt you, Darcy. We understand you are reading your grandmother's journal. At first I did not believe Georgia should hear all this melodrama from the past. I didn't think I wanted to hear it either; sad reminders, you know. But then we decided it was actually our duty to come."

They arranged their skirts around their ankles and folded their hands. Both wore identical dark dresses and serious expressions. I wondered when Georgia, who, judging from the old photograph, dressed in the latest style 70 years ago, decided that her wardrobe should be outdated and plain. Their white faces and gray hair contrasted harshly with their dark attire.

Georgia smiled at Mom as she and Jackson resumed their seats. With all three women sitting side by side, I marveled at the resemblance between my mother and the twins. Why hadn't I seen it before?

"We are glad you're here," I said. "I hope Granny Grace's words don't upset you. It's a sad story that she tells."

Carolina nodded. "Yes. We understand that."

"Darcy, would you like for me to read? Or maybe Grant?" Mom asked.

"No. I'll be fine. It's just that I can feel the pain Granny must have suffered. The next entry is long and I warn you that it will be shocking to everyone but Mom and me." I glanced at the twins. "And possibly Miss Georgia and Miss Carolina."

I took a deep breath and continued.

November 1, 1918—I am so shaky I can hardly write. A terrible, terrible thing has happened. Did I do wrong? Oh, if only I had kept quiet but I couldn't. I couldn't keep Markham's mistreatment a secret any longer. It started when he came home after being in Levi all day at some saloon. Markham was in a dark mood and at once complained that supper wasn't done to his liking. He picked up a bowl of fried potatoes and flung it against the wall. Then he told me he was going to teach me how to be a good wife, how to cook things as he liked them. He came toward me and I ran. He stumbled and fell and just lay there. I guess he had passed out from too much liquor. I ran and ran until I got to my parents' home. I was so scared and I was crying. I must have been quite a sight as I burst through their front door.

Mama and Papa had guests. Judge Ira Jenkins and his wife Polly were eating supper with them. When I ran into the room, they leapt up and hurried to me. Mama put her arms around me like I was a child and kept saying, "Shh, shh. It's all right."

"No, it isn't all right," I told her. "Markham is drinking again. I'm afraid of him. I don't want to go back to that house ever again."

Papa patted my shoulder and told me he would not let me go back and he asked if Markham had ever hit me. When I said Yes, I thought he would grab his gun and go after Markham. I believe he would have if Mama hadn't intervened.

Judge Jenkins said he had known Markham was no good for a long time. Seems he had run-ins with him in Levi; things Markham never mentioned to me. The judge said that he had put Markham in jail several times. So I guess on those nights Markham never came home, he was sobering up in jail.

Mama and Miss Polly had me sit down and drink a cup of tea. The judge and Papa were talking about charges to bring against Markham when all of a sudden, the door flew open and there he was. He was swaying on his feet but he had a gun, waving it around. I think all three of us women screamed. Papa started toward him and Judge Jenkins stepped between them, advising Markham to calm down and go home. Well, Markham started calling the judge some bad names...words I had never heard before and they were awful. Then he pointed his gun at the

judge. Judge Jenkins is known for having a short temper and he lost it right then and there. He pulled a big gun out of his coat and before anybody could say more, he shot Markham...shot him through the heart right there in Mama and Papa's living room.

Miss Carolina interrupted. "And the gun he used is right here." She pulled a box out of her handbag. It was a cedar box such as old time ladies once kept their jewelry in. She lifted the lid to show everyone the ancient Remington .44 nestled inside.

Chapter 33

A log dropped in the fireplace, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney.

"Miss Carolina, please let me have that gun. It is old but it might go off accidentally. It's fully loaded except for one bullet," Grant said, leaning toward Carolina.

"Yes, it was loaded except for the one bullet that killed Markham," she said. "Don't worry, Sheriff. I took all the bullets out."

Pat's frightened voice broke the silence. "I don't understand. That gun—it looks so old. Why on earth did you keep a murder weapon, all those years, Miss Carolina?"

Mom stared at the box in Miss Carolina's hands. "She didn't keep it. It lay in a well for nearly a hundred years."

Pat drew a quick breath. "Do you mean that's what Cub found instead of gold or money?"

Mom nodded. "It is. But how did you come to have it, Miss Carolina?" Miss Georgia turned toward my mother. She had a handkerchief in her hands and kept twisting it through her fingers. As she looked at Mom, she spoke to Miss Carolina. "Let me tell her, Sister. You see, Flora, we didn't know what Cub had found. The only thing we knew was he had found something that had been on your land and it had been there for a long time. We were afraid it had something to do with what had happened so long ago. Mama told us, after Papa died, that he had shot a bad man once and that Mama and Papa and your parents got rid of his body. She said she herself threw away the gun that Papa used to kill Mr. Cauldfell, even though that gun had been in our family since the Civil War. Whatever it was Cub found, we didn't want anything known that could cast aspersions on our parents. They were such good people."

