

GRAVE SHIFT

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CHAPTER 1

The letter came on a warm morning in November. Several weeks later I asked my mother if she had a premonition, a tingling in her fingers before she read it. She said no, not even a chill down her spine. However, sometimes it's the everyday events that hold the potential for disaster. Who would have thought that the contents of an innocent-looking envelope could turn our lives upside down?

The blank screen of my computer stared accusingly at me. Several national newspapers had picked up my story on *The Changing Face of Rural America* and I was trying to work on two more features, but it was hard to stay indoors on such a beautiful day as this.

Downstairs in the kitchen, my mother made plans for the new school she was building on the Ben Ventris farm south of town. *Ben's Boys*, she was going to call it; a school for boys who needed a home and firm, loving guidance.

No one was more shocked than my mother when Ben Ventris, an old friend of the family, was murdered last spring and bequeathed his farm and all his earthly holdings to her, Flora Tucker.

When she recovered from that unexpected windfall, she started making plans. "This farm would be a wonderful place for boys," she said. "There's that orchard behind the house. There's the river for swimming and fishing, and plenty of trees so the little fellas could learn to chop wood for the fireplace."

Those “little fellows” would actually be juvenile delinquents or boys in danger of going astray from the law. I doubted that they would equate wood chopping with fishing and swimming, but I knew what she meant.

Ben’s estate included not only the farm but also his and his daughter’s extensive land holdings and another treasure that neither she nor I mentioned. Its location was far too sad to think about. Not many people knew about that hidden vault and that was fine with both of us.

Snatches of the old hymn, *Build Me a Cabin in the Corner of Glory Land*, floated up the stairs as Mom planned how many bunk beds and how large a dining table those boys would need.

Knowing very well what she was doing, I called down the stairs, “Say, Mom, are you drawing up plans for your new house?”

“Darcy Campbell, this house suits me fine. Why would I need a new one? I’ve got lots of memories of your father within these rooms.”

This was an on-going, good-natured battle between us. The truth was, this hundred-year-old farmhouse needed constant repairs. She could afford a new house now and deserved one; preferably one with no stairs to climb or possibly tumble down.

Cliff Anderson, our mailman, came chugging down our road in his old blue truck. We seldom got more than utility bills, bank statements, and sales ads from Williams IGA but Mom looked forward to her daily trip to the mailbox. Most of the friends and relatives who might have written lived here in Ventris County. My mother had been Granny Grace’s only child and Dad’s parents died a long time ago but I had several cousins and, as Granny used to say, shirttail kin. As far as communicating by email went, Mom refused. The phone and personal chats were her means of communication.

My bedroom window provided an excellent view of the front yard. Mom pulled four items out of the mailbox. Three, obviously too big to be letters from distant relatives in Georgia were probably fliers advertising a seasonal clearance at a store in nearby Tahlequah. As she turned from the mailbox, Mom halted in mid-stride and studied the fourth envelope, a square one. She shook her head then hurried on toward the porch.

Her voice held a note of excitement as she came up the stairs calling, “Darcy, I got a letter from somebody I don’t even know in Amarillo.”

She tore open the envelope and pulled out two handwritten pages, unfolded them and began reading.

“Who in the world?” she muttered.

“What?” I asked.

She finished the first page and handed it to me. The message was written on plain, lined notebook paper in blunt, no-nonsense cursive:

Dear Flora Tucker: I read about you and your daughter solving the mystery of the murders in Levi after the police were unable to make any progress. I also have a mystery—one that breaks my heart—and I hope you will consider helping me to find a way out of the pain that has engulfed me for more than two years. My name is Sophie Williams. Although you don’t know me, I’m sure you will recognize my daughter’s name. It was Andrea Worth.

That jerked my eyes from the letter. “Holy cow!! She’s the one who . . .”

Mom nodded, her gaze glued to the second page.

Sophie Williams was right; my mother would recognize the name of Andrea Mott Worth, as would nearly everyone in our little town of Levi, Oklahoma; as well as many people across the country. Although I lived in Dallas at the time, instant recall came to me. Local newspapers had covered the strange series of mysterious events surrounding this young woman.

