

A NED McNEIL MYSTERY

# Moonlight CAN BE Murder



BLANCHE DAY MANOS

*Moonlight*  
CAN BE  
*Murder*

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Moonlight Can Be Murder  
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## *Dedication*

I lovingly dedicate this first book in a brand new series to Matt, Dawn, Sara, and Nathan Manos and to the memory of my parents, Bob and Susie Day.



## *Acknowledgments*

A big thank you to my publishers, editors, and designer; to my critique group, to all those first readers who made suggestions and corrections, to my brothers Tracy Day and Richard Day; and to attorney Scott Wray for his advice concerning wills.





## *Chapter 1*

My car's headlights cut a yellow swath through the swirling snow. Heavy, gray clouds, trees crowding either side of the driveway, and the lateness of the December day made it impossible to see more than a few yards ahead, but at last I glimpsed the dark shape of Javin Granger's Victorian house through the winter twilight. The sight brought a lump to my throat as I thought of the last time I had seen this lovely home.

Forty years ago, Uncle Javin's driveway did not seem so long but memories dim with time. I grew up here in Ednalee, Oklahoma. As a child, I visited Uncle Javin often and ran all through the upstairs, downstairs, and basement. My parents and I lived in a much smaller house and the rooms in Uncle Javin's home invited a little girl's inquisitiveness. My visits, however, ended when my uncle was sent to prison in 1974 for killing his neighbor, Eldon Decker.

Dad and Mom never wavered in maintaining Javin's innocence even though he himself confessed, forty years ago, to the murder.

"He didn't do it," Mama said, a hundred times. "He's protecting somebody."

Dad always nodded his head and muttered, "Sure as the world, that's what he's doing."

However, the jury in Ednalee found Javin guilty and sentenced him to forty years in the state penitentiary. My parents were crushed.



A small town has its share of gossips and armchair jurors and my hometown of Ednalee became uncomfortable for us. When I was twelve, my parents and I moved to Atlanta and began a new life there. Uncle Javin's house, the house which Mom called the old home place, remained locked until Uncle Javin's release from prison last year. There had been no need to return to Ednalee—until now.

When I left my hometown, I had no idea I would ever return. But, life is unpredictable and it had dealt me some hard blows. My husband Sloan died five years ago. While I was still reeling from that loss, my dad died, and Mom, a year later. Sloan and I had no children, and I felt very alone and directionless. Uncle Javin's letters awakened childhood memories of Ednalee and I began looking forward to becoming re-acquainted with my only living relative and spending Christmas with him. I wanted to turn a page and step into a brighter future by reconnecting to my past.

Squinting through the snow, I saw the dark shape of Uncle Javin's house grow closer. Strange, though, that not even one light shone from its living room windows. Surely Uncle Javin had re-activated an account with the electric company.

He had sent me two letters, the first one mailed three weeks earlier, written in the shaky hand of the aged.

"Please come, Nettie," he wrote. "You need to come home."

His letter was noteworthy not only for its terseness but also for its rarity. Never before had my mother's older brother written to me. And then, a few days later came the second message: "You've got to get here soon. I must talk to you. Strange things are happening, and there's something you should know before it's too late. Please stay here in my house. I think you'll be safe enough. Hurry."

Those letters worried me. Was he in danger? He was evidently concerned and fearful about something. His words shocked me. There was something I should know? My uncle, my only family left on this earth, needed me; this seemed even more important than my job as a bookkeeper with Krohman Department Store. And why should there be any question about my safety?

Besides, there was another, more sinister reason for leaving Atlanta. It had to do with something I saw, or perhaps something that someone *thought* I saw.

One evening last October, I went shopping at a nearby Atlanta mall. When I left the store and started walking back to my car in the crowded parking garage, I noticed a flurry of activity in the aisle behind me. Two men, dressed in sweaters and knit caps held the arms of a third, well-dressed man. As I watched, they hustled him toward a long, gray car.

Obviously, the third gentleman did not want to go with these two and put up a fight. While I stared, shopping bag slipping from my hand, the man wearing the suit looked straight at me and shouted, "Help me!"

I yelled for them to stop but the two assailants pushed their victim into their car, jumped in, and sped off. As they drove under a light in the garage, I glimpsed the car tag. I called the police, reported a possible kidnapping, and gave them the car's description and tag number.

The next day, television stations trumpeted the story. Congressman Edward Langlier had been kidnapped. The police put out an all-points bulletin for the car and the congressman, but so far, neither had turned up.

Since I was the only witness, I spent some time in the police station, describing what I saw. I had not gotten a good look at the kidnappers but I might be able to recognize them again. Possibly.

After that, bizarre things started happening. Several times as I drove, I noticed a gray sedan following closely behind me. I got a dozen strange phone calls; just calls with no number or name on caller ID and nobody on the other end of the line. A dead bird showed up outside my apartment door, and an anonymous letter arrived with words clipped from a newspaper advising me to forget what I had seen in the parking garage.

I reported these instances to the authorities, and took them the letter and dead bird, but they seemed unable to get any leads. They simply told me to be careful and to keep in touch.

In that large, impersonal police force, one particular detective, Max Shelman, took a special interest in the case. He phoned several times to ask if I was all right. He even took me to lunch once, after I went to the station with anonymous note in hand. Max was of medium height, slim, with brown hair cut very short, brown eyes, and an engaging warmth about him. When he learned I was from a small town in Oklahoma, he seemed genuinely interested and asked several questions about Ednalee.

"I was in Oklahoma once," he reminisced. "Beautiful state. Any good fishing spots around Ednalee?"

His friendliness helped me feel less alone and steadied my shaky nerves. With a little encouragement, our friendship might have grown, but I simply was not interested in pursuing it. The romantic part of my life died with my husband. I had neither the time nor inclination for another attachment that could be severed suddenly and completely, leaving me with an even more damaged heart.

With no ties to hold me in Atlanta, and with a good reason for leaving, I did a most extraordinary thing. I, Nettie Elizabeth Duncan McNeil, resigned from my job, packed my bags, climbed into my black Ford Escape, and headed west.



## *Chapter 2*

My uncle's white two-storied house emerged fully through the curtain of snow, its wood-framed appearance majestic in the twilight. I parked in front of the wrought-iron fence surrounding the Granger yard. Scooting out of my SUV, I yanked one suitcase from the rear seat and locked the doors behind me. Tomorrow would be time enough to unload more luggage. Right now I felt an urgency to talk to my uncle.

Pulling my flashlight from my purse, I pushed open the gate and waded through the snow toward the house.

The two-storied residence was built in an L-shape, with a square porch in the angle of the L. Steep wooden steps led to this porch. With relief, I stepped under its sheltering roof. The beautiful brass door knocker looked just as it had many years before. Banging it against the large strike plate, I waited. Not getting any response, I knocked on the door.

"Uncle Javin!" I called. "Uncle Javin, it's Nettie."

Still, no answer. The cold penetrated my coat and I shivered. It felt strange to stand outside the silent, familiar old house, waiting for my uncle to unlock the door. Set back from the street and surrounded by trees, this imposing Victorian was isolated from any near neighbors. No one in town knew I was here. Nobody would be checking to see if I had arrived safely.

Taking hold of the doorknob, I pushed. Creaking mightily, the heavy door swung on its hinges. Inside was as dark as pitch. Shadowy shapes of loveseat, chairs, and tables appeared in the beam of my flashlight.

Some premonition nibbled at my mind. My uncle had asked me to come. He knew when I would arrive, but where was he?

Finding the light switch by the door, I pressed it and the crystal chandelier hanging from the ten-foot ceiling blazed, revealing a deserted parlor, silent and cold.

My flashlight no longer needed, I stepped hesitantly through the parlor and into the dining room. A few coals glowed in the fireplace in the dining room, like red eyes winking at me. Uncle Javin and my grandparents before him, used this large room as a combination living/dining area mostly because the fireplace made it warmer. In the summer, the family ate in the small sunroom just off the dining room or in the kitchen itself. I didn't bother turning on other lights until I got to the kitchen.

"Uncle Javin!" I called, at first softly, then louder. "I'm here! Where are you?"

When I flipped the light switch inside the kitchen door, sudden brightness revealed a room exactly as I remembered it. Evidently, my uncle did not believe in updates or simply liked the kitchen the way it was. Small, with outdated sink, the kitchen was straight out of the past; however, those stainless steel fixtures gleamed. A wood table with four chairs, white stove with yellow trim, small refrigerator, a single porcelain sink, and a yellow vinyl cabinet top free of clutter completed the room; but, there was no aroma of food or fresh-perked coffee. The room had an empty, unused feel.

Where was Uncle Javin? What should I do now? I gripped my cell phone in my coat pocket. Who should I call? What acquaintances were left in my home town?

Something brushed against my leg. I jumped and yelped. A small, gray cat gazed up at me with solemn, unblinking eyes and then commenced twining around my ankles.

Relief flooded me. At last something warm and alive moved in this silent house. Kneeling down, I ran my hand over the cat's sleek fur.

"Are you hungry?" I asked softly. "Is your food dish empty?"

The cat arched her back and turned around to trot toward the laundry room.

Perhaps Uncle Javin had to leave before he put out food for his pet. Or maybe he lay somewhere in the house, injured or ill. He was, after all, elderly and he lived alone. Feeding the cat seemed to be top priority, then I would search every room until I either found my uncle or knew for certain that he was not here.

I followed the cat into the small room next to the kitchen.

A washer and dryer lined one wall. An ironing board lay on its side. My breath caught in my throat and I leaned against the door facing until the room stopped spinning. Two legs wearing tan corduroy pants stretched out from under the ironing board.

My heart in my mouth, I edged farther into the room, not believing what I saw. On the floor, half-hidden by the washer, lay my uncle. One arm was flung out, fist clenched; the other lay under him. An ugly, dark blotch of blood marred his unwrinkled shirt.

I fell to my knees and gently raised his head. He attempted to smile. Tears filled my eyes. Uncle Javin had been in his early forties when he was taken to prison, a vigorous man with dark, curly hair and twinkly blue eyes. Now his hair was gray and thin. His eyes were the only thing that looked familiar.

"Nettie," he whispered. "You came home."

He gasped and coughed. I bent closer to hear his next words: "Be careful, Nettie. Don't trust . . ." He gulped, struggling to breathe.

I put my ear next to his lips.

"Don't trust who, Uncle Javin?"

"Rose—Find it, Nettie. Important . . ." His lips moved but I could hear no further words.

"Rose? Do you want me to find a rose?"

Uncle Javin sighed and closed his eyes. I had come home but I was too late. My uncle was gone.

Lowering Uncle Javin's head, I sat frozen beside him. Surely, I would wake up soon from this awful nightmare. I stared at the room, searching for anything that would make sense of the scene before me. Everything appeared to be neat with nothing out of place except the overturned ironing board, and, of course, my uncle with the hole in his chest. Without being told, I knew that it was a bullet hole or a knife wound. An unknown person had snatched Uncle Javin's life from him. His letter said strange things were happening. Had attempts been made on his life before today?

A black object protruded from behind the washing machine. I gingerly poked it, and the handle of a gun slid into view. Guns were not my area of expertise and though I owned one, I didn't like them. But as I picked it up, I knew that it was a revolver. It felt cold and looked deadly and it didn't take much guesswork to ascertain this was probably the thing that had been used to snuff out my uncle's life. But whose was it? Who had pulled the trigger?

A scream shattered my thoughts. I jumped up and whirled around just in time to see a bowl hit the floor and break, spattering food. A short, plump, gray-haired woman stared at me with large, frightened eyes. Putting up both hands as if they were a shield, she croaked,

"Please, please don't shoot me too."

That gun was still in my right hand, pointing in the general vicinity of the woman. Guiltily, I placed it on the floor.

"No, no," I said, "I didn't shoot him. I don't know who did. He was here just as he is now when I came in."

The woman delved into her coat pocket and pulled out a cell phone. "Stay away from me," she yelled. "I'm calling the police."

She backed up until she reached the kitchen, then whirled and ran as quickly as a person of her ample girth could run, toward the front door.

I didn't follow her. Sighing, I looked down at my uncle. I had just found him after forty years and now he was gone. Who had killed him and why? Calling the police sounded like a very good idea to me.



## *Chapter 3*

The officer who escorted me to the police station, a young, slim man named Gerald Mills, opened the door to the office of the chief of police. He indicated a straight-backed, wooden chair which faced a broad, cluttered desk. A bronze name plate stated that the desk was the property of Cade Morris. A memory stirred deep within me but I was too upset to pursue it.

“Have a seat, ma’am,” said officer Mills. “The chief’ll be with you in a minute.”

I sat on the edge of that chair, twisting the straps of my purse, swallowing back my tears. The woman who found me beside Uncle Javin had, indeed, called 911. She told them I shot my uncle and very nearly shot her too. No matter how much I protested, the two policemen answering the call asked me to accompany them downtown.

The small room seemed cold to me. I shivered and pulled my long, wooly coat closer.

“Would you like some coffee, Mrs. McNeil?”

I looked up at the man who belonged to that deep, soft voice. This, I supposed, was the Chief of Police of Ednalee, Oklahoma. He was tall and broad-shouldered. Gray liberally sprinkled his short, dark hair and mustache. Blue eyes, the color of a cold December sky held mine.



Gratefully, I took the steaming brew. “Thanks,” I mumbled, cradling the warm cup in my hands.

He sat down behind the desk. “Cade Morris, ma’am. You are, I believe, Nettie McNeil?”

I nodded and swallowed a mouthful of coffee.

“Officer Mills tells me that you are old Javin’s niece?” he asked.

I corrected the “old Javin” with, “I’m *Mr.* Granger’s niece, yes.”

“Well now, Mrs. McNeil, I’m sorry about your uncle. I knew him and regarded him highly.”

“You did?” I blinked. He regarded my uncle highly even though Javin had served time for killing someone?

Cade Morris nodded. “Now then, suppose you just tell me, in your own words, exactly what happened. Go as slowly as you need. I’m in no hurry.”

So, between gulps of hot coffee and frequently wiping tears from my eyes, I told him about Uncle Javin’s letters, my drive from Atlanta, and finding his body. I even told him about the cat.

As I talked, the chief scribbled in a small notebook. No stenographer or tape player here, just a pen and paper for writing up reports.

“I found that gun under the washing machine,” I finished. “I shouldn’t have touched it because now my fingerprints are on it but I was too upset to think about that. I promise you I did not kill my uncle and I was not about to shoot that—that woman.”

He supplied the name for me. “Martha Decker.”

Drawing a shaky breath, I looked down at my Styrofoam cup, damaged beyond holding more coffee. I had absent-mindedly torn bits off the rim as I talked.

Cade Morris stared at me for so long, heat crept up my neck and onto my face. At last, he half smiled and said slowly,

“I place you now. You’re Ned Duncan. I sat behind you in Miz Thornton’s room at Ednalee Elementary.”