Miss Carolina interrupted. "We didn't ask Mama any more questions about the murder. Georgia and I were horrified and it made Mama's head hurt to talk about it. We figured we couldn't accidentally mention something that we didn't know anything about. We were afraid Cub had found some sort of proof that Papa had killed a man in a fit of anger. Oh, I know it was self-defense but Papa's temper was well known. We wanted whatever it was that Cub found so we hired a young man we know, a very trustworthy young fellow, to take it without your knowledge, Flora and bring it to us."

A dull red crept up Pat's neck. "Would the name of that young man be Jasper?"

"Yes. Yes, it was Jasper," Georgia said. "But I want you to know that he meant no harm. We told him that it was dangerous for you to have whatever it was in your possession and he would be doing you a favor to bring it to us. So that's what he did."

Burke shook his head and chuckled.

"I can't see what's so funny about a breaking and entering, Burke, even if nobody meant any harm," Grant snapped.

Jackson grinned too. "I see a bit of humor there...who would be less likely suspects than these two frail ladies. But I would advise both of you against taking up a life of crime."

"So I guess my son knew when he saw that old gun with the journal that the gun must be what you two wanted," Pat said slowly, narrowing her eyes in thought. "He was probably in a hurry to get out of Flora's house before he got caught and just grabbed up what he saw on the table. And, Jasper being Jasper, he wouldn't have wanted you to have the journal since it had

Miss Grace's name on it. He has a strange sense of honor." She sighed. "But at least, he's got one."

Carolina nodded and clicked the lid down on the cedar box.

"Go on with the journal, Darcy," Mom directed.

"Granny's entry stopped there," I said. "She didn't write again until the next week."

November 8, 1918—Why am I writing all this? Maybe to absolve my conscience? Maybe because it's too great a secret? Or maybe because in writing it I can begin to make some sort of sense out of a horrible nightmare. After Judge Jenkins shot Markham, he and Papa wrapped him in one of Mama's oldest quilts, put his gun in the quilt beside him, and they carried him outside. I didn't ask where they were taking him. When they came back inside the house a couple of hours later, they just told us it was all taken care of and they wouldn't say anything more. I don't think I wanted to know what they did with him. Mama and Miss Polly were near hysteria. While the men were out, Mama was crying and she went to the family Bible and ripped out the page that recorded Markham's and my wedding. She ran into the kitchen and dumped her silverware out of the sheepskin. She put the Bible page in that sheepskin. The judge had dropped his gun onto the floor after he shot Markham. I can still see Miss Polly's face as she picked that gun up by the handle and put it on top of the marriage record. She said she didn't care if it had belonged to the judge's father and had seen use during the Civil War, she didn't want it ever to connect the judge with murder. She didn't want the judge to see it when he came back inside and she told Mama to put it someplace where it wouldn't ever be found. Then Mama took the whole bundle and hid it under her mattress. She said she would dispose of it next day where it wouldn't be found. Nobody ever mentioned it again.

"I've got to have more coffee," I said. Grant went with me to the coffee pot. We both refilled our cups.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked.

I nodded. "Grant, it is like I'm reliving all the pain these people went through. What a terrible thing to keep secret all these years."

Pat too brought her empty cup to the coffee pot. "Darcy, is there more to that journal?"

"One more entry, Miss Pat. We are almost finished."

We sat down and I opened the journal to the last page.

November 30—It is like a dream, only it's a good dream this time, almost too good to be true. My George is alive. He was injured and in a hospital but he did not die. His records got all mixed up. He said that happened to a lot of the soldiers. He is home and my world is sunny once again. I've told him all about Markham and I think Papa told him where they buried Markham. I didn't know if George would understand or if he would blame me for not waiting but he loves me. Oh, my heart is singing. He loves me and we are going to be married."

It was a solemn group of people in my mother's living room. Miss Georgia softly wept into her handkerchief and Miss Carolina stared at the lid of the cedar box, industriously polishing it with her sleeve.

When I laid the journal down, I felt as if I had been working all day. I was completely drained. Mom wore a small smile and Jackson looked thoughtful, staring into the fireplace. Pat dabbed at her eyes and sniffed loudly.

Burke cleared his throat then spoke slowly. "My father told me about the marriage between Markham and Miss Grace. He said he wished he had refused to perform the ceremony because he was afraid the marriage would not be a happy one but he hoped Markham would change his wild ways."