Less than three years ago, Gary Worth, a wealthy rancher who owned several hundred acres of good pastureland in Ventris County, quietly married Andrea Mott, a 32-year-old divorcee from Amarillo. After only a few months, Andrea Mott Worth disappeared and no one knew where.

“Wait, Mom. I kept that clipping.” I jumped up and rummaged through my desk. *The Dallas Morning News*, where I used to work, ran a series of articles on the disappearance. I had cut them out because they concerned my hometown.

My mother silently continued reading Sophie’s letter while I re-read the clippings.

According to her husband, Andrea was still in bed when he left at 7 a.m. that September morning. When he came home shortly after noon, she was gone. All of her clothes and personal possessions were in the couple's bedroom. Her handbag sat in its usual place on the dresser, he said. Her red Mustang still crouched in their three-car garage. A housekeeper had been at the Worth home earlier but she reported that she had not seen Andrea at all.

In fact, nobody had seen Andrea Worth since about 6 p.m. the previous day when a landscaper came to deliver an estimate for some tree trimming. He reported that Andrea was the only person at home when he arrived. He gave her the estimate and she promised to call him later. That call never came.

How could she have just disappeared with no trace?

The account of that disappearance brought to mind the disturbing questions asked but never answered. Gary told the police that he was not alarmed when he came home and discovered his wife gone since sometimes a friend picked her up for lunch. By 5 o'clock, he began to worry. He called Andrea's friends and when he got no answers from them, he notified the Ventris County sheriff. No evidence ever turned up, although the couple's vehicles, home, surrounding area, and Gary's place of business underwent repeated testing.

Sunlight gilded the leaves of the oak by the front gate and a chill wind fanned my bedroom curtain. Andrea Mott Worth, young and undoubtedly full of hopes and dreams for the future, had disappeared even more completely than those leaves blowing off the tree and going who knew where.

One of my editors at *The Dallas Morning News* remarked at the time, "I bet that little ole gal just found herself another man and walked off."

Could be. There was certainly no body and no evidence that a murder or kidnapping had taken place.

Mom held out Sophie's second page to me. *Although I am not a wealthy woman*, Sophie wrote, *I do have a little money in savings and would be happy to pay you and your daughter for whatever help you can give me. Please consider looking into my beloved daughter's*

disappearance. I felt like the newspaper story about your solving the Ventris case was the answer to my prayers and the last hope I've got.

Sophie's home phone and cell phone numbers followed.

"Well, Mom, what do you think of that?"

She headed toward the stairs. "What I think is I'm going to make a fresh pot of coffee."

A cup of coffee and a talk with my mother solved many a problem during my high school and college years. Strangely enough, today we sipped the dark brew, busy with our own thoughts. Mom's rose bush swaying in the breeze just outside the kitchen window caught my attention.

"It'll soon be nipped by frost," I said.

"What? What'll soon be nipped?"

"Your rose. I was just thinking, Mom, that another season is here and this will be the second autumn that Sophie has faced without knowing the whereabouts of her daughter. How awful that must be for her."

"I agree," Mom said slowly, "and if there's anything we can do to help that poor woman, we ought to do it. With your newspaper connections and the way you can get all kinds of stuff on that computer, and considering that we know just about everybody around here, we might be able . . . you do have a little spare time, don't you?"

Her eyes grew misty and she reached across the table for my hand. "I know just how I'd feel if I was in Sophie's shoes. She must be heartbroken."

I squeezed her hand, realizing again that coming home after Jake died had been the right thing to do. I needed to heal from the loss of my husband and Mom needed companionship. She seemed to be lonelier now than she had been when Dad died twenty years ago. We two women needed each other. And now another woman needed both of us.

"Well, sure, if that's what you want us to do, we could give it a try and see what we can stir up."

A roguish smile quirked my mother's lips. "I kind of like the sound of it. We could even hang a sign out by the mailbox."

“A sign? I don’t understand.”

“Sure you do. We could hang a sign out there so everybody could see it from the road. A sign that says TUCKER AND CAMPBELL, Private Investigators.