Staring at the chief’s salt and pepper hair and mustache, a half-formed memory emerged. About two feet of height disappeared and I realized why he seemed familiar. We had indeed been in the

same room but not the same grade in elementary school. My home room teacher put me in a writing class with a group of older students. Creative writing was my favorite subject and I excelled at it. As a boy, Cade Morris teased me about my red hair and freckles but he punched another classmate during a long ago recess who had done the same thing. He and the other school children shortened my long name, Nettie Elizabeth Duncan, to Ned. I hated the nickname.

His was the first familiar, live face since my arrival in Ednalee and I'll confess the room seemed a little less chilly. It was good to see someone I knew, even if that someone had once been a pest and was probably wondering if I was guilty of killing my uncle.

Cade cleared his throat. "I don't suppose you would happen to have your uncle's letters with you?"

So, he didn't entirely believe me and wanted proof.

"Thankfully, I do have," I said, pulling the folded and re-folded pages of lined paper from my purse.

Anxiously fidgeting with the Styrofoam cup, I waited while he read the letters. His eyes narrowed as he looked up. "Do you mind if I keep these?"

I refused to be intimidated either by his office as chief of police or his direct gaze.

"How about just making copies and giving me the originals?" I asked.

A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "How about my keeping the originals and giving you the copies?"

I shrugged and he called Officer Mills to run off the duplicates.

Cade seemed to be thinking out loud. "It sounds like your uncle may have been afraid for his life. I wish he had notified us of his suspicions. You say he asked you to find something?"

"Yes. Actually, Cade, um . . . Mr. Morris . . . I can understand why he might not trust law enforcement. His association with the police was not pleasant, as you know."

"How about his mental outlook? Do you know about that? Was he depressed? Did he contact you before or after those letters?"

Shocked, I answered, "No! He never did. Why do you ask? Do you think he shot himself?"

Cade leaned back in his chair, half closed his eyes, and regarded me thoughtfully. "It was bound to be depressing, coming back to the town where the murder happened, even if it was a long time ago. Maybe he felt alone. Maybe he didn't see much of a future."

I swallowed. Why hadn't I kept in touch with my uncle? Of course he felt alone. He *was* alone, and I, his next of kin, had not given him any support.

"Actually," Cade mused, "I didn't think he seemed despondent either. He seemed determined to make a life for himself. It's funny that Martha Decker was there just at the same time you were. She said she was bringing your uncle a casserole. Said she does that quite often."

"What's funny about it?" I asked. "I assume she is a neighbor, somebody trying to be kind to a lonely old man."

Never mind that she had jumped to an entirely wrong conclusion. She must have a good heart.

Cade Morris pushed his chair away from his desk, crossed his legs, and frowned.

"It's funny 'cause Martha Decker might have been trying to be friendly to a lonely old man that a lot of people shunned, but she also happens to be the stepdaughter of Eldon Decker, the man Javin Granger killed."

I nodded. Strange, yes, but somehow irrelevant. The day's events seemed to pile up on me. At that moment, I just wanted to sleep for a month in a warm, comfortable bed. Perhaps, when I woke up, I'd find myself in Atlanta and my return to Ednalee would be only a bad dream.



## *Chapter 4*

The bed I slept in that first night back in my home town was comfortable enough, I suppose, for a motel, because, in fact, I didn't go to Uncle Javin's after leaving the police station. Cade Morris, my long ago champion, told me I could not return to the scene of the crime until his lab boys were through dusting for prints and searching for evidence. So, at the expense of the city, Gerald Mills took me to the town's only motel, The Corner Inn, saw me safely to a room, and told me I would hear from him the next day.

Fatigued and probably in a state of shock, I only numbly realized that, although Chief Morris hadn't locked me up in his jail, I was certainly confined. I had no car, no suitcase, and Officer Mills had probably given the desk clerk orders to keep an eye on me.

I flopped down across the queen-sized bed, closed my eyes, and fell asleep. Sometime during the night, I awoke, dreaming that Uncle Javin was trying to tell me a secret that only he knew. I lay awake until daylight peeked in around the heavy drapes at the window. Then, I fell asleep again and didn't awaken until nearly six o'clock in the afternoon.

So, it was that in the evening of my first full day in Ednalee, Gerald Mills drove me back to Uncle Javin's house. Officer Mills unlocked the squeaky front door, gravely handed me the key, and told me to be sure

to lock myself in. He followed me inside, and checked out the rooms to be certain no one was lurking there.

Officer Mills didn't go to the utility room, where I had found my uncle's body, but he told me he was sure it was still pretty much a mess, with fingerprint powder, and the bloody results of the shooting.

"Don't try to clean it up, Mrs. McNeil," Gerald told me. "I think the chief may want to take a final look tomorrow. Then, maybe you can phone someone to come help you mop it."

I nodded, thanked him, and dutifully locked the door after he left. At the moment, I didn't want food nor even to go near the kitchen. I wanted to build a blaze in that dining room fireplace, get a book from my suitcase, and read myself to sleep on the sofa. I tried to shut out the sound of the wind howling around the corners of the house, and concentrated instead on the popping fire, the little cat curled up beside me, and the current mystery I had been reading in Atlanta and brought with me to Oklahoma. That's how I fell asleep.

The next morning when I woke up, I didn't know where I was for several seconds. Heart pounding, I sat up, and dislodged the cat. As I gazed around the shadowy dining room, the fire now nothing more than ashes, memories of the fantastic events since my arrival flooded my thoughts: finding Uncle Javin dying on the floor, Martha Decker—stepdaughter of the man Uncle Javin had killed—accusing me of murder, the police station, the questioning, the confinement in a motel, and Officer Mills returning me to this house.

Cade Morris said he had no evidence to hold me but told me not to leave town.

The cold parlor with the hard-looking settee seemed singularly uninviting, but, surprisingly, the sofa in front of the fireplace had been a comfortable bed. There was no way I would have ventured into those cold and dark upstairs bedrooms.

Drawing a green crocheted afghan tightly around my shoulders, I stumbled toward the kitchen. That small room was dark, with the old-fashioned pull-down shade tightly drawn. I tugged it up and

was surprised to see sunlight dancing on a snow-covered world, its brightness belying any of the evil that happened here.

Uncle Javin had been a neat housekeeper. The wide-plank oak floor was dust-free, its yellowed boards glowing in the light of day. Three colorful braided rugs were scattered across the floor. A can of coffee sat on the bottom shelf over an old-fashioned electric coffee pot on the counter top. One of my firm convictions is that life goes better with a cup of good, strong coffee—or two cups or more. Quickly, I filled the pot with water, added a generous amount of coffee, and plugged the cord into the wall socket. Soon, the comforting gurgle of percolating brew and the rich aroma of my favorite hot drink added sound and scent to this empty room.

The morning sun pricked dazzling ruby and sapphire sparks from the snow mounding the yard and in the light of day, the house seemed inviting. It was hard to believe that a murder had actually occurred here or was that awful scene in the laundry room only a tortured fantasy of my tired mind?

My furry companion rubbed against my ankles and meowed plaintively.

“Oh, my, I forgot about feeding you!” I said, bending down and scooping her into my arms. “Are your food and water dishes in the laundry room?”

Deciding that another soft meow meant Yes, I wondered how I would manage to retrieve her food since it was probably in the room where death had come calling. I did not want to set foot near the place where Uncle Javin died, but the hungry little animal snuggled confidently against me needed food. How could I bear the sight of the overturned ironing board and the blood on the floor that would bring back the full horror of my uncle’s death? Glancing at the door separating the kitchen from the utility room, I saw no yellow tape stretched across it. Supposedly, when the investigators finished, they removed the tape. I wished they had cleaned up the room as well.

Lowering the cat to the floor, I advanced into that awful place. In front of me, two small blue plastic bowls and a box of Kitty Krunchies sat on the lowest panty shelf.

Perhaps, if I carefully kept my eyes straight ahead, I wouldn't need to see where Uncle Javin died. Step by step, I resolutely entered the laundry room.

Morbid curiosity got the better of my revulsion, and I glanced around. The ironing board was not only in an upright position, it had been folded and propped against the wall. No dark blotch marred the floor. The room looked normal. Someone had scrubbed away all evidence of a murder. Who? Who had been here after the police left? Cleaning up after a crime did not fit the job description of a law officer, and Gerald Mills, although he had not checked the laundry room, seemed sure it would need to be cleaned.

The cat followed me back to the kitchen. I filled one bowl with water and the other with dry food. As soon as I set them on the floor, she dug in.

"I wish you could talk," I told her, pouring coffee into a tall brown mug. "Who was here last night? Who shot my uncle to death? Where were you when that was going on? Did you hide under a bed upstairs? And who came back and cleaned up the murder scene?"

Receiving no answer, I sat down at the kitchen table and swallowed a mouthful of coffee, feeling it burn all the way down. What was I to do? Should I continue to stay in this house? Who did it belong to now? And, the question that crowded out all other considerations: who had killed my uncle and why?

My suitcases were as yet unpacked. I could turn around and drive back to Atlanta. Or, maybe not. Cade had looked pretty serious when he told me not to leave town and then there was the threat which I feared still awaited me in Atlanta. Was I trespassing in this house? Did it belong to the bank or a mortgage company? Had Uncle Javin left the house to someone in his will?

I quickly swallowed more coffee. The caffeine was not dispelling a headache that had begun pounding between my eyes. Before doing anything else, I would search for an aspirin either in my purse or the medicine cabinet. When I had gone up to the bathroom after Gerald

brought me home last night, I noticed the old medicine cabinet still hung on the wall, just as I remembered.

As I started toward the stairs, the sound of the door knocker stopped me. Someone was on the porch. Who would be calling at this hour? The police again? My heart hammered against my ribs and I shivered.

The knocker echoed once more. The person on the porch was not going away. I trotted through the kitchen, into the living room, and opened the front door, which, again, creaked mightily on its hinges.

I blinked at the gray-haired, round-faced woman standing in front of me.

"Miss," I swallowed and licked my dry lips. "Miss Decker?"

Gray curls bobbed. "Yes, yes. And you are Nettie Duncan. I came to apologize for my behavior and I brought you a peace offering. I'll bet you haven't had breakfast, have you?"

Dumbly, I shook my head and stood aside as she sailed into the house, headed straight for the kitchen and plopped a covered casserole dish down on the table. My visitor looked to be several years older than I, but she certainly moved quickly.

As I followed in her wake, the sense of unreality deepened. Only a few hours ago, this woman accused me of murder, and had been afraid that I would shoot her as she thought I shot Uncle Javin, and now she was bringing me breakfast? What was going on?

She darted unerringly to the correct cabinet door and pulled out a small, blue pottery plate. Next, she opened the cutlery drawer, found a spoon and fork, scooped out a hearty helping of steaming bacon, eggs, and hash browns and set the plate in front of me.

"Eat!" she commanded.

The casserole looked and smelled delicious and I realized I had had nothing for supper nor breakfast except bottled water and coffee. I picked up my fork and dug in. After chewing and swallowing, my brain began to function again. I laid down the fork.

"Miss Decker," I began.

She waved a hand. "Oh, for Pete's sake, call me Martha. You may not remember me but I remember you from the time you were a child.



Don't stand on ceremony. I've known your uncle all these years and, after all, we're neighbors."

Her manner and speech were overpowering but I had lost patience with odd behavior and, to the best of my ability, I wanted to insert some sanity into the morning.

Looking into her eyes, magnified by thick glasses, I held up my hand.

"Stop a minute, Miss Decker. Let me get this straight. As I remember, you thought I killed Uncle Javin and was about to make you my second victim. You called the police. Now, this morning, you are wanting us to be friends? I'm afraid I don't understand."

She reached across the table and patted my hand. "Now, now, don't let's fret over my mistake. Surely, you understand, Nettie, that I was shocked at seeing poor, dear Javin all laid out and dead as a doornail. And then, there you were with the gun aimed directly at me. What was I to think?"

I considered. She had a point. But what was her relationship with Uncle Javin? Was there a romantic link, despite the more than twenty years' difference in their ages, or was she simply a concerned neighbor?

"That room was cleaned up this morning," I said, pointing toward the utility room. "Did you come back after the police left and clean it?"

"Why, my gracious, no, Nettie! How would I have gotten in?"

I shrugged. "As I understand it, my uncle spent most of his adult life in the penitentiary for killing your stepfather. It seems a bit unnatural to me that you would befriend him. And, I take it from what Cade Morris said, you were in the habit of bringing him food just as . . . well, just as you did for me this morning. I should think you would at least feel a bit of resentment toward the man who had taken your stepfather's life."

Martha Decker snorted. "Fiddlesticks. Let bygones be bygones, that's what I always say. Javin paid for his crime. If ever there was a no-account person, it was Eldon Decker. He needed killing. Yes sir, he sure did."

I picked up my fork and took another bite of casserole. Martha was a good cook.



## *Chapter 5*

After Miss Decker left, I needed a time of recovery. Pouring another cup of coffee, I sat down again at the table and thought about what she had told me in her non-stop dialogue. With no prodding from me, I learned that she had given Uncle Javin the gray cat, whose name was Penny, she took care of her bedfast mother, Anne, who lived in an upstairs room of Martha's house, and if I ever needed anything, I was to call on her because she lived next door just beyond the copse of pines which separated her property from my uncle's.

My head was still pounding and I had yet to find that aspirin. As I rinsed my cup in the sink, I noticed that the eaves were dripping. The snow would soon be a thing of the past.

Wandering from the kitchen into the back entryway, raising shades, pulling aside curtains, and letting some light into this house of Uncle Javin's, I noted that it seemed generally unchanged with the years. Except, perhaps, it was more beautiful than I remembered. Children don't often appreciate fine workmanship, antiques, or the care with which Victorian houses were built. The sunroom, with light slanting through, warmed that part of the house. White curtains lined the long windows. A white wicker table and four chairs looked as if they were inviting someone to come in and sit down. Now was the time to search

Uncle Javin's medicine cabinet for an aspirin. The oak banister felt smooth and cool under my hand as I climbed those well-worn steps. The steep stairs rose straight to the second floor with no curves or landings. Reaching this upper level, I turned right, into the bathroom. Besides the sun porch, the bathroom was probably the old home's brightest room. When the house was built, this small area, one wall lined with windows, had been the sewing room or sitting room for the lady of the house. In here, there were modern, slatted blinds. I opened the louvers and turned to the medicine cabinet. Inside, the small space was stocked with antacids, aspirins, a razor and shaving cream. I shook out a couple of aspirins and swallowed them.

The claw-foot bathtub invited me to take a long soak, but my suitcase sat downstairs by the front door and, since I was already upstairs, this would be a good time to peek into the bedrooms. Surely, somewhere there was a clue, a letter or journal or something that my uncle had left. What were the strange happenings he had mentioned in his letter? And, who would kill a harmless old man who had already spent much of his life shut away from society and all he held dear?

This upper story was built around the stair well. A person could walk from one bedroom directly into the next except for the master bedroom which was set back by itself, in front of the stairs. It had the privacy of only one doorway which opened into the hall. Going into this dark room, I pulled aside the heavy drapes. A deep blue chenille spread covered the double bed and, judging from the shoes side by side under the bed and several books of western fiction on a small table, this had been Uncle Javin's room.