"I'm glad that the truth about my father's part in this did not come out while he was alive," Carolina said.

Miss Georgia placed a trembling hand on Carolina's arm. "Oh, Sister, it would have killed Mother if Father had been branded a murderer." She looked nervously around the room. "Surely, now that the truth is known, it won't be recorded anywhere or be brought up again, will it?"

This was something I hadn't considered. People kept warning me that sometimes long ago events were best left buried. Had my digging into the past resulted in pain for the innocent people in the present? Still, it seemed that I had no choice but to try to find out the secrets behind the gun and the baffling marriage of my grandmother to one obscure Markham Cauldfell.

Grant glanced at Jackson Conner, drew a deep breath and said, "I see no reason this should go any further than this room. It happened a long time ago and I believe justice was carried out."

Jackson thoughtfully smoothed his mustache. "I agree," he said.

"Mum's the word," Pat added.

Mom looked at Miss Georgia and it seemed an unspoken message flashed between them. The mystery of what had happened to Granny Grace's first husband was solved but the secret of Mom's parentage was hers and her mother's. They chose to keep it.

Pat rose. "Are you going to prefer charges against my boy, Grant?" she asked.

"That is up to Darcy and Miss Flora," Grant answered.

"Charges? Whatever for?" Mom asked.

Jackson stood up too and shook his head. "Someday that boy is going to come up against someone who is not as kind hearted as you, Flora. Better keep a close rein on him, Pat."

Pat sighed. "As if I could."

"I'll walk out to the car with you ladies," Burke told the Misses Jenkins. "It's a mite slick underfoot. Can't have either of you falling and breaking a bone."

Only Grant was left of our visitors. He picked up some empty coffee cups and carried them to the sink.

"A couple of generations ago, five people kept the secret of how a man was killed," he said. "Do you realize that we are still keeping that secret, a hundred years later?"

I nodded. "Yes. Now it is something that eight people know and I don't think any of us will repeat what we've heard here tonight."

"Grant, do you know what was so important about our land that it cost Eileen her life and very nearly cost Darcy hers?" Mom asked.

Grant nodded. "I do. But I'd like to show you instead of telling you. If the weather is good, could I pick you up tomorrow morning and take you for a little ride in the country?"

"If this is the way you want to explain it to us, Grant, we'll be ready," I said.

Chapter 34

The next day was Sunday. My mother and I should have been in church thanking the Lord for bringing us through a month of dangers, close calls, and amazing revelations. Instead of sitting in a pew, singing praises to God and offering up our heartfelt prayers of thankfulness, we were in Grant's double cab truck, on our way to Granny Grace's acres.

True to its changeable temperament, the weather was perfect. The sun shone and only traces of snow clung to the hillsides. The temperature edged toward sixty degrees. Birds sang as if spring had already made her appearance and the sky was that clean, azure color that caused human spirits to soar. However, one human was doing battle with her conscience.

"We will go to tonight's service," Mom said. "I'm sure Pastor Huggins' sermon will be just as good tonight as it is this morning."

Grant smiled down at me. I was snuggled between him and my parent, as close to his warm, broad shoulder as I could get. "I'll go with you," he said.

"It's a good day for an outing," Mom admitted, nudging the hamper at her feet. "I believe the Lord understands when we need to be in His great out-of-doors instead of stuck within man-made walls."

I giggled. "'Stuck', Mom?"

She sniffed. "Well, you know what I mean."

Mom had packed a lunch and brought along a blanket. We were adding a festive air to our trip, by way of a picnic lunch.

Grant drove to my grandparents' old home place along a back road, the same way I had gone the day the spider webs clogged my vision, the day Grant had declared he loved me.

At last we arrived at our destination. Grant jumped from the truck and held the sagging wire fence down with one foot while my mother and I stepped over it onto Tucker land. Taking the hamper, he led the way on the stepping stones across Lee Creek.

"Darcy, do you remember that you heard a pickax or a shovel the day you came out here by yourself?" he asked.

I nodded. "I sure thought I did but then I ran into those giant cobwebs and looking back at it, I don't know if they were real or not. Maybe I imagined them and maybe I just thought I heard some-body digging."

He shook his head. "You didn't imagine it. Follow me. Be careful of these rocks and bushes. There's poison ivy in among them."

I grasped Mom's hand as Grant walked in front, holding limbs out of our way and offering help in the rough places. At last he led us to a gravel bar jutting into Lee Creek. The rocky limestone bluff met the land here. The little creek was a small rivulet hugging the side of the cliff.

