

THE
CEMETERY
CLUB

The Cemetery Club

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THE CEMETERY CLUB

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CHAPTER 1

When I awoke to sunshine, blue skies, and the fragrance of freshly-perked coffee that morning, I had no inkling that a few hours later the sun would be blotted out by menacing clouds or that my mother and I would stumble upon a dead body in a brush pile in Goshen Cemetery. Mom's purpose in coming to the cemetery was to see what needed to be done before Decoration Day, which would happen on the third Sunday of this month of May. My purpose was simply to be with her.

But there it was—a bare human foot sticking stiffly from a mound of dirt and tree limbs heaped in the oldest part of the ancient graveyard called Goshen. Nature itself seemed to recoil at the horror before us. Trees bowed and swayed in a macabre dance with the wild wind while angry clouds brooded over the gray headstones. I had seen more than one dead body in my years as an investigative reporter, but this shocked me to the core because it was so unexpected and horrible.

Mom grabbed my arm. "Darcy," she said, "is that what I think it is?"

I swallowed before I could answer. "I'm afraid so."

"But—but, how can that be?" Mom's voice quavered. "Who is it? Come on, let's uncover him. Maybe he is alive. Maybe we can help." She started toward the pile of debris.

I grabbed her hand. "No. Don't go there. We need to get the sheriff. Whoever is under that brush is beyond all help."

Flora Tucker did not take advice easily. She pulled away from me and made a beeline for the grisly object. Past examples of her courage flashed through my mind: Mom gently carrying me to the doctor when, as a child, I fell from a tree and broke my arm; another time, she loaded Dad's old rifle and poked around the foundation of our barn until she found and shot the copperhead that bit my father. She was not a large woman, but she had a lot of grit.

Nevertheless, I tried to stop her. "You shouldn't see what's under there," I pleaded. "Think about it, Mom. This is a job for the authorities."

She shook off my hand as if I were a pesky mosquito, grabbed a stick from that pile of trash, and began scooting away the limbs and rocks until she uncovered a green plaid shirt. Removing a few more sticks revealed arms folded across a man's chest and just a few inches under his arms gaped a ragged, dark bullet hole. Another two seconds of digging and the dead man's face appeared. He had a dark complexion and longish gray hair.

Mom gasped and shuddered like the limbs of the surrounding cedars. "It—it's Ben," she whispered.

I held my nose and leaned forward. She was right. Ben Ventris, a longtime neighbor of Mom and Dad's, lay before me. I had visited in the Ventris home many years ago when Mrs. Ventris was alive. I remembered a comfortable house and the scent of wood smoke. Their farm connected to land owned by my grandmother. But now, here was Ben, still and lifeless, thrown away like someone's trash. Tears stung my eyes.

Something else about Ben Ventris did not look right, besides the fact that he was quite dead. Mom noticed it at the same time as I. Her hand on my arm felt like a vise. "Look!" she whispered hoarsely. "Oh, dear Lord, Darcy, look at Ben's poor hand."

I looked. Only a bloody stump remained where the third finger of Ben's left hand should have been. Nausea welled up in my throat and I heard my mother gag.

"Somebody cut off Ben's finger," Mom whispered.

As we stood, mesmerized by the horror in front of us, a strange silence descended on the graveyard. I raised my head to see what was happening. Dark clouds that had brooded above us now moved and churned and a small eddy of whirling air pointed downward. My heart stopped, then thudded against my ribs.

"That's a tornado!" I yelled. "If it drops, we are in trouble!"

As if in agreement, a low roar began over our heads and wind, hail, and rain came at us, battling to whirl us into the seething heavens.

Mom and I linked arms and stumbled into the storm. Putting her mouth close to my ear, she shouted, "The chapel!"

We struggled toward a small, sandstone building at the edge of Goshen Cemetery. Rain blinded us, hail pelted us, and tree branches flew past, but at last we reached the little building. I tugged the door open and we both fell inside, gulping blessedly dry air.

Mom sank into a pew and I leaned against the wall. The storm's roar dimmed to a comparative quiet within this sanctuary. I was about to sit beside my mother when I heard a sharp click and felt a breeze eddy around me. A shiver traced its way down my spine. Had the back door of the chapel just opened and closed?

"Who's there?" I called.

"I don't care who it was," Mom said, her teeth chattering. "Maybe someone else wanted out of the storm. At the moment, I'd share space with Mick Monroney himself."

While I doubted that it was Ventris County's notorious outlaw from the 1930s who had gone out of the door, I could not see much in the dim room. I flipped the light switch. Nothing happened. Evidently, the electric power was a victim of the storm.

Turning the lock in the front door, I felt my way through murky semi-darkness to the other end of the building. No shadowy figure lurked anywhere that I could see. Our arrival must have sent someone who had sheltered here into the storm. Groping for the bolt on the door, I slid it into place, and fumbled my way back to the pew where Mom huddled.

"I wish I had a jacket to put around you," I said. "You must be chilled to the bone."

"I'll be all right," she said. "It's the shock of finding Ben more than being cold. Do you have your cell phone?"

Of course! Why hadn't I thought of that handy little electronic gadget? Delving into my purse, I found it and flipped it open. I punched in 911. Nothing lit up nor buzzed nor played music. I shook my head.

"No signal. We must be out of range."

Mom sighed. "There are lots of hills around. That must be the reason. This storm will let up sooner or later and then we can get safely back home."