Already, the room felt empty and desolate and I quickly exited. The next bedroom was directly above the dining room and boasted a fireplace as the flue went straight up through the attic and roof from the room below. Uncle Javin must have meant this sunny, pretty little room with the white organdy tie-back curtains, the white bedspread flocked with pink roses, and the white fluffy rug beside the four-poster bed to be mine. A wilting vase of flowers graced the bedside table along with a box of unopened chocolates.

Realizing my uncle must have spent hours preparing this room, grief swept over me. I sat down in an old-fashioned rocker close to the bed, and cried. My uncle and I might have spent some happy hours reminiscing. He could have shared his concerns about whatever events caused him to write the letters, but none of this would ever happen now.

At a tiny, questioning “Meow,” I looked down to see Penny standing by my chair, gazing up at me as if to ask what was wrong. Patting my knees, I invited her onto my lap. The throbbing purr in Penny’s throat and the warmth of her soft body comforted me.

“Thanks for being my buddy,” I whispered. “We’re not really alone, Penny. You and I have each other, and we have the Lord. If my mother were here, she’d remind me of that. Come on, let’s go down and unload my car, unpack a few suitcases. And, I believe, I’d like a bath. I’ll check out the other two bedrooms later.”

Penny followed me from my room, but as we passed Uncle Javin’s, she detoured inside. Padding quickly past his bed, she stopped in front of the large walnut wardrobe. Instead of closets, this house, which had been built during the 1800s, contained these magnificent pieces of furniture for holding clothing. Penny delicately stood on her hind legs and pawed, with both front feet, at the wardrobe door.

“No, no, Penny,” I said. “You’ll mar the wood. Didn’t Uncle Javin have a scratching post for you?”

She looked at me and resumed her pawing.

“Are you trying to tell me the post is in here?” I asked. “Or did he keep a supply of cat toys in his room for you?”

Pulling the wardrobe’s double doors open, I stared in amazement. Half of Uncle Javin’s suits, jeans, shirts and pajamas lay tumbled on top of each other at the bottom of the closet. Several other shirts and pants hung haphazardly from the clothes rod. In an otherwise neat room, the contents of this cabinet stood in stark contrast.

Squatting on the floor beside the cat, I pulled out a few of the garments. Beneath a pile of shirts, I found Penny’s sack of treats.

“Why would my uncle have left this in such a mess?” I wondered out loud. “The house, at least the part I’ve seen, is as neat as a pin. It looks as if these shirts have been ironed, so why did he just dump them all on the bottom of the closet?”

And then I noticed an even stranger sight. All of the pockets on the pants and coats had been turned wrong-side-out.

I caught my breath as a chilling realization swept over me. Someone had been through my uncle’s clothing. Someone had been hunting for something and I didn’t think it was my uncle who had left his closet in such a mess. Who? And when? I couldn’t imagine anyone doing this while Uncle Javin looked on. Had it happened after he was shot? Why didn’t whoever it was take the time to re-hang his clothes on the rod that ran through the tall cabinet? And what in the world had he or she been looking for?

Scrambling to my feet, I grasped the door of the closet and felt a cold finger of dread trace its way down my spine. Perhaps the unknown person heard or saw something that caused him to leave in a hurry. Maybe he had been frightened away before he completed the search. My uncle was alive when I found him. Had someone been in this very room, hunting for something, at the same time I was downstairs? And, had my arrival been the reason for that person’s abrupt departure? My only answer was the wind moaning down the chimney in the next room and Penny, contentedly crunching her snack on the floor.



## *Chapter 6*

What wonders a nice, warm bath doth work! After the discovery in the wardrobe closet, I had gone downstairs and carried up the one suitcase I brought into the house from my car. Climbing out of Uncle Javin's deep tub, I towed off, powdered, lotioned, and slipped into my work clothes for the remainder of this day: blue jeans and a red turtleneck T-shirt topped with a white sweatshirt. I pulled on socks and a pair of black waterproof boots because I was determined to explore Uncle Javin's two acres, snow or no snow, prowler or not. Phoning the EdnaLee police department was top priority. The tumbled clothes closet definitely might turn up a clue to Uncle Javin's murderer. However, I had reasoned that thirty more minutes wouldn't make a difference in the investigation. I had decided that was time enough for a bath. True, the find was unnerving and downright scary, but I felt much more able to face the scrutiny in Cade Morris' eyes knowing I looked a little more presentable.

Fluffing up my mostly auburn hair (a short, curly do, easy to care for), I dabbed on a bit of lipstick. A glance in the full-length mirror beside the tub reflected a serious face with a few faded freckles sprinkled across my nose. My eyes, gray like my mother's, looked thoughtful. True, dark circles under them showed the strain and shock

of tragic events, but the trauma I found here in Ednalee surely justified the way I looked.

For a woman on the far side of fifty, my figure was pretty good. Size ten jeans still fit my five feet six inch frame. I didn't worry about weight and fad diets held no appeal.

Turning away from my image, and squaring my shoulders, I determined to stay here in my uncle's house until someone told me to move out. I would not rest until I knew who had killed him and why. What had he wanted me to find? And who was Rose? Since the house had no phone, I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and dialed 911.

In the time between placing the call and the arrival of the police, I found milk and cheese in the refrigerator, re-filled the coffee pot, and wolfed down a small snack. The refrigerator looked well stocked. My uncle had been prepared for my visit.

In less than ten minutes, a white Ford truck stopped at the yard gate. Cade Morris and Gerald Mills walked briskly up the porch steps and knocked on the front door.

Looking up at Cade's frowning face, I was almost sorry I had called him. The tone of his voice did nothing to reassure me.

"You said you found evidence that a prowler had been in the house?" he asked. "Do you mean someone had been here after Javin was killed?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I don't know when he was here, I just know that my uncle wouldn't have left his closet in such a mess and I certainly didn't either," I said.

The two men stomped snow from their boots, stepped inside the entry, and removed their gray western hats.

"It's upstairs," I said, leading the way, "in Uncle Javin's bedroom. His clothes were taken off their hangers and the pockets were turned wrong side out."

Silence met my statement. They followed me into my uncle's bedroom and stood looking at the wardrobe with its jumble of clothing.

"You think someone was looking for something?" Officer Mills asked. "Something that might have been in his pockets?"

I shrugged. "It looks that way to me."

Cade rubbed his hand across his clean-shaven chin and sighed. "Gerald, you take a look around in here. Ned, I mean Mrs. McNeil, have you searched through all the upstairs rooms?"

Feeling slightly foolish that I hadn't, I said, "No. Actually, I haven't had a lot of time, yet."

"Come with me," the chief directed. "Tell me if anything else seems to be out of place."

The final two rooms looked as if Uncle Javin had used them for storage. Or, perhaps he just hadn't had time to set them to rights. He had, after all, not been out of prison long. These rooms were full to overflowing with what were probably antique tables, chairs, books, a loveseat, and a desk. The wonder to me was that nothing had been stolen during those four decades when the house had been empty. I wondered if Uncle Javin had an overseer who watched after it.

Cade followed me slowly around the stacks of furniture.

"You don't think this unknown prowler had been in these rooms?" he asked.

"I have no way of knowing. I haven't set foot in this house for a very long time. All I know is that Uncle Javin was a neat housekeeper and probably was planning on cleaning and arranging these rooms. There's dust on things, so it doesn't appear as if anything has been disturbed."

"Let's take a look downstairs," Cade said, making the circuit from the last bedroom into the short hallway.

Downstairs again, we walked slowly through the parlor, dining room, sunroom, and kitchen.

"Anything out of place?" Cade asked.

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

He strode into the utility room then turned around and glared at me. "Didn't Officer Mills tell you that I wanted to take a last look around before you cleaned this up?"

I swallowed an urge to snap at him. "Believe it or not, Chief Morris, I did not clean it up. It looked like this when I got up this morning. I don't know who cleaned it."



Gerald Mills clomped down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Find anything?" Cade asked.

He shook his head. "No. Do you think we should dust for prints?"

"Good idea!" I chirped.

Gerald glanced into the utility room and shook his head. "Sure couldn't find any leads in here now," he said. "But, the lab boys probably did a pretty good job while they were here."

"So, was that gun really the murder weapon?" I asked.

Cade frowned. "You know, Ned, that this is an ongoing investigation? Then you know I can't talk about it."

"Maybe it wasn't his," I said. "Maybe it belonged to the murderer."

Gerald grinned. "The murderer must be pretty smart then. Or maybe he wore gloves 'cause the only prints were yours and . . ."

Cade's voice cut him off. "Quiet, Mills."

Gerald looked suitably rebuffed, but I guessed his hurt feelings wouldn't last long.

Cade leaned against the door facing, looking glum. "If we dusted upstairs, we probably would find the same thing, since you evidently touched everything, Ned."

His attitude was fast becoming tiresome. "If you found your uncle on the floor, dying, and you saw a suspicious looking object nearby, would you have remembered that you were not to contaminate the crime scene? We don't all react precisely as we should in times of shock, Chief Morris."

Cade raised his eyebrows and Gerald ducked his head, but not before I saw him grin.

"We'll take a look around outside," Cade said.

As they left, I couldn't resist calling, "Be sure you don't obliterate any footprints in the snow!"

Fifteen minutes later, they appeared on my porch.

As I held the door open, Cade spoke. "No, we won't come in. No sign of any prowler."

If the person who had rifled through my uncle's clothing was the same one who murdered him, he undoubtedly had gone through the

clothing after he shot Uncle Javin and before I arrived. However, I didn't voice my opinion. My fingerprints on the gun and nobody else's footprints in the snow was not good. The only clues seemed to point toward me.

Gerald Mills patted my shoulder. "By the way," he said, "Mr. Granger's body is at Chalmers Funeral Home."

Cade nodded. "You can make plans for his funeral any time you'd like. And, Ned, you really should think about getting a burglar alarm or a dog. You're pretty isolated back here."

"A really *big* dog," Gerald added.

I rubbed a stiff spot in my neck that began to ache. "Maybe it was Uncle Javin himself who dumped everything off the clothes hangers. Maybe he lost something and was looking for it."

Cade smoothed his mustache. "That's a possibility."

Gerald glanced at his boss then at me. "Maybe it was the ghost."

Cade snorted. "Let's go, Mills."

"The—the ghost?" Was this young man joking?

"Oh well, that's just the story about this old house," Gerald said, as Cade headed for the truck. "You know, the house is old, and people talk. Some claim to have heard or seen a ghost, but me? Naw! I don't believe in such things!"

However, before he left, I noticed he leaned forward and peered around me as if he expected to see somebody in the parlor.



## *Chapter 7*

The sunny day lost part of its brightness with the departure of Cade and Gerald. Walking around outdoors in the crisp air could possibly clear my head of a few cobwebs. Not that I doubted the expertise of Ednalee's two lawmen, but I planned to do some investigating on my own. Pulling my coat from the hall tree, I headed out the back door.

The builder of the Granger house had been liberal with his use of red bricks. As well as the walk that led to the front gate, a brick path wound around the house, and branched off in a couple of places, toward a carriage house, much in need of repair, and to an ancient well. Dad had cautioned me, when I was a child, not to play on this well. It looked sturdy but he warned me that sometimes children fell into these hand-dug sources of water. That possibility was enough to keep me at a respectful distance. A moss-covered roof shaded the trap door covering the opening for a bucket. Thankfully, the wood cover had been nailed down. My grandparents plumbed the house and brought water indoors, but the old well still stood, picturesque, sturdy, and ominous.

Three tiers of bricks circled it, allowing anyone who came for water to step up and remove the old well's lid before lowering the bucket. Broad-leafed English ivy, still green where it peeked out from under the snow, climbed all the way to the roof. Several cedars crowded close,

making the area dark even at noon. As I stood gazing at the well, a cloud moved between the sun and me and I shivered with more than the cold.

According to my parents, this well was the place Eldon Decker met death. By Uncle Javin's own account, Eldon picked a fight, accusing my uncle of too close a friendship with Eldon's wife, Anne. Eldon swung at him and Javin returned the punch, knocking Eldon's head against the sharp bricks of the well and killing him. Javin might have gotten off with a lesser sentence if it had not been for the town gossips. The story circulated that Eldon was correct in his assessment and Javin concocted his story of self-defense in an effort to justify killing Anne's abusive husband. An impartial jury? Not to my way of thinking.

An aura of gloom surrounded this part of the yard and permeated my spirit like a cold mist. I turned away, not wanting to think about the tragedy that took Eldon Decker's life and Javin Granger's freedom.

The snow was quickly melting under a pale sun. I waded through slushy puddles toward the carriage house. From the looks of the partially cleared bushes, Uncle Javin had tried to reclaim his land from years of neglect, but he hadn't gotten around to the whole two acres. Honeysuckle vines, still holding onto many of their leaves, looped around each other and climbed up the trunks of scrub cedars and stately oaks. They even encroached on the fading white of the carriage house. I glanced toward the row of towering pines which separated this land from Martha Decker's on the opposite side of the yard. The faint outline of her footprints showed here and there through the slush, marking the route she took from her house with the casserole. Perhaps, if she were really as friendly as she seemed, I would be using that foot path a lot. It would be interesting to know whether Eldon and Anne Decker with Anne's daughter Martha, lived there forty years ago, when Uncle Javin killed Eldon.

The weathered boards and sagging double doors of the carriage house seemed to forbid me to enter. With a lot of elbow grease and money, the bottom part of the structure could be made into a garage.

I recalled stairs going to a roomy loft. Maybe, someday, it would be a guest apartment or living quarters for a future tenant.

I ambled back toward the house, in no hurry to leave the open air and sunshine. My cursory search of the ground turned up nothing out of the ordinary. As far as I could see, the house and its surroundings looked the same as always, with nothing differing much from the way it looked four decades earlier, except, of course, for the inevitable erosion of time. Now I must make myself go to the funeral home. Although I dreaded that visit, it was a necessity and I should not put it off any longer.

A double cab gray truck turned into the long driveway and chugged slowly toward the house. Stepping up on the front porch, I watched its progress. Who could this be?

The truck stopped beside my Escape and two women slid out. Both, I judged, were about my age. They wore crocheted ear warmers and short coats over blue jeans. The woman on the passenger side of the truck carried a covered dish.

"Ned?" shouted the driver. "Ned Duncan, is it really you?"

The gloom I had felt a few minutes ago melted. I ran down the porch steps to meet the visitors.

"Jackie Peyton?" I asked, stopping in front of this middle aged woman with the sparkling brown eyes.

She nodded. "One and the same. Or at least, I used to be. Jackie Murray now. Oh, Ned, it's good to see you." She put her arms around me. "Pat and I heard you were back."

The second woman, the one who held the food, smiled. "I was Pat Shelby way back when, Ned."

I wiped tears from my eyes and hugged her. "Of course, Pat. We were the Three Musketeers. Remember?"