He stepped across the creek and climbed a short way up the bluff. Moving aside a large bush, he revealed a large hole in the overhanging rock and a pickax lying beside it.

"So I did hear somebody digging," I said, "but digging for what?"

Grant looked down at Mom. "Silver," he said. "There's quite a large vein of silver running through your land, Miss Flora."

"What did you say?" Mom asked. "Did you say there's silver in the rocks there?"

Grant nodded. "Sure is. Enough to make you a very wealthy woman, Miss Flora. Do you mind if we spread out that blanket, Darcy? Did you bring some of your famous coffee, Miss Flora? This is going to be a long story. We might as well be comfortable."

A large, flat rock on the gravel bar made a perfect table. Grant set the hamper on it.

Sitting on the blanket, coffee in hand, Grant began to put the finishing touches to the unbelievable mystery that had very nearly taken our lives.

"Stuart Wood of Innovation Technology is a shady character operating just within the limits of the law," Grant began. "His business is a fly-by-night outfit. He bilks unsuspecting people out of their money if he can. Evidently he had heard rumors that this part of Oklahoma might have deposits of valuable minerals. Have you two heard of the legend of bars of Spanish gold and silver being buried somewhere around Comanche, Oklahoma?"

I nodded.

Mom poured three cups of coffee, handing two to Grant and me. "I've heard that old tale all my life," she said, "but a lot of people have hunted for it over the years. If the legends were true, I'd think it would have been found by now. Personally, I think it's just that, an old tale. Nothing to it."

"Stuart Wood believes it," Grant said. "He's a treasure hunter with his sights set on digging up a fortune somewhere. He had heard the legends about gold being buried around these parts too, maybe loot of outlaws like Jesse James or more modern ones like Pretty Boy Floyd. Anyway, he did some research and found a descendant of one of those bad guys, Chester Overton. Can you guess who that relative is?"

"Jude Melton?" I asked.

Grant shook his head. "Bruce Dowell. Bruce is a great-grandson of old Chester."

Mom smoothed a corner of the blanket we sat on. "I guess that explains Bruce's interest in what Cub found in the old well. And maybe that also explains why he wanted to pasture his cattle on my land. It would give him a good excuse to be snoop around while he was supposed to be taking care of his cattle."

"Correct," Grant said. "He thought if there was any treasure buried out here, it should rightfully be his and you can bet if he had found anything, he wouldn't have told anybody."

I shook my head. "That's twisted thinking, Grant. How could Bruce assume that renting a pasture gave him ownership of what's under the ground?"

Grant grinned. "If you haven't noticed, Darcy, Bruce is just a little bit of a twisted character. He also carries around a big chunk of self-pity and suspicions. He convinced himself that old Chester had buried something on your land."

Off in the distance a couple of crows cawed. A squirrel scooted headfirst down an oak and bounded away through tall grass, probably on his way to a buried cache of nuts. This was such a peaceful scene, unchanged for centuries except for that scar in the hillside and the pickax that lay beside it.

"What about Eileen and Jude Melton?" I asked. "Were they related to Bruce?"

Grant poured another cup of coffee from the thermos. "No, they were two people that Mr. Wood picked up to use for his own purposes. They were drifters, both of them. Eileen was never in one place very long. Somewhere along the way she met Jude, another man with a chip on his shoulder and sort of shiftless. He felt that the world owed him a living. Somehow he and Eileen met and hit it off. He idolized her."

"And they were just the kind of people Stuart Wood could use," I mused.

“Yes. Wood was the brains of the group. Eileen and Jude along with Bruce did his leg work for him, the dirty work. He tried buying your land first, Miss Flora. That would have been a lot easier and a lot more legal. Wood knew that it would never do for you to move out here in your new house. You would hear and see the digging he is doing. When you wouldn’t sell, he was ready to resort to violence. He would have been in the clear, or so he thought. Eileen and Jude were the ones doing the spying and putting poison in your coffee, Darcy. If they had been caught, he would have been in the clear, or so he thought.”

“So that’s the reason he offered me a lot of money for a little bit of rocky land,” Mom said, tossing a stick into the water.

“What are you going to do with the land now that you know there is silver on it?” I asked her.

“What do you think I should do?” Mom asked. “You’re the one who will be inheriting all this someday.”

These hills, with Lee Creek running through to the river, the rocks, trees and animals were forever a part of me. My family’s history lay here among the trees, the rocks, Lee Creek and the Ventris River.

The cleared area where my grandparents’ house had stood, the old apple orchard in bad need of care, the lonely cemetery with its leaning headstones and the one unmarked grave. I loved it all with a fierceness that surprised me. I could not imagine heavy equipment digging up the hillside, trucks muddying the stream, trees being cut and animals without their habitat.