Getting safely back home, I feared, might not be so easy. Wind pounded the chapel and did its best to come in the door or through the roof. Lightning flashes lit up row after row of wood benches inside our shelter. Thankfully, the benches had no other occupants. An old, upright piano crouched in a shadowy corner, and a small table with a lectern on top stood in front of the pews. My ancestors had gathered here in this small cemetery for countless funerals and Decoration Days. Mom's grandfather helped build the chapel. Through the years, Goshen had been a place to worship and for mourners to hear the comforting Word of God when burying a loved one. However, after this traumatic day, Goshen Cemetery would never be the same for me. Something more dreadful and violent than a spring storm had happened here. A good man's life had been cut short, wrested violently from him by an unknown assassin.

"We need to pray, Darcy," Mom said softly. I nodded. Together, we began Psalm 91, the Protection Psalm. "*He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.*"

Mom and I needed the assurance that God was with us. I once fully believed this, but events of the last few months had done nothing to strengthen my faith. When my husband Jake died, the ground shifted under my feet. My rock was gone. Why had God allowed Jake to die? Did He care that I was suffering as I had never suffered before? How could it be His will to cut short the life of one as honest and kind and

loving as my husband? Of course, I knew that Jake was in heaven, but what about me? I was left to carry on somehow without him, and I sorely missed Jake Campbell's strong arms around me.

Returning to Levi, Oklahoma, the place of my birth, yesterday gave me the eerie feeling that I had never left. I came home seeking healing, hoping that being away from the Dallas house that I had shared with Jake would somehow ease the aching loneliness. Since that awful morning when I awoke in our bed and found that a heart attack had stolen my husband, I had lived with emptiness. Moving through each nightmarish day, I pretended that Jake was in the next room or had just gone downtown. At other times, the cold fact that my husband would never return hit me full force and I knew that, somehow, I would have to carry on without him. During the weeks after Jake's funeral, I wandered through the house, wondering what to do with it and all the furnishings, unable to concentrate on my job at *The Dallas Morning News*, even though the editor told me I could work from home. I still had an unfinished assignment for the paper which was nowhere nearly completed. Thankfully, Jake's life insurance was enough so that I could take time off from my job without financial worry.

Mom wanted me to come live with her. She was lonely too, although Dad had died twenty years before. So, when my house sold, I loaded up my personal belongings and headed back to Levi, hoping some of my mother's courage would rub off on me.

A brilliant flash, a roar, and a crash jarred me out of my reverie. The chapel shuddered.

"The oak," Mom said. "Lightning must have hit the old oak by the back door. I felt in my bones this morning that a rain was coming but I didn't know it was going to be a storm like this."

The tree seemed to have landed on the roof. I hoped it would not come through.

Mom squeezed my arm. "Darcy, I am sorry that you have had such a sad welcome home. I wanted you to feel safe here."

"I will admit that finding a dead body and being in the middle of the storm of the century is a little different than I imagined," I said. "It is, however, a homecoming I'll never forget."

Actually, it was more than memorable—horrible came to mind. And, “safe” was not a good description of the way I felt at the moment. Would a storm obliterate us or would Ben’s murderer get to us first?

Was it only this morning that the neighbor’s old gray mule had brayed a welcome to a beautiful spring day? The sun had dappled the leaves of the maple in Mom’s front yard and brought out the heavenly scent of peonies by the gate. Standing beside those bushes more than twenty years ago, my boyfriend had kissed me for the first time. Not Jake; not at that time. It was tall, slim, and handsome Grant Hendley, the man of my girlhood dreams. Where was Grant now? Had life dealt well with him?

Mom interrupted my thoughts. “Listen, Darcy.”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Right. We don’t hear anything. The storm is over!”

My knees wobbled when I stood up and my mother evidently felt the same. “I am as weak as a kitten,” she said. “I guess that’s what comes of being scared about half to death.”

Taking her arm, I led her to the front door. “Let’s see if your Toyota will start or if it has been washed down the hill and into the creek. I hope we can get back to town and there are no trees across the road.”

“But, Darcy,” Mom said, “you’re forgetting poor Ben. Someone should stay with him. You go on home and get the sheriff. I’ll stay.”

I stared at her. “Are you kidding? I’m not letting you out of my sight. There is a murderer loose somewhere around here. Ben is dead and we can’t help him now. My concern is for you. You need dry clothes and something hot to drink. We are both going into Levi and get the law out here as fast as we can.”

Unlocking the door, I tugged it open. Grass swam with water. Rivulets ran here and there like small creeks. The huge oak lay at a crazy angle across the back of the roof, its roots sticking out of the mud. Faded flowers in forlorn little heaps were scattered among the graves and tangled in trees. Sunlight filtered through remnants of racing clouds. At the back of the cemetery, that mound of debris was still there but, thankfully, it was so far away that we could not distinguish Ben’s body.

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Mom sighed. “How in the world will we ever have things ready for Decoration Day? And how can we even have a Decoration when somebody has murdered poor Ben?”

I guided her around a water-filled hole. “It will be a job for your cemetery club. If anybody can set this place to rights again, it is you, Flora Tucker. Let’s hurry. Who knows if the killer has gone or if he’s somewhere around here.”

She quickened her pace. I held the door as she slid into the passenger seat of her Toyota. Then I hurried to the driver’s side, jumped in, and reached for the ignition. There was only one route back to Levi, and, hopefully, the little creek below the hill had not washed out the road.