Jackie and Pat said together, "How could we forget?"

After my parents and I moved to Atlanta, Pat and Jackie and I had written frequently and even telephoned each other. We promised that we would visit but somehow, with passing years, and busy lives, those visits never happened.

“We were so sorry to hear about your uncle Javin,” Jackie said.

Pat smiled. “We thought perhaps you could use a coconut cake. You know how we are here in Ednalee. Food cures all ills, especially if that food is loaded with sugar and calories.”

“I am very glad you came,” I said. “Come in. We’ve got a lot of catching up to do and I believe I have some coffee that will be perfect with your cake.”

So it was, for the second time that day, I sat down at Uncle Javin’s kitchen table and ate with people from my past. Only this time, the conversation was as warm and sparkling as the sun glinting off the remnants of yesterday’s snow.



## *Chapter 8*

As Pat, Jackie, and I talked, it seemed as if we had never been away from each other. Conversation flowed easily and we giggled over reminiscences like schoolgirls. Jackie's dark hair had turned white and Pat's athletic build had rounded into near-chubbiness but none of that mattered. What mattered was our friendship and I felt a stir of gladness that I had not experienced since my return to Ednalee.

"You've met my son, Ned," Pat said. "Gerald Mills, the policeman."

"No!" I exclaimed. "Years have a way of slipping by, don't they?"

Pat smiled and nodded. "Afraid so. I married right out of high school so you might say I was a child bride. My husband was Jarred Mills. He was from Atlanta. He was killed in Vietnam."

Jackie took a sip of coffee. "You met Jarred when you were working in Tulsa, didn't you?" she asked. "I never met him."

Pat nodded and swallowed a bite of cake.

"I got married too, only I waited until I finished college," Jackie said. "I met Ron Murray at the University of Oklahoma. When a position teaching kindergarten opened up here, we moved back. I taught kindergartners for a good many years and Ron established a law practice."

"Any children?" I asked.

Jackie shook her head. "The regret of my life. I'm retired but I consider all my ex-students my children."

“Life takes us around blind corners sometimes,” I said. “I was really looking forward to seeing Uncle Javin after all these years, but my homecoming was not exactly what I expected.”

Pat slid a second slice of cake onto my plate. “I heard about it. How horrible, finding your uncle like that.”

Jackie put down her coffee cup. “Tell us all the details. What’s going on, Ned?”

So, I poured another round of coffee and told them about Uncle Javin’s letters, finding him dead, the trip to the police station, and the discovery in his wardrobe.

Pat’s mouth dropped open. “I guess my son didn’t tell me everything after all. Martha Decker accused you of murdering poor Mr. Granger?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Jackie munched thoughtfully and said, “She’s a strange one, I think.”

I found myself coming to Martha’s defense. “Actually, I understand why she thought I had shot Uncle Javin. And when she came this morning, she seemed really friendly.”

Jackie was still chewing. “Okay,” she mumbled. “If you say so. Have you had any other visitors? There’s a rumor that a developer from Oklahoma City is trying to buy up property in this part of town for a housing development and is especially interested in Mr. Granger’s house and acreage.”

“A housing development here on this beautiful land?” I felt my temperature rise and set my cup down so forcefully coffee sloshed. “Nobody like that had better come nosing around.”

Pat poked Jackie and grinned. “She hasn’t changed a bit.”

“There’s another rumor too; actually, it’s an old folktale, that there might be silver on this land,” Jackie said. “I don’t know if it’s supposed to be hidden in the house or buried in the ground or what. Like all gossip, it changes from one mouth to another.”

“Oh, boy,” I muttered. “What under the sun have I stepped into?”

Pat’s eyes crinkled. “Well . . .”

Jackie looked stern. “Pat!”



"Do you know whether the Decker family was living next door at the time of Eldon's death?" I posed the question to both of them.

"So far as I know, they were," Jackie answered.

"And Martha has never married, I suppose. At least, she didn't mention a husband. She said she lives next door with her mother, Anne. Martha's name is still Decker."

Pat looked thoughtful. "It seems I remember my parents saying she had a boyfriend but I think he disappeared about the time Eldon Decker was murdered."

"Probably a good thing for him," Jackie said. "I don't know much about Martha but she seems a little dingy."

"Dingy?" That was a pretty good way to describe her. "Did she have her sights set on Uncle Javin? Chief Morris said she brought him food often. I don't know how Cade knew that, though."

Jackie picked up her napkin and wiped cake crumbs from her mouth. "First I've heard of it."

Pat's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Ned, I'm sorry this is happening to you. Right here, three weeks before Christmas too, when we're supposed to be cheerful and merry and . . ."

"Things are not always what they should be," Jackie said, carefully folding her napkin. "We just have to deal with them as they are."

We were silent for a few moments, digesting Jackie's morsel of wisdom.

Pat squished cake crumbs together with her fork. "What do you think of Cade? He has changed a lot, hasn't he?"

"Honestly, Pat, who wouldn't change in forty years? He's probably a good lawman, seems to take his job seriously."

"Much too seriously sometimes," Jackie said.

"It's because of that dratted Lena." Pat's voice rose. "She didn't know a good man when she saw him. She ran off with some salesman two or three years ago and nobody has heard from her since."

Jackie sipped her coffee. "As Ned said, sometimes life leads us around blind corners."

"When is Mr. Granger's funeral?" Pat asked.

I traced the rim of my cup with my finger. "That's a chore I dread. I must go to the funeral home and make arrangements. I have no idea whether he went to church or which church, or if he had close friends here or who should be notified."

Pat smiled. "He did go to church—the one Gerald and I attend, Rose Chapel. In fact, sometimes Gerald preaches when Pastor Williams is out of town."

My ears pricked up. "Rose Chapel? Uncle Javin mentioned 'Rose' but I thought he was talking about a person. Could he have meant the church?"

Pat shrugged.

"I tell you what," Jackie said, collecting empty saucers, cups, and forks, "let us go with you to the funeral home. We can help you make decisions and then we can put an obituary in the paper. That way, anyone who knew Mr. Granger will be able to come and pay their last respects."

"Would you?" It felt as if a load were lifted from my shoulders. "It would mean so much to me."

"We're the Three Musketeers. 'All for one and one for all,'" Pat said as she stood up. She walked into the parlor and looked around. "This is a remarkable old house. One of the really historic ones in town. Look at that lovely detail in the woodwork."

"My grandparents lived here," I told her, "and since Uncle Javin never married, he lived on in the house after they died. But I understand it was built before their time, and they bought it from some of the first owners. I don't know whether my uncle had a will, or if the house is mortgaged. I know nothing about it."

"All old houses have stories," Pat continued, "and so does Granger's Mansion."

"Granger's Mansion?" I asked.

"That's what the people in town call it. I probably shouldn't tell you this, Ned, but there's a rumor that it's haunted."

"Pat!" Jackie exclaimed. "You'll scare her."

I lifted their coats and my own off the hall tree. "Actually, I heard the same thing from your son this afternoon."

Pat nodded. "Yes, there's a story about the original owners . . . I've forgotten their names. Anyway, the lady of the house just disappeared one day. This was way back before statehood. I think the husband was influential in town politics. Rumors made the rounds that he had killed her but he said she ran off with another man."

"Oh, my goodness!" I pulled my jacket close. "Ednalee is such a quiet, peaceful town on the surface, but it seems like the women, at least, are pretty restless. So I guess the ghost is that poor woman?"

Pat cocked her head and gazed at me with wide eyes. I winked at Jackie. "Pat's hoot-owl look, a sure sign of wisdom."

"And, a further bit of information," Jackie said, "your uncle did indeed have a will. Ron was his lawyer and I feel sure he will be calling you."

By sunset, I had scheduled Uncle Javin's funeral for Friday at ten, three days hence, arranged some of my own clothes and books in my bedroom upstairs, and at last sat down at the kitchen table to eat a bologna sandwich and drink a glass of milk with Penny on my lap. What a day this had been.

"Friendship," I told the warm bundle of fur across my knees, "is what makes the world go round."

Pat and Jackie had gone with me to the funeral home and helped with the decisions for my uncle's service, to the newspaper office to place the notice of his death, and to the corner café, Grandy's, where we had a cup of caramel mocha coffee to boost our spirits and our strength.

Thinking beyond the funeral was impossible at the moment. Jackie said that her husband Ron was Uncle Javin's lawyer. Maybe something in my uncle's will would give me direction or at least make clearer the things that had happened.

"Penny, I feel so much better," I told my house mate. "If you promise to go with me and curl up on the foot of my bed, I believe I will be brave enough to climb those stairs and sleep in that pretty bedroom Uncle Javin fixed for me. And tomorrow, well, 'sufficient unto the day

*Moonlight* CAN BE *Murder*

is the evil thereof' as the Lord Himself said. A good night's sleep is what I need."

Little did I know that, although a good night's rest may have been what I needed, it would not be what I got.



## Chapter 9

The noise jarred my eyes open. I gasped and sat up. The luminous dial on my bedside clock told me it was two in the morning.

“Penny?” I muttered. “Did you knock something off a table?”

But the little cat was not on the foot of my bed. As I listened, heart pounding, it came again—a clang like metal striking metal.

Afraid to move and afraid not to move, I swung my feet off the bed and crept to the window. Was the noise inside the house or out? It was impossible to know. What could have caused that dreadful crash?

Leaning close to the pane, I peered out, my breath making little foggy circles on the window.

Moonlight bathed the yard in silvery brightness, lighting the roofs of the well and the carriage house. In the darkness of oaks, cedars, and honeysuckle, something moved. I wiped fog off the glass and squinted at the yard. Something white and filmy drifted from the tangle of trees and bushes and seemed to float toward the carriage house. Hardly daring to breathe, I waited for the person or thing, whatever it was, to reappear, but it didn’t. Finally, the sound of my teeth clicking together made me realize I was shaking.

My neck was getting stiff and my arms had goose bumps. I flicked the curtain back across the window and retreated to the side of my bed. Vulnerable and decidedly shaken did not adequately describe my

feelings. What was I doing here, alone in this house that was nearly two centuries old? Something was going on, something nefarious and mysterious, but what? Sliding my fuzzy blue robe off the rocker beside the bed, I shrugged into it, belted it, and felt under my mattress for the gun I had put there last night. It came with me from Georgia, a reminder of my husband Sloan. He had insisted I take training for a concealed/carry permit. I had resisted that idea but at the moment, I was very glad Sloan won the argument. And, since my husband's death, I always had a flashlight beside my bed on the floor, in case of power outages or other emergencies. Gun under the mattress, flashlight and cell phone by the bed, Bible on the bedside table had become a habit established after my husband died.

I tiptoed to the head of the stairs and listened. Not a sound came to my ears. Had the ethereal figure by the carriage house been the cause of the awful noise that woke me? Somehow, I couldn't relate the loud clanging to that wispy shape which hardly seemed to touch the ground.

Step by slow step, I descended the stairs and stole cautiously to the front door. Sloan had told me never to open the door, if I were frightened. I should stay inside and let the threatening person come to me. He could be waiting in the darkness, ready to spring in or drag me out the moment the door was open.

Putting my ear to the door, I strained to hear anything unusual. All was deadly still.

What should I do? Would calling Cade be wise? Evidence relating to Uncle Javin's murder was scanty but what little there was pointed to me. Would Cade think I was imagining things? Would he decide I was just trying to cast suspicion on someone else?

However, if I yanked open the door, shone the flashlight onto the porch, jumped back and held the gun at the ready, surely I would have the advantage. Curiosity and a rising anger at an intruder who would dare scare the daylights out of a woman alone, got the better of Sloan's advice. I whispered, "Psalm 91 protection, Lord," jerked the door open, and yelled, "Freeze!" The gun in my right hand and the flashlight in my left, I gazed around the porch and front yard.

The scene before me lay as serene as a Christmas card in the moonlight. And silent. Breathing hard, my gun hand shaking so that I could not possibly have hit a target, I stood there, slowly swinging my flashlight from left to right. Nothing moved. Not a sound reached my ears.

Drawing a deep breath of relief, I was about to close the door when something on the porch floor glittered in the flashlight's beam. I bent down and picked it up. Uncle Javin's brass knocker lay heavy and cold in my palm. It had adorned the door probably as long as the house had stood; at least, for as long as I could remember. In its place a large, ugly dent and splintered nail holes marred the beautiful wood.

My courage dissolved and I slammed the door, locking it and leaning against it for support. That explained the racket which had awakened me. Someone had hit the door twice and struck the brass knocker to the floor. The sound was metal hitting metal. What had the vandal used—a hammer? And why?

No matter what the chief of police might think of me, this was a matter for the law. I pulled my cell phone from the pocket of my robe. Gerald Mills had given me the number of the police station and Cade had reluctantly given me his home number. That was the number I punched into my cell phone. Undoubtedly, he would be asleep. I didn't care. The faster he got here, the better.

Cade's voice when he answered the phone, sounded groggy but, to his credit, when I told him about the door (I didn't think I should mention the wispy figure) he instantly became alert.

"Lock all the doors, Ned," he told me. "Don't turn on any lights 'til I get there."

Relief washed over me that he had taken my call seriously. I padded, barefoot, into the kitchen. Using only my flashlight, I took a can of coffee from the shelf, filled the pot with water, and waited for the coffee to perk and Cade Morris to arrive.

Cade approached silently and slowly, driving his white Ford truck with the lights off. I watched until he parked in front of the gate. He opened and shut his car door softly, then shone a light around the

yard, into the carriage house, across the house, and through the trees. Moonlight danced off his hat as he moved as stealthily as a shadow up the walk then disappeared. I knew he must be going around the house, checking for any clues. When at last he stepped up on the porch, I guessed the long pause meant that he was examining the vandalized door.

Finally, he knocked and said, "Ned? Let me in."

Obligingly, I swung the door open.

"Thanks for coming, Cade," I said.

"My job," he muttered. "Have you looked in all the rooms?"

"Um, no. Didn't even think about it."

He grunted and went through the parlor into the dining room, sunroom, kitchen and utility room. I followed as far as the kitchen. Getting out a couple of cups, I waited for his return.

I heard him upstairs, opening and closing doors. Having another person in the house felt surprisingly reassuring.

At last, Cade reappeared in the kitchen.

"Coffee?" I asked.

"Sure," he answered. "That sounds good."

We sipped in companionable silence for several seconds. Finally, he said, "Your feet will get cold."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"You're not wearing shoes and this house isn't exactly balmy. Don't you have a furnace or is the fireplace your only heat?"

"Sure, there's central heating. I guess it's useable. I think the control knob is in the parlor but I haven't thought to turn it on."

"You have a permit for that?" He motioned to my pistol I had laid on the table, barrel pointing to the wall.

"Sure do."

"Ned, have you considered moving back to Atlanta?"

"Back to Atlanta? Why?"

He rubbed his hand across his stubbly cheeks and glared at me. "Why? Why do you suppose, woman? Somebody shot your uncle.