I shook my head. “I like it just as it is”

“If people knew about that silver, they would say you are standing in the way of progress, Darcy. Are you ready for that?” Mom asked.

I picked up a flat pebble and expertly skipped it across the stream. “Sometimes progress is just another word for greed,” I said.

“Besides, who is going to know?” Grant asked. “I can cover up that hole and I doubt that Stuart Wood or Jude or Bruce will be in much of a position to say anything.”

I tapped him on the shoulder and feigned shock. “Why, Sheriff Hendley! Are you going to be withholding evidence?”

Mom nodded. “Or obstructing justice?”

Grant grinned and caught my hand. “At this moment, in a jail in Levi, justice is being served and as for evidence—what evidence? I don’t see anything here of interest to anybody but us, do you?”

We three along with our circle of trusted friends were getting pretty good at keeping secrets. It was absolutely alarming, the secrets we had uncovered and wouldn’t be sharing with anybody else. Cub’s ears would certainly twitch if he got word of the truth inside that parcel he had found. By the time it made the gossip circuit of Levi, the true story of Granny Grace’s first husband, Cauldfell’s murder, the murderer, Mom’s and my brush with death, and the silver on our land, who knows how that story would have changed? What truths would be twisted?

My mother and I had wished many times that Cub’s curiosity had not led him to look into the old hand-dug well, but maybe instead of being the villain, Cub was the hero here. He had started us on a strange pathway into the past. We had uncovered a mystery we didn’t know existed. Because of Cub’s nosiness, Mom had discovered her birth mother and a new bond was being forced between her and Miss Georgia. I had come face to face with greed and lies and death but in the process, I had discovered how much a good man loved me and how much I loved him.

I twined my fingers through Grant's and smiled up into those clear blue eyes. "You're right, Sheriff. There's nothing on this land that would interest anybody else in all of Ventris County. Who needs a silver mine? I've got everything I could ever want, right here. Already, I am a rich woman."

Grant raised his coffee cup. "Well said, Darcy Tucker."

Mom and I lifted our cups and we three clicked them together. I smiled and for once, didn't correct him. I liked the sound of Darcy Tucker Campbell but I also liked Darcy Hendley. I believed I could get used to that new name with no trouble at all.

About the Authors



It may seem strange to some that a mild-mannered kindergarten teacher would become an author of cozy mysteries, but it's actually a good fit. A teacher is a word craft. So is a writer. A teacher wants the efforts of her labor to have a positive outcome. So does a writer. A teacher prays and hopes that each student has a positive take-away from her work. A writer hopes that for her readers too. A teacher would like each of the children in her classroom to achieve a satisfying life. Although she can't control that, as a writer she can control the way her books conclude!

A native Oklahoman, Blanche has a deep familiarity with the Sooner state, so it's the logical setting for her books. Her Cherokee heritage and feeling at home in the rural settings of Oklahoma are vividly woven into the background fabric of her books. Her other published cozies include *The Cemetery Club* and *Grave Shift*, books one and two on the Flora/Darcy Series, co-authored by Barbara Burgess.

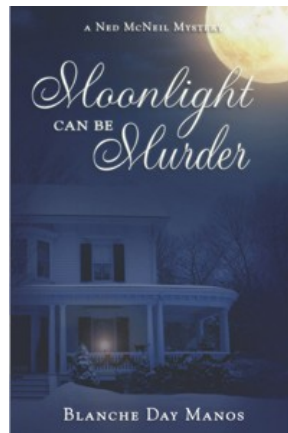
Visit Blanche at www.BlanchDayManos.com

Barbara Burgess is a retired trial court administrator who says she found many good story ideas in the courtroom. One of those ideas evolved into her first suspense novel, *Lethal Justice*, published in 2010. She also co-authored *The Cemetery Club*, a mystery novel based on Cherokee history. Her father was half Cherokee and she says much of her family history involves Cherokee legend and beliefs similar to those found in *Grave Shift*. She has also written short fiction for *Woman's World* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine* and freelanced for several Arkansas newspapers.

Do you like Blanche's cozy mysteries?

**Bet you'd love *Moonlight Can Be Murder*, Book 1 of the Ned McNeil mysteries.
You can even save money too!**

Nettie "Ned" McNeil cannot imagine why her Uncle Javin feels that he is in danger, but she loads her suitcases into her car, leaves Atlanta and her late husband, and makes the long trek to Ednalee, Oklahoma, to help out. When she arrives, Uncle Javin's white Victorian house is strangely dark and silent. Inside she finds him lying on the floor in a pool of blood.



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