Somebody vandalized your front door. This was a pretty quiet town until you got here. I think you'd be a lot safer if you went back home."

"This is my home now, Cade. I sort of burned all my bridges in Atlanta, quit my job, and let my apartment go. Besides, an incident happened there a couple of months ago. I don't know that I'd be any safer there."

"What incident?"

So I told him about the kidnapping, the threats and intimidation.

"I think you attract danger like a magnet, Ned. You always were the center of anything going on. Must be your red hair."

"That isn't funny, Chief Morris."

He shook his head. "No, it isn't. Sorry. What about your husband?"

"Sloan died five years ago."

He didn't comment, just gazed at his coffee cup.

"How about you? Married? Children? Grandchildren?" I didn't think I should tell him that Pat had mentioned his wife.

"I don't know if I'm married or not. Lena left a couple of years ago. I have one daughter, Marianne, a missionary in Africa."

I refilled our coffee cups. Catching up with old friends was nice but I couldn't see that it had anything to do with current happenings. I wanted to ask more about Lena, but she was actually none of my business.

"Good coffee," Cade said.

I nodded. "So, here we are, full circle. You and I are both in the town where we started, but a lot has happened since we were kids. And, my hometown isn't the quiet little place I remember."

His eyes held mine. "Until Javin's murder, about the only excitement was the meth problem. I'm pretty sure one of Ednalee's fine citizens, maybe more than one, is involved in making it. Problem is, I haven't caught anybody so far. I will, though. People who would deal in that stuff can't be all that sharp."

"That's awful. Seems like there's no lack of people wanting to do harm to others, whether it's in Atlanta or here. I hope you catch whoever it is and throw the book at him."

“Oh, I’ll catch him, all right.” Cade’s voice was grim. “I didn’t find a thing out of place here, Ned. There were a few tracks out by the carriage house and around the well but they may have been yours.”

Thinking of the gossamer figure, I answered, “I walked around out there yesterday.”

“Nobody made it into your house this time, but next time, they may be brave enough to come in. I don’t know why those nut cases in Atlanta would follow you here. You’re out of their vicinity now but you are definitely a threat to somebody. Do you have any idea why?”

Shaking my head, I thought about that. What could I possibly know that was a danger to someone? Did this unknown person simply want me out of the house? Who would hate me enough to kill me?

“Well, I think I may have been Mrs. Thornton’s pet way back in that creative writing class. At least, she let me wash the chalkboard and dust the erasers quite often. Maybe another of her students held a grudge.”

Penny appeared from the vicinity of the parlor and sought out Cade, rubbing against his leg.

“I see you still have Javin’s cat.”

“Of course. However, she disappeared when that noise woke me. I guess she thinks it’s safe to come out now. She seems to know you.”

He reached down to stroke her head. “I used to look in on Javin now and then.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what to think, Cade. Who would have killed a harmless old man like my uncle? And who would be trying to scare me away? For what purpose?”

“That’s a question that I hope you’ll leave to law enforcement, Ned. It could well be that the person who frightened you tonight is the same one who killed your uncle.”

“So, at least you’ve decided I’m probably not guilty of murder?”

A smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. “Probably not. Thanks for the coffee, Ned. Keep that door locked and your eyes open. I’m as close as the telephone.”

With those parting words, Cade scooted back his chair and left.

Penny and I spent the rest of the night curled up on the dining room sofa with an afghan and the fireplace keeping us warm. My gun lay on the floor beside us.



## *Chapter 10*

Alternating between periods of sadness, gratitude, nervousness, and worry, I survived the day before Uncle Javin's going away ceremony. First, I called an electrician to check out the furnace, which he pronounced okay, so I turned it on, but then, every time it clicked, I jumped.

When Jackie and Pat drove up the driveway, I hovered by the window, my hand on my phone until I was sure the truck contained my friends and not a stranger. They brought three plastic cups of carry-out mocha coffee from Grandy's. It was a relief to sit down with them and tell them about the nighttime visitor.

"And Cade suggested you move back to Atlanta?" Pat asked.

I nodded. "For my own safety, I suppose, but maybe he was thinking things would calm down if I left."

Jackie nodded her head. "That may be good advice. You can't help your uncle now and your safety could be at risk. The person who tore off that beautiful old brass knocker might have been warning you that the next victim will be you."

Tears sprang to Pat's eyes. "Oh, no, Jackie, we can't let her go. We are all three together again. We'll see this through with you, Ned. I'll pray for your safety."

"Yes, we will do that. When you saw that ghostly figure, Ned, could you tell whether it was a man or a woman?"

“I couldn’t even tell if it was human,” I said. “It just appeared for a few seconds and seemed to vanish.”

Pat shivered. “Ooh. Didn’t I tell you this place is haunted?”

After they left, I once again made sure all the doors were locked, then I went upstairs to check through my closet. Before leaving Atlanta, I gave many of my clothes to a thrift shop but surely I could find a dark skirt and jacket appropriate for the funeral. My search revealed a navy blue dress with matching long jacket and navy pumps. I felt comfortable in this outfit and decided it would fit the occasion.

Penny and I moved back to my bedroom to sleep that night. I don’t know how well she snoozed, but I slept very little, hearing every squeak and pop of the old house. When the wind came up, blowing a tree branch across my window, I ran to investigate and felt foolish at seeing what had caused the noise.

At last, it was “gettin’ up time,” as my dad used to say, and I walked downstairs to plug in the coffee pot and make some toast. I would try not to think about the sad duty that awaited me. I had gotten through my husband’s and my parents’ funerals by performing the required activities and putting a mental shield around my heart until later. Maybe that’s not emotionally healthy, but it worked. Hopefully, it would hold true for Uncle Javin’s funeral as well.

To keep my thoughts off the fact that my last living kinsman lay in a bronze-colored casket at the front of Rose Chapel, I scanned the faces of those in attendance as I entered the little church, wondering if one of them could be a murderer. The first row of seats was reserved for family and it would have been mighty empty except Pat and Jackie, with her husband Ron, sat with me. I actually would have preferred sitting in the back row where I could keep an eye on the visitors, but that would have been breaking protocol.

The pastor of Rose Chapel, Gabe Williams, delivered a comforting and stirring message. He seemed to have known my uncle well. He was probably a decade or so younger than Uncle Javin; it was hard to know because Reverend Williams’ thick, white beard covered much of

his face. His hair was a white, longish mop but his piercing black eyes arrested me. I did not doubt his sincerity.

At the end of an old familiar hymn, “Shall We Gather at the River?” the group of mourners solemnly passed by the open casket, shaking my hand, and offering words of sympathy. I did not recognize any except Martha Decker, although many of the older ones remembered me. I knew that Cade was in attendance and probably so was Gerald Mills but I felt they were doing what I would like to have done, standing at the back surveying the crowd.

Only a few of us went from the church to Ednalee’s cemetery. This lonely place sat atop a hill on the outskirts of town, actually only a few blocks from Granger’s Mansion, as the crow flies. Pastor Williams, Ron, Jackie, and Pat stood with me around the open grave. I felt someone touch my arm and looked up to see Cade standing behind me. He smiled and the cold day lost a bit of its grimness. We sang a hymn, “Farther Along,” Pastor Williams said a final prayer, and I placed a single red rose atop Uncle Javin’s casket. As I raised my head, I glimpsed a movement among the pines surrounding the cemetery. It was just a flash of white, then it was gone. It could have been a person; it could have been my imagination, or a trick of the light seen through my tears.

The congregation of Rose Chapel had kindly offered to serve lunch in the church’s dining room. Pat, Jackie and Ron sat with me at a long, cloth-covered table. Seeing the number of town folk who came to pay their respects to my uncle surprised me. Was he that well regarded in spite of his crime? Or did they remember the Granger family and choose to respect my grandparents’ memory? Whatever their reasons for coming, even if it was simple curiosity, having people around helped keep my loss at arm’s length. A cemetery with an open grave is the loneliest spot on earth, and I was happy to push that memory to the back of my mind while I smiled and thanked those who filled the church’s dining hall.

The warmth of the room and the friendly faces of the citizens of Ednalee helped alleviate my sadness. Many of the mourners had known

my parents as well as Uncle Javin. Some of my former schoolmates were at the church. All in all, I breathed a sigh of relief that this sad memorial for my uncle was coming to a close.

Pastor Gabe Williams sat beside Ron Murray, across from me at the lunch table. I congratulated him on his soothing words and told him I appreciated the fact that he emphasized the positive side of my uncle and ignored his crime and conviction.

"Even though I haven't lived here long, only a couple of years, I visited with your uncle many times," said Pastor Williams. "He was lonely and liked to talk about the old days here in Ednalee."

Guilt grasped my heart with merciless hands. Why hadn't I found the time to visit my uncle? Pride, perhaps? Shame? Had I been all that busy?

"Thank you," I whispered.

"There's something you should know, Mrs. McNeil," the preacher continued. He set down his coffee. "I've been pondering and pondering and I believe we need to talk. Is there a day that I can come by and visit? Or perhaps you could drop by the church?"

"Why certainly," I said. "Any time actually." I rummaged in my purse for a pencil and paper and scribbled my cell phone number.

He took the paper, folded it, and stuck it in his jacket pocket.

Two tall, slim men rose from the back and ambled toward my table.

Black hair threaded with gray, dark eyed and with scruffy beards, these two stared down at me for several seconds before one of them spoke.

"Miz McNeil?" asked the older gentleman.

"Yes. Do I know you?"

The man laughed, a sound like dry leaves crackling underfoot. "No, I doubt that you do or would want to. We don't know you neither and that's jest as well. We knew ol' Javin, though."

The second man nodded, "Yep. We knew Javin well enough. We had to come today to make sure that was him up there in that casket. It was and I guess we're satisfied."

The first speaker smiled, showing crooked, yellowed teeth. "We're satisfied, right enough. Ol' Javin got jest what he deserved."

"Sometimes bad things happen in this ol' town," said the second man. "Sometimes people get hurt. You might think about that."

They glided away and out the door. A cold dash of icy water could not have chilled me more than the words of these two strangers.

Looking at Pat then Jackie, I choked, "What in the world? Who were those two men?"

Ron reached across the table and put his warm hand over my cold one. "It's all right, Ned. Those two fellows sounded much worse than they are." He looked thoughtful. "Although, I didn't much like the sound of what Moe said. It was very nearly a threat."

"They didn't *look* too good either," I said, "but who were they?"

Cade strode to our table and pulled out a chair. "You just met the Decker boys," he said. "Moe and Vermouth, Eldon's brothers."

My mouth went dry. "Is there more coffee?" I asked nobody in particular.

"I'll get it," Cade said, taking my cup and heading for the kitchen.

"Moe and Vermouth? Who would saddle their children with such names?" I wondered.

"You'll have to admit that those names are pretty unforgettable," Jackie said. "Moe is, I think, short for 'Monroe' and it's probably not good to think about the German meaning for Vermouth."

"What is it?" piped up Pat.

"Wormwood," Jackie answered.

"So, Eldon was their brother and they hated my uncle?" I took the coffee Cade held out to me. "Maybe one of them shot him. Have you checked out their alibis?"

Once again, Cade sat down. "That's the first thing I did. They were not anywhere near Ednalee or Granger Mansion. Their neighbor said that at the time Javin was shot, the brothers were helping him chase down one of his steers that jumped the fence. He swears it took them a couple of days to find it. They hardly ever show up in town. I imagine Javin's funeral is the only thing that could have brought them out of the hills."

Cade seemed ready to accept the Decker brothers' alibi, but I wasn't.



“Surely they would come in to see their niece Martha now and then?” I asked.

Ron shook his head. “Martha isn’t their niece. Remember, she was Eldon’s stepdaughter.”

Okay, so maybe she wasn’t their niece but I certainly was not convinced they knew nothing about my uncle’s death. If evil ever looked me in the face, it did when Moe and Vermouth Decker stopped at my table.



## *Chapter 11*

The night after Uncle Javin's funeral went uninterrupted. No loud noises broke the quiet; no wispy figures dissolved into the darkness. However, Penny followed every step I made. Perhaps she was afraid I would disappear as had my uncle. The more I saw of her, the better I liked the little cat. She was friendly and talkative, after her own cat fashion of meows and purrs. Surely my conversations with her were not a sign of senility. She certainly helped keep the emptiness of the old house from getting to me.

Saturday morning, my phone rang. Jackie's husband, Ron, answered my 'hello.'

"Ned, Jackie said she told you that I was Mr. Granger's lawyer," he said.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm not sure why he needed a lawyer, but I'm glad he chose you."

Ron laughed. "There are not that many lawyers in Ednalee, but yes, I felt honored that he trusted me. He named you as the sole heir in his will, and I need to go over the will with you. Can you come to my office Monday morning?"

"I'm Uncle Javin's only heir? Oh, my!" I had to stop for a moment to digest this bit of information. Tears once again threatened to surface and my voice sounded shaky as I said, "That's kind of over-

whelming and far kinder that I deserve. I suppose he still owned the house then?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Ron answered. "His incarceration didn't change that. It's an interesting will, Ned, and I'm looking forward to your reaction. See you Monday."

"But—" I stopped. Ron had broken the connection.

As I stuffed the small phone into the pocket of my jeans, I saw Penny staring at me. Picking her up, I carried her to the kitchen. The coffee pot's light still shone.

"What do you know about that?" I asked her. "How can a will be interesting? And, Penny, why do I feel such a sense of finality about it? I really hate this! Maybe I don't want this house. Think about the upkeep! Why did Uncle Javin have to die?"

Pouring a fortifying cup of my favorite breakfast drink, I sat down at the kitchen table. Penny jumped up on my lap.

"Uncle Javin spent forty years of his life locked away from those who loved him," I told my furry companion. "Surely he deserved to live out the remainder of his time in the house he loved. And, surely, I deserved to have at least one remaining family member to cherish."

Wiping my nose on a tissue, I set Penny on the floor and stood up. "Enough of feeling sorry for myself," I told her. "Let's you and I go upstairs and pack away the clothing in Uncle Javin's closet. We can, at least, do that much."

Working in my uncle's room didn't prove to be the sad chore I feared it would be. A welcome peace seemed to pervade the room. Although I searched all the pockets of his pants, coats, and shirts myself, I found them all to be empty. A large suitcase rested at the back of his closet. Pulling it out, I put Uncle Javin's clothing inside.

Pat called and invited me to her church, Rose Chapel, on Sunday. Glad for a reason to get out of the empty house, I looked forward to going and hearing another of Gabe Williams' sermons. Steeling myself to think of the pastor's hope-filled words instead of the bronze casket that had rested beneath the podium, I found myself enjoying this service. The music was brisk, the words upbeat. Gerald had the day

off from work. He and Pat invited me for a home cooked Sunday meal of roast and potatoes, and I accepted in a flash. Pat's pretty house felt comfortable and sunny. In the years since I knew her, she had become a gifted cook.

It seemed to me that, little by little, my new life in Ednalee was unfolding in front of me. I felt as if I were a traveler in an unknown land, going from one signpost to the next, hoping to arrive at a safe and familiar destination. My next steps would take me to Ron Murray's office and hearing Uncle Javin's will, but in what direction that would point me, I had no idea.



## *Chapter 12*

At last Monday arrived. The sun shone on slushy snow puddles and the temperature hovered in the mid-forties. I decided a bulky, denim-blue sweater over jeans with a matching red-and-blue scarf would suffice for the trip to Ron Murray's office. A flannel-lined, hooded, red corduroy jacket topped off my outfit.

Although the day began with sunshine, it grew steadily cloudier and crisper until by the time I reached Ron's office, the heavy clouds looked as if they were sitting on the treetops.

Light spilled out of Ron's waiting room as Jackie met me at the door and gave me a hug.

"Hi, Ned. Ron asked me to come and lend moral support. Sometimes hearing or viewing the actual will is an emotional experience," she said.

I squeezed her hand. "Thanks. I really appreciate you taking time for me."

Comfortable-looking beige leather chairs accented with red and yellow throw cushions furnished Ron's outer office. Brass picture lights glowed under original oil paintings of landscapes. I looked more closely at a scene depicting Ednalee's courthouse with dogwood trees blossoming in the background. Noting the signature, I turned to my friend.

"Jackie! You didn't tell me you are an artist. These are beautiful!"

Jackie blushed and waved my compliment aside. "I had to do something after I retired from teaching. Painting is relaxing and it's a lot of fun."

Ron opened the door to his office. "I thought I heard your voices. Come in, both of you," he said.

Although the room was small, the same color scheme of cushy beige leather and bright cushions gave it a homey feel. A framed photograph of Ron and Jackie on their wedding day hung behind his cherrywood desk. The desk took up a good third of the room.

Jackie bustled over to the coffee pot, poured three cups of the steaming brew and handed a cup to me. "Sit here," she said, indicating one of two chairs that faced the wall where a big screen television hung.

Looking at Ron, I said, "You mentioned that Uncle Javin's will is interesting. Are you going to read it to me or should I read it myself?"

Ron shook his head. "Actually, nobody is going to read it. Mr. Granger didn't leave a written will; he wanted a videotaped last will and testament."

Swallowing a mouthful of coffee, I gasped and said, "My eighty-four-year-old uncle was into technology?"

Ron grinned while Jackie handed me a napkin. "He was, insofar as the will is concerned. Ned, I wanted Jackie to be here with you because sometimes seeing a loved one on the screen, looking alive and well, when you know you've just buried him, can be a bit of a shock."

I nodded and sat back, coffee cup in hand, to face the television.

The first frame that appeared on the screen showed my uncle. Although I knew his face would appear, I was stunned. He looked well and happy. Then, he spoke, his voice strong and sure. "My name is Javin Granger. Being of sound mind and a fairly sound but kind of old body, I made this here will on the nineteenth day of August, 2013." Ron's name and credentials were in the lower right hand corner of the frame.

The next picture showed Uncle Javin sitting in his rocker beside the fireplace in the dining room of Granger Mansion. Flickering flames cast shadows across his chair. He wore the same tan corduroy slacks

and brown checked shirt he had on the day I found him, dying, in the laundry room of his home.

His gray, thinning hair was neatly combed. His blue eyes twinkled, as he smiled directly into the camera. A lump rose in my throat and I choked on my coffee. Ron pushed the pause button and waited until I gained control of my tears before he continued.

Uncle Javin looked straight at me (or the camera, I supposed) and spoke.

“Nettie Elizabeth, if you’re watching this, of course, I’ve gone to my eternal reward, as they say. I want, first of all, to apologize for the disgrace I brought on my family, way back in ’74. I didn’t mean to kill Eldon Decker, but that’s what happened and I spent a good part of my life paying for it. You, my dear niece, are the only part of my family that is left and, although I haven’t seen you in a passel of years, you were always my favorite youngster.”

Here, Uncle Javin paused while Penny jumped up on his lap. Automatically stroking her head, he continued, turning to gaze toward the sunroom and its windows.

“This is an interesting house, Nettie. It has a history, and, I fear, a few secrets. I want you to dig into the past and find out about that history. Write down what you find and what you remember from when Mother and Pop lived here. I want you to make a book of your findings and give it to the library. I believe you had some good times running through this old place, when your folks came to visit. I sure missed you all when I went to the pen. Missed everybody.” His voice trailed off and he paused for a few seconds.

I sniffed and wiped my eyes, trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

“Some news has come to my attention lately and I don’t quite know what to make of it,” Uncle Javin said, once again looking in my direction. “I hope you talk to Pastor Williams, Nettie. He has sorta hinted at some things but maybe he’ll tell you more than he told me. By the way, his church is a good one. I think you’d enjoy it. But now, I come to the best part of this here film. Everything I have, whatever is in

my bank account, whatever you find hiding on these old grounds, this house and furnishings, all will go to you at my death, Nettie.”

He grinned. “Only one thing I require and I don’t know how this is going to set with you. You might have ties in Atlanta—probably do, as a matter of fact. In order to inherit everything I own, including Granger Mansion, you have to live here. You can’t go traipsing back to Georgia or anywhere else until you’ve lived here at least a year. By that time, I hope you’ll like the old place so well that you’ll stay of your own free will. Now, if you don’t want any part of your hometown or this place, why, my secondary beneficiary, as Ron calls it, is Rose Chapel. They do a lot of good, handing out food to needy folks and I’m sure Preacher Gabe would appreciate it. Ron, of course, would handle the details.”

He paused and then said, “By Ron, I mean my lawyer, Ron Murray. Good and honest fellow.”

“But, whatever you do, Nettie,” Uncle Javin went on, “don’t let no durn land developer cut up these two acres, tear down my home, and put in a bunch of dinky little houses. You hear?”

Those blue eyes flashed fire and it was all I could do not to mutter, “I hear you, Uncle Javin.”

He set Penny on the floor and stood up, a tall, thin man, erect and unbowed. I sensed in him an iron resolve.

“That’s about it. So long, Nettie-girl. My blessings go with you.”

The camera focused on Uncle Javin as he turned away and walked into the kitchen. The frame grew smaller then dissolved into a captivating picture of the outside of Granger Mansion, shining silver under the light of a full moon.

I sat silently for a few seconds, trying to absorb what I had heard. For the short time Uncle Javin spoke, it seemed as if he were still here, speaking to me in a conversational tone. Ron cleared his throat and brought me back to reality.

“Uncle Javin left everything to me but I have to live here?” I asked.

Ron ran his hand across his carefully combed, scanty red hair. “That’s about it, Ned. I also have the key to his safety deposit box. If



you agree to the terms of the will, I have a document for you to sign. You may need to think this over for a while. If you do, that's fine."

He scooted an official looking paper to me with an "x" marked on the line for my signature. Without a word, I picked up a pen and wrote my name. I wanted Granger Mansion.

Ron handed me a heavy yellow envelope. "Here is the key to his safety deposit box at the bank, his checkbook, and the old abstract. I can tell you, Ned, that the balance of his checkbook is less than a thousand dollars. Is this going to be a hardship, living here? How about a job?"

Jackie patted my hand. "What he means to say, Ned, is how are you fixed for money? Do you need to go to work right away?"

Still dazed, I shook my head. "No. Actually, Sloan left a large life insurance policy. Money is no problem."

Jackie gazed at me with concern in her deep brown eyes. "Are you all right, Ned? You are as white as—well, as that snow we had."

Drawing a deep breath, I looked at my friend and smiled. "I'm fine. As Ron said, a will can be overwhelming and Uncle Javin was so kind, so generous and I had practically ignored him for a long time."

She put an arm around me while my swimming eyes spilled over. "I understand, Ned. Of course it's going to take some getting used to, and please, don't feel guilty. Your uncle wouldn't want that."

"No," I agreed, squaring my shoulders and tossing the soggy tissue into a wastebasket. "No, he had a lot of courage. Maybe I've inherited some of that too."

Jackie, Ron, and I stood up. "What is your next step?" Ron asked.

What, indeed? What is one supposed to do after inheriting such a huge gift? I had no idea. I held out my hand to Jackie.

"Pinch me," I said.

"Pinch you? Why?"

"I must be dreaming. Last month, I was living in my condo in Atlanta and now . . . and now I have no idea what I'm supposed to do." I caught my lip between my teeth to keep it from trembling.

"Okay," Jackie said and pinched.

I yanked my hand back. "Ow! I didn't really mean it."

Jackie patted my hand and grinned. "Now, don't go all squishy, Ned. You can handle this. You know what I'd do, if I were in your shoes?"

Feeling meek and chastised, I asked, "No. What?"

"I'd go to Grandy's, sit in a back booth, order a cup of caramel mocha coffee, and think."

So, that is just what I did.



## *Chapter 13*

Grandy's was much the way I remembered it. I had been here with Pat and Jackie since my return to Ednalee but, being in it by myself, I took the time to look and absorb some of its atmosphere. It used to be a hangout for teens but my family left Ednalee before I was old enough to appreciate it.

People of all age groups and occupations filled the booths. Grandy's was a long, narrow room within a building that housed other businesses. It was a relic of the 1950s. An old-fashioned song selector hung from the wall by each booth. An actual Wurlitzer juke box occupied one corner of the room. Gale Storm singing, "Dark Moon" followed me all the way to that empty back booth that Jackie had suggested.

Grandy's may have been outdated and small, but that was part of its charm. It was sparkling clean, it served home-cooked food, and the tastiest caramel mocha coffee I had ever swallowed, although I've had some of the best.

I smiled at the neatly-dressed waitress who brought my coffee. She wore a crisp white uniform, short green apron, and stiffly-starched cap that took me back a few decades. With the heavenly taste of caramel mocha awakening my senses, I tried to think clearly about the things that had happened since my arrival in Ednalee.

First, of course, was the shock of finding Uncle Javin dying in the laundry room and being accused of murdering him. Then, there was Uncle Javin's ransacked closet, the vandalized door, the wispy white figure by the carriage house, the trauma of the funeral and those evil-looking Decker men and now, the awesome gift left to me in my uncle's will.

I dipped my spoon in the mound of whipped cream atop the coffee and licked it off. What had Uncle Javin meant when he said that I should be careful? He told me not to trust somebody but he didn't say who. And he mentioned a rose and said find it. Find what, the rose? None of it made any sense.

Today, the reading of his will awed me and left me in a state of disbelief. He left me everything. Why? I remembered visiting Uncle Javin and playing in his beautiful house when I was a child, but when my family moved to Atlanta, my poor uncle and his pitiful incarceration had barely entered my thoughts; usually, it was only when Dad or Mom mentioned the sadness of the situation and their belief that he was covering up for the real murderer.

"So now, Nellie Elizabeth McNeil, you are a landowner, and custodian of your family's old home place." I spoke aloud and saw several nearby diners turn their heads to look at me. I didn't really care.

Selling my condo in Atlanta would be wise, but probably a real estate company could take care of that for me. Christine Standford was a friend in the real estate business in Atlanta. She would be glad for the commission. As for the furniture in it, well, as far as I was concerned, that could go with the condo. I had taken my clothing, books, and a few personal items when I answered Uncle Javin's summons. Probably Christine could put everything else in storage.

The years had taken their toll on loved ones. Time rolled on, until Uncle Javin and I were the only ones left of our family. Still, I hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about my mother's oldest brother until those terse letters came. It was humbling to realize that he had thought about me, remembered the child I once was, and assigned to me his earthly wealth.

I sipped my coffee and realized it was growing cool. Quickly, I downed the rest of it. Uncle Javin had mentioned the house, Granger Mansion, having an interesting history. Certainly, I would delve into its past and try to write something about it; that was the least I could do for my benefactor. Why did he say that whatever I found in his home was mine? Was something hidden away in one of the rooms? And what did he have in that safety deposit box at the bank?

The best way I knew to answer that last question was to go to Ednalee's First National Bank and use the key Ron had given me.

Fumbling in my purse for a tip for the waitress, I was about to leave Grandy's when a familiar voice asked, "May I join you?"

Ednalee's chief of police smiled down at me.

"Sure," I said, motioning to the empty bench across from me.

Cade dropped his hat on the bench and scooted in beside it. "Just coffee, black," he told the waitress who promptly appeared at his elbow. "Ned?"

"Nothing for me, thanks. I've just finished my allotted amount of caffeine for the day."

He said nothing more until the waitress brought his coffee and left, then, he looked at me and asked,

"How have you been, Ned?"

Something in Cade's tone of voice warmed me, as if my answer was important to him.

Lacing my fingers around my cup, I proceeded to tell him about Uncle Javin's will and the enormity of the gift he had given me. Expecting him to smile and congratulate me, I felt dismayed when he frowned.

"Yes, I can see that you are bowled over by inheriting the house and whatever else he owned, but that may be a burden, Ned. There's something about that old place. I've heard stories about it all my life, from my granddaddy. The old-timers knew it as the bad luck place," He swallowed some coffee and sat gazing at me.

Icy fingers seemed to squeeze the muscles in my back. "Why on earth would it be known as bad luck?"

He gave a short laugh. "Why wouldn't it? Forty years ago, that Decker man, Eldon, was killed there. And, because of that, your uncle was locked away for the best part of his life. I'd call that pretty bad luck, wouldn't you? Besides, there's some sort of superstition attached to it. Not that I believe in such things."

Searching his face, I saw the uneasiness there. "I hope you don't believe in an old tale like that, Cade. Christians shouldn't be superstitious. You do go to church, don't you?"

He looked down at his cup. "I used to, years ago. Haven't been much lately."

Disappointed, I drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Cade."

He shook his head as if he were ridding himself of unpleasant memories. "What I actually wanted to tell you, Ned, is that ballistics has finished testing the gun that killed your uncle. It was the one you found with him, the one you picked up and the only fingerprints on it were yours and his. Even though neither of us can believe he would have killed himself, that's a possibility we can't dismiss yet."

Cade's eyes held mine and I saw that he was truly perplexed. But suicide? No, not for a minute could I believe that a man who had just been allowed his freedom would suddenly find life distasteful. "He was looking forward to my visit, had stocked the refrigerator and fixed up my bedroom upstairs," I said. "I don't believe he would have wanted me to find him like that. He seemed to actually care for me."

Cade considered this while he swirled the coffee in his cup. "You're right. I talked to him several times and he didn't seem to me to be the type that would commit suicide, but we can't really know what's going on in somebody else's mind."

"But, not suicide," I said, shaking my head.

Still examining his coffee, he said, "I called that detective, Max Shelman, in Atlanta."

The name didn't register for a few seconds. "Max? Oh! The person who was working on the kidnapping of Congressman Edward Langlier! Have they found him? Did they identify the crooks who kidnapped him?"

“The cops nabbed one of the guys and they think he may be ready to talk. The second man is still on the loose. Shelman is afraid he may be headed this way, Ned. You see, you are the only person who might identify those two. Shelman is going to ask you to fly back to Atlanta when they apprehend the second man so you can check him out and I just imagine that the two kidnappers are not eager for you to point the finger at them.”

My mouth fell open. When I could speak, I muttered, “Good night! So, I guess the one that is still loose could be a threat?”

Looking gloomy, he said, “I just don’t know, Ned. Ednalee was certainly a lot quieter before you came.”

A flash of anger warmed my face. “Thanks a lot. I didn’t ask for any of this, you know.”

Cade stared at me for several seconds then spoke slowly. “There’s something else, Ned. You have come into quite an inheritance, courtesy of your uncle. There may be people in this town who resent that, people who would like a chance at that house and two acres, if you were out of the way. I want you to be careful. Don’t trust anybody and if you see somebody you think is suspicious, call me. I mean, call right away! Don’t wait.”

Along with the good comes the bad. It sounded as if I wouldn’t be free to enjoy my new-found inheritance because I’d have to be looking over my shoulder. Shivering, I slipped my arms into my jacket.

“You aren’t helping me feel safe and secure,” I said. “Surely, I’m not in any real danger. That would be ridiculous.”

Shaking his head, he picked up his hat and scooted from the booth. “It’s not my job to make you feel all warm and fuzzy. It’s my job to try to keep you safe. Remember what I said, Ned. Be careful.”



## *Chapter 14*

Snow contrasted starkly with the black hood of my Escape as I drove to the First National Bank of Ednalee. What a strange feeling, to come back to the place of my birth, the town that had known my parents and grandparents. Oddly enough, the landmarks reminded me of the set of a play. All the buildings were in place, looking much as they had always looked, but where were the familiar actors in this drama? I half expected to see my mother and dad striding up the walk to the house on the far side of Ednalee, the place I used to call home. Only now, the house was gone, the lot vacant, and snow covered the over-grown walk. Yes, my home town still existed but the people who had made it special were gone and, for me, Ednalee would never be the same. The set was empty. I hurried past my vacant house place, tears burning my eyes.

Parking by the curb in front of the bank, I locked my car and went inside, grateful for light and warmth. A teller directed me to a bank officer when I told her I needed to view Uncle Javin's safety deposit box. After explaining things to him, showing my ID, and the affidavit from Ron Murray, he brought out a card for me to sign. The card in itself would be of interest to Ednalee historians. Evidently, my grandparents once rented this very box because both James and Prudence Granger



had signed it at various times. Next, came Uncle Javin's signature through the years.

He walked with me to a small inner room. Row upon row of locked boxes lined the walls. Using both his key and mine, he unlocked Javin Granger's security vault. Soon, I sat in a small cubicle with my uncle's belongings spread on the table in front of me.

The first thing I picked up was a Bible bound in black leather. Opening it to the flyleaf, I read, "James and Prudence Granger, united in Holy Matrimony, November 12, 1922."

My grandparents' Bible. I hugged it to my chest. What a treasure! Next was a deed giving ownership of Granger Mansion and the two acres to Javin Granger. I glanced through it.

Another official-looking document from the state of Oklahoma declared that Javin Granger was a free man after having served out his sentence in the penitentiary at McAlester, Oklahoma. I shook my head. This piece of paper gave back to my uncle the freedom that his own hasty deed had taken from him so long ago. Understandably, the document would be important enough to him that he locked it away, or perhaps he just wanted it put where he wouldn't need to look at it ever again.

The last item was a small brown leather box. I lifted the lid and gasped at the beautiful object nestled on a crumpled velvet lining. Overhead lighting in the cubicle danced off a silver locket set with jewels and attached to a silver chain. The silver had a soft, almost rose tint to it and a glow that seemed to come from within as much as from the artificial lighting. Reverently, I lifted the gorgeous piece of jewelry from its velvet nest. The locket itself was perhaps a little more than an inch in diameter. A large ruby adorned the center, surrounded by alternating diamonds and emeralds. My hands shook as I pushed the clasp. The locket sprang open revealing a picture of a young, smiling man. His hair was dark, and his eyes as they looked at the camera, held a twinkle. I had seen this man many times as a child. Uncle Javin smiled up at me. The other side of the locket, the side which should have held the picture of Javin's sweetheart or wife, was empty.

What a treasure to be locked away in a bank vault! Someone should be wearing this to gala functions. However, that someone was not me. An uncomfortable inner voice told me this locket had been meant for someone else. Regretfully, I returned the beautiful item to its resting place and closed the lid to the box. As long as it remained here in the bank, it was safe.

I replaced everything except the family Bible. This would go home with me. Perhaps I could find in its pages a family tree that would prove interesting.

The small room in the bank was becoming chilly and I wanted to get back to my house (how strange to think of it as mine) and sit by the fireplace with a cup of coffee. Penny probably could hardly wait to hear of the day's happenings. Maybe by talking aloud to that friendly little cat, I could sort out this overwhelming day, and decide what steps I would take tomorrow.



## *Chapter 15*

I woke up the next morning with one thing on my mind—exploring Granger Mansion. Uncle Javin had told me to find something. What, I had no idea, nor why, nor where, but maybe I would know when I found it—whatever “it” was.

After a breakfast of oatmeal, orange juice, toast and coffee, I stepped into jeans, pulled a bright yellow sweater over a red turtleneck, and scrutinized my image in the mirror on my dresser. My face didn’t reflect the shock and surprises of the past week; instead, for some reason my gray eyes sparkled. Good heavens! Was I enjoying this? To be truthful, no, I was not happy about my poor uncle’s unresolved murder or the desecration of the front door, but I felt alive, more alive than I had felt since Sloan’s death. I had a purpose: flushing out Uncle Javin’s killer, trying to figure out what his last words meant, and finding whatever it was I was supposed to find.

Running a brush through my curls, I decided that my hair didn’t look any grayer than usual, which was a good thing. Turning away from the mirror, I deemed myself ready for the day.

Since I was already upstairs, I would start my search here, in my bedroom, progress to Uncle Javin’s room, then tackle those last two rooms that he had used for storing furniture. First, though, I would

run down to the kitchen for another cup of coffee to take with me as I hunted.

By lunch time, I was dusty, tired, and ready for a break. Just a glass of milk and a sandwich would suffice. Nothing suspicious had surfaced in searching the bedrooms, bathroom, and wardrobe closets. I had, however, gained a greater appreciation for this wonderful home. The hardwood floors were solid, still beautiful, and needed only a dust mop to shine with their original beauty. Scooting the desk, chairs, and lamps into more useable spaces in one of the bedrooms, I promised that I would do more another time. An old ledger that belonged to Jefferson Reilly had been stuck at the back of a drawer in the desk, as if it had been pushed there with other papers stacked on top of it. The ledger looked as if it had been in its cramped hiding place for a number of years. Reilly, I dimly remembered, was the man who had built Granger's Mansion. The ledger would provide interesting reading. It was an informative find, noting the sale of cattle, the price of feed, of groceries, and household expenses. Did that mean the house and two acres were part of a farm years ago?

Of greater interest to me was a small diary crammed into the loose binding of this ledger. The name, Constance Reilly, in faded blue ink appeared on the flyleaf. Had the desk been hidden for years under other furniture in the attic? Had Uncle Javin brought it down with the idea of cleaning it up and using it? I would enjoy reading that diary and ledger later, when I had more time.

Before deserting this upper floor in favor of food, I wanted to take a short look at the attic and see if it had been cleaned out. The stairs to this upper floor went up from the second story landing, beside the bathroom. I ran up the steps, turned on the overhead light by pulling a chain dangling from a bare bulb, and surveyed this dusty place. A stack of old suitcases cluttered a corner of the attic. Several patches on the floor were clear of dust, attesting to my thought that furniture had been taken out, probably to the spare bedroom where I found the desk. The room was cold and dark and I put this area on a mental list of things to look through later.

Resisting the urge to take a short nap after eating, I grabbed a dust cloth and vacuum cleaner which were in the broom closet built into the space under the stairs.

The sun shone on leftover snow, the fireplace crackled and popped, Penny drowsed on the sofa, and I hummed “Jingle Bells” as I worked. Christmas would soon be upon us and I had no idea how to handle that holiday here in Ednalee. It seemed inappropriate to put up decorations so soon after the funeral. Yet, the old house, decked out in greens and reds would be lovely.

Going into the utility room, I looked around at the washer, dryer, ironing board and pantry. Sunlight splashed through the room’s lone window, making the scene that I had witnessed a few days ago seem incongruous.

“I’ll save you ’til last,” I told the silent room. I had not been down to the basement since my arrival and certainly, I should explore it. Wasn’t this where hidden passageways and evildoers lurked? At least, that was true in some of the books I read.

The stairs to the basement were tucked next to the pantry. Opening the door, I flipped on the light switch and gingerly descended. Evidently, Uncle Javin had started at the bottom of his house and worked his way to the top when he cleaned. This large area was bare of everything except the furnace and empty shelves built into the wall. It did not even have the closed-away scent of some unused rooms.

Returning to the utility room, I decided I would have to overcome my negative feeling about it. I would clean the room, no matter what vibes it evoked. Gritting my teeth, I plugged in the sweeper and set to work, trying not to think about Uncle Javin’s prone figure under the ironing board.

Determined to be as good a housekeeper as Uncle Javin had been, I ran the vacuum cleaner into all the corners and even up the walls. Getting down on my knees, I tried to push the nozzle under the washer but the space between the bottom of the washer and the floor was too narrow. Holding one end of my dust cloth, I flipped it under

the washer and pulled it out. Here, Uncle Javin would have failed the spotless housekeeper test. Stuck to the cloth was an abundance of dust bunnies and lint. About to suck up the mess with the vacuum, I paused as I noticed something amid the dust, something that shone a dull gold in the afternoon sunshine.

Gingerly, I picked up the wad of dust. Holding it in my palm, I blew on it. Clear of the powdery dirt, a gold ring lay in my hand. For several seconds, I squatted on the floor staring at it. Was this what my uncle wanted me to find? How long had it been under the washing machine? Was it his or did it belong to somebody else?

Penny sailed onto my knee and poked the ring with her nose. Rising abruptly to my feet sent her sliding to the floor. On the outside of the ring, some sort of engraving twined around the circlet, something like leaves and flowers. Holding the ring up to the window, I tilted it to see whether I could read an inscription on the inner part. Evidently, at one time, letters had been etched inside the ring. Two hearts were still visible on either side of the letters. Between the hearts, parts of three initials remained. What those letters were, I was not sure. The first one had a couple of vertical lines, only a part of the second initial remained, and what looked like a loop for a third initial. Could it be an O? Maybe a C? Or a D? And, if it was a D, would that stand for "Decker"? I thought of the evil leers on the faces of Eldon Decker's brothers, Vermouth and Moe. Or was the faded inscription part of a G for Granger?

My housecleaning finished for the day, I returned the sweeper to the broom closet, sat down in front of the fireplace, and searched the ring for further clues of its owner. Had it been in its dark hiding place since the washer was installed? Had I found a piece of the puzzle concerning Uncle Granger's murder or did the ring only complicate things further?

My head felt as if it would burst with one more riddle. Slipping the ring into the pocket of my jeans, I leaned back against the rocker. Warmth from the fireplace and the physical labor of this long day took

their toll. My last waking thought was that I had just begun to explore this house. Tomorrow, I would go to the city library and see what, if anything, I could find there concerning Granger Mansion, which was surely one of the earliest buildings in Ednalee. Fatigue took over and I slept.



## *Chapter 16*

The Carnegie Library, a single story, red brick structure with white trim, stood proudly at attention commanding a view of the old courthouse, just as I remembered. As I went up the wide, stone steps, a light snow began to fall. Shivering, I pulled my jacket closer.

Heavy, double doors swung outward on rusty hinges when I pulled on the brass handle. Inside the vestibule, the same unique library smell that I remembered met me. The odor was of books, floor wax, stale air, and a distinctive aroma of cat. When I was a child, Miss Abigail, the librarian, kept a bevy of cats inside and outside the building. The cats were gone, except for one fortunate tabby, but the smell lingered, and the stern face of Miss Abigail no longer greeted me; instead, a smiling, gray-haired woman behind the desk asked if she could help.

"I hope so," I answered, pushing back my hood. "I am trying to find information about the Granger Mansion. I understand it's historic and I'm hoping there may be old newspaper clippings, or something that you have stored here—perhaps on microfiche?"

"Certainly," she answered. "I'll show you where to look. That's a beautiful old place. It would sure be a shame if that land developer snatched it up."

So Mrs. Thatcher, according to her name plate, had heard the same rumor about somebody out to get Uncle Javin's house.



"Yes, it would," I agreed. "I'm Nettie McNeil. I live there now and that would put me out of a home."

Greta Thatcher's gray eyes squinted behind her stylish glasses. "Your home? Are you a relative of the Grangers?"

"I'm Javin Granger's niece."

She snapped her fingers and grinned. "I knew you looked familiar! Ned Duncan, sure as the world. I was Greta Anderson, way back in Ednalee Elementary. Being a year or two older than you, you may not remember me."

"Oh, but I do," I said, reaching across her desk to take her outstretched hand. "You were such a whiz in school, won so many honors, that everybody knew Greta Anderson."

"Will wonders never cease?" she murmured, gazing at me. "Well! I'm so glad you're back, Ned, and I hope you enjoy that old house. Come over here with me and I'll show you the microfiche machines."

So began an engrossing hour as I journeyed into the past. At last, armed with several print-out pages of Granger's Mansion, I stood up and rubbed my aching neck. The house had quite a history and had played an important part in early-day Ednalee.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Greta Thatcher asked.

I nodded. "The house is even more interesting than I thought. I'd like to know more, though, about its first owners, Jefferson Reilly and Sherman Lloyd."

"Mr. Lloyd was pretty prominent in state politics," Greta said. "You might be able to just Google him and find out more. Or, the courthouse, right across the street, has files and files of information."

"You're right, of course." I smiled at Ednalee's librarian. "With the weather taking a turn for the worse, it might be wise to do that; however, I don't think Uncle Javin went in for such modern foolhardy things like wiring the house for cable. I have my laptop but I sure don't have access to the internet."

"You're welcome to use it here," Greta told me.

Thanking her, I left. Another day, I'd take her up on that offer, but at the moment, I wanted to go home, brew a cup of coffee, start up the fireplace in the dining room, and relax.

I was so lost in thought that I was halfway up my driveway before I noticed a long, black vehicle parked in front of the wrought iron gate. Another visitor? Jackie drove a double cab gray truck and Pat's car was a small, blue compact. I pulled alongside the shiny SUV, admiring its sleek lines. Obviously, this was a top of the line Cadillac, an Escalade. Perhaps because Uncle Javin's funeral was fresh in my mind, the SUV reminded me of a hearse.

Even though the sun should have been at its zenith, swirling snow and low clouds darkened the day with a premature twilight. Unlatching the gate, I looked up at my front porch just as a figure arose from the top step where it had been sitting.

I stood with one hand on the gate, my mouth open and my heart caught in my throat. A tall, bare-headed man wearing a beige coat with turned-up fur collar strode down the walk toward me.

This stranger seemed to be an extenuation of his car. He too appeared dark, expensive, and, in the half-light, ominous. Snowflakes melted on his short, black hair. His face was lean and tan and his eyes looked nearly black. Perfect white teeth flashed as he smiled. He was altogether one of the most attractive men ever to cross my field of vision.

"Mrs. McNeil?" he asked, holding out his hand.

Numb, I nodded, putting my gloved hand into his.

"I'm Sherman Lloyd," the apparition said. "I believe you are living in my house."



## *Chapter 17*

After I regained the ability to speak, I muttered, “Sherman Lloyd? No, you can’t be. He died a long time ago, and this isn’t your house. It’s mine.”

Speaking slowly, as if he were explaining an obvious fact to a six-year-old child, Mr. Lloyd said, “I assure you, I’m very much alive. Perhaps you are thinking of the first Sherman Lloyd who owned this house, my great grandfather. May we go in out of this snow? Or, you might rather go to that little café on the corner, Grandy’s, I believe. Of course this is a shock for you, but absolutely legal and I’ll be glad to tell you all about it.”

My heart raced, hammering against my chest. Had Sherman Lloyd been looking at Granger Mansion with an eye to occupying it? Was this why he was on the porch instead of remaining in his vehicle? The man’s arrogance caught me off guard. I stepped back, widening the space between us.

“No,” I said, my voice rising. “No, I think not. I don’t know who you really are, but I must ask you to leave. Now.”

He sighed, his broad shoulders lifting and falling. “I was afraid that would be your attitude. Well, I’m sorry, Mrs. McNeil. Maybe this will explain things to you.”

Lloyd thrust a business-size envelope into my hand, brushed past me, and slid into his car. Slowly, he turned the Escalade around. I

watched, rooted to the sidewalk, until the car's taillights disappeared amid the curtain of snow.

Penny met me inside the parlor, voicing either a welcome or her displeasure at having been left alone; I wasn't sure which. Picking her up, I rubbed my cold cheek against her warm fur and carried her through to the dining room.

When I set her on the floor, Penny went immediately to her empty food dish.

"So, you weren't that glad to see me. You were just hungry," I told her, going to the laundry room for her box of dry food. Filling her dish, I returned the box to its shelf, and put the envelope from Mr. Lloyd on the kitchen table.

As I shrugged out of my coat and gloves, I noticed that my hands were shaking. What should I think about that strange man who had introduced himself as a descendant of Sherman Lloyd? And what was behind his claim that Uncle Javin's house was his? He said that something in the envelope would explain things. For some reason, I dreaded opening that envelope.

The house seemed cold, so I turned up the thermostat in the parlor. Obediently, the furnace clicked on. However, I needed more than warmth; I needed the comfort of a crackling blaze in the fireplace. Gathering small sticks of wood from the basket beside the hearth, I lit the kindling, added a couple of logs, and held my cold hands toward the heat.

Glancing out of the windows, I noticed that the snow was falling thicker and faster, looking as if it meant to turn into a blizzard. The wicker table and chairs in the sunroom seemed more inviting today than Uncle Javin's kitchen table. Besides, the heat from the fireplace would soon reach that small room. A cup of hot coffee might steady my nerves and give me the courage to open the mysterious envelope. I walked to the kitchen and opened the cupboard for that all-important can of courage.

Scenes of this amazing day vied for importance in my mind. When I returned home to Ednalee from Atlanta, I had no idea what awaited

me. Had I landed in a battlefield? If so, who was the enemy and how should I fight?

Armed with a hot cup of strong coffee, I picked the envelope up from the kitchen table and headed for the brightest room in the house. Putting my cup on the wicker table, I settled into a chair, opened the envelope and pulled out what were evidently copies of two official-looking long sheets of paper. The first one had the words "Warranty Deed" emblazoned in large print at the top. Under that was the declaration, to "*Know All Men by These Presents: That Jefferson Reilly of Ednalee, Oklahoma, does hereby give, bequeath, and sell, for the sum of one dollar, to his daughter Constance Reilly Lloyd and her husband, Sherman Lloyd and their descendants, the house and following parcel of land*"

A land description followed which, I assumed, was Uncle Javin's acreage but which I would check out with Ron Murray. The document looked to be properly stamped and notarized, all looking perfectly legal, but so what? Later, the first Sherman Lloyd had subsequently sold the property to my grandparents, James and Pru Granger. I had a copy of that deed in Uncle Javin's security box.

Downing half the coffee in three large gulps, I unfolded the second document.

A will! A very old will, written before Oklahoma became a state, while it was still Indian Territory. I read, re-read, and then sat staring at it, my coffee growing cold.

This will, written by the first Jefferson Reilly, specified that the house and land would go to his wife at his death, then to their offspring. In case his child/children died with no issue (meaning descendants) the land would revert to Constance's husband, if married, and that husband's next of kin. If the land was then sold, it was to remain in the hands of the male member of the family of the new owner and, at the death of that male member, if he had no sons to inherit, the house and land would revert to the city of Ednalee.

My head swam. "What?" I asked Penny who had deserted me for the rug in front of the hearth. "What is this? I've never heard of such a

crazy will. I'm sure it isn't valid. How can a man who has been dead a hundred years reach out from the grave to rearrange life in the twenty-first century?"

Shaking my head, I stared out at the fast-falling snowflakes. Someone moved in the yard; somebody short and round and wrapped in coat, hat, and scarf trudged through my yard. Soon, I heard a knock.

I hurried to the door, glad for company. That brass door knocker must be re-attached, and the door repaired. I would ask Jackie or Pat for the name of a handyman.

Martha Decker stood on the porch, holding another covered dish in her mittened hands.

"Martha!" Her bulky presence reassured me. Here was my friendly next door neighbor, bent on another good deed. Little did she know that her best good deed was simply to keep me company on this nerve-shattering day, food or no food.

Her voice behind the wool scarf sounded muffled. "I made a beef pot pie for my mother and me," she said. "We don't eat all that much and the recipe called for such a lot that I wanted to share it."

Smiling, I stepped aside to let her enter. "You don't have to explain. Just come on in out of the cold."

Once again, she carried her offering into the kitchen. This time, she deposited it on the countertop, pulled off her scarf, hat, and gloves, and surveyed me through those thick glasses that were fogging over.

"Drat!" she muttered, swiping the glasses off her nose and rubbing them against her coat. "Glasses should come with de-foggers."

Laughing, I helped her out of her coat and pulled out a couple of kitchen chairs.

"How about some coffee?" I asked.

"I'd love it," she answered. Then, true to her non-stop method of talking, she went on, "So, how have you been, Nettie? Are you settling in? Do you have any questions about the house? I visited Javin quite often after his—um—his return home and I got to know this wonderful old place." She looked around at the ceiling and walls. "In fact, at one time, I thought, that is, I hoped . . . Oh, well, things are what they are."

She stopped long enough to take a sip of coffee.

"I'm doing well, thanks, Martha. I appreciate the food and thank you for being a friend to my uncle. I'm sure he needed one."

She waved that aside. "He was a nice man, a true gentleman."

"How about your mother?" I asked, and then was surprised to see her head jerk in my direction.

"What about my mother?"

"I just meant to ask how she is feeling. I understand she is confined to her bed. Does she ever get out of the house? I'd like to meet her."

Vehemently, Martha shook her gray curls. "No. No, never leaves the house. Can't walk much, you know, can't manage the stairs. And sometimes her mind wanders. Actually, it wanders quite a bit and I can tell you, I get a little lonesome over at my house. I was wondering if I could help you with anything, Nettie. Cleaning, setting things to rights, just anything at all?"

"That's really kind of you." I said. "I can't think of anything, though. Like you, I get lonely sometimes and staying busy keeps me from being sad. However, I do appreciate your offer. You don't know how glad I am to have you right next door."

Martha's eyes crinkled as she grinned. "Now, that's mighty neighborly. I have a feeling we're going to be great friends, Nettie, but now I'd better get back to my mother. She's a bit restless today."

I went with Martha to the door and cautioned her to be careful going down the steep front steps.

"Oh, I've gotten a lot of practice walking on snow this winter," she assured me, then trotted along the shortcut through the trees back to her home and her waiting mother.

Penny rubbed against my ankles. "What a day," I said to her. "I am as tired as if I had jogged ten miles. What do you think about that weird will? Did you run and hide when you heard Sherman Lloyd at the door? It was nice to end the nerve-wracking day with a visit from Martha, and you, of course. If it's all right with you, Penny, I'm going to dig into that pot pie Martha brought, and go to bed."

*Moonlight CAN BE Murder*

Penny evidently thought it was a good idea because as soon as I snuggled under the quilts in my upstairs bedroom, she curled up at my feet, on top of the covers. Her gentle purring lulled me to sleep.





## *Chapter 18*

A motor was running somewhere and something massaged my shoulder. Slowly, I swam up through the thick fog of sleep and opened one eye. Penny sat on my chest, gently kneading my shoulder.

“For goodness sake!” I scolded, sitting upright. “What time is it?”

Light shining through the bedroom curtains told me it was long past daylight. I threw back the quilts, swung my feet to the floor, and padded to the window. A world gently mounded in white shone in the morning sun. Evidently, I had overslept.

Slipping my arms into my housecoat and my feet into my fuzzy slippers, I stumbled toward the stairs. Several cups of hot coffee would be necessary to clear the cobwebs from my mind this morning.

While the coffee pot was doing its magician’s act of changing black grounds into aromatic brew, I buttered two pieces of bread, slid them into the toaster, and poured a glass of grapefruit juice. Judging from his well-stocked refrigerator, my uncle had tried to think of anything that I might like and I was grateful.

After I replenished Penny’s food and water dishes, I sat down at the kitchen table with my toast, juice and coffee. Yesterday’s incredible events rushed back at me. What should I do? Surely Sherman Lloyd’s claim was false. Yes, he gave me copies of the deed and the will but something must be wrong somewhere. Uncle Javin’s will was strange,

but the one I read yesterday was completely bizarre. Someone more knowledgeable than I would need to look over those old documents—someone like Ron Murray. Before I took them to Ron, however, I wanted some input from the two people in town I most trusted, the other two members of the Musketeers. After I ate and showered, I would give Pat and Jackie a call, hoping they wouldn't mind battling through the snow to my house. Today I needed to verbalize these latest events and get their honest input.

At ten o'clock, the three of us, Jackie, Pat, and I sat in my sunroom, coffee cups in hand, the papers Sherman Lloyd left with me on the table. Worry shone from Jackie's brown eyes.

"You will take those documents to Ron right away, won't you, Ned?" she asked.

"Certainly I will. Of course, they are copies. Mr. Lloyd wouldn't trust the originals out of his hands. There must be something wrong somewhere, though. Grangers have lived in this house far longer than the Lloyds or Reillys.

"And, I haven't told you yet about the ring," I added.

"Ring?" Jackie's ears perked up.

"What ring?" Pat asked.

So, I pulled that ring I had found in the utility room out of my pocket and put it on the table, on top of the deed and will.

"How pretty!" Jackie said.

Pat leaned forward and picked it up. Turning it round and round, she eyed it thoughtfully. "You said there was some sort of engraving inside?"

"Yes, but it's almost all worn away. Take a look," I invited.

Both Pat and Jackie tried to decipher the initials but neither of them could agree on the letters.

Reaching into my sweater, I pulled out the gold chain that had hung around my neck for five years.

"These are Sloan's and my wedding bands," I told them. "I'm going to add this ring onto the chain. That way, I'll have it with me, if I should find out whose it is."

Jackie nodded. "Good idea. You won't lose it that way."

Pat ran her finger around the rim of her cup. "Have you seen that ghost any more, Ned?"

"I don't think it was a ghost, Pat. I think when we die, our spirit goes either up or down. I don't believe it stays here on this earth," I said.

She stared out of the window. "Well, I don't know. Some things just can't be explained."

"Did you find quite a bit of information at the library yesterday?" Jackie asked.

"Yes, I did," I answered and told them about the articles on microfiche.

I had emptied the pot of coffee into a carafe and set it on the table. Picking it up, I re-filled our cups. "I just can't get away from the last thing Uncle Javin said to me."

"Are you talking about his instructions in the will?" Jackie asked.

"No," I said. "His last words were not to trust somebody, I don't know who. He didn't have time to tell me. Then he said to find something, that it was important."

Pat picked up her cup. "Maybe it was the ring he wanted you to find."

I nodded. "Maybe."

"In case it was something else, have you looked through all the house, and have you searched the carriage house?" Jackie asked.

"I haven't searched every nook and cranny," I answered, "and, no, I haven't searched the carriage house. It's kind of hard to search for something when I have no idea what it is. I did find an old ledger and a diary upstairs. I think it had been hidden away in the attic for years. Do you all feel up to walking out to the carriage house with me?"

Pat shivered. "Didn't you say that's where the ghost disappeared the night someone hit your door?"

"Yes, it looked as if the figure went in there. I couldn't be sure. It just disappeared and if it didn't go into the carriage house, it simply vanished into thin air."

"Well, I don't know . . ." Pat began as Jackie and I got up to pull on boots and coats.

"Oh, come on. Don't be a baby," Jackie said as Pat showed no inclination to join us.

Reluctantly, my friend got into her coat and boots. We went out the door and across the yard to the dilapidated building.

Dead weeds and tall grasses weighted down with snow and ice tangled together around the building. The wide front door hung from its hinges.

"This old place could sure use a facelift," I said. "That is, if I get to stay here, if Sherman Lloyd doesn't take over."

Jackie lifted her chin in a defiant gesture I remembered from the past. "We won't let him. The will that he had was ridiculous and I'm sure it was fraudulent. This is your home now, Ned. Come on, let's explore the carriage house."

I followed her through the door and stood staring at the clutter of boards, limbs, and buckets, all under a light sifting of snow. The glass was gone from two windows and wind moaned through. Stairs that I wasn't eager to climb led to a shadowy loft.

"Maybe, with a lot of work, I could fix this up," I mused. "The upstairs probably looks as bad as this does but wouldn't it be neat to make it into a small apartment? What do you think, Pat?"

I turned around but Pat was not behind me. Instead, she stood outside the building, arms hugging herself, her eyes round and scared.

"I'm not going in there," she said, her teeth chattering. "I've got a bad feeling about this place. There's something evil here, Ned."

Her evident fright took the spirit of adventure completely out of the day. I agreed—the deserted building certainly didn't look cheerful or inviting.

"Come on, Jackie," I said, "Pat has convinced me."

"Me too," Jackie muttered. We scooted out of the carriage house a lot faster than we had gone in.

"Let's go get your documents that Mr. Lloyd left," Jackie said. "I'll take them to Ron and save you the trip, Ned."

That sounded good to me. We three explorers beat a hasty retreat but I determined that later I would come back. If the carriage house held a secret that might point me in the direction of Uncle Javin's murderer, I was determined to find it.



## Chapter 19

“Yep, it’s a shame that somebody damaged this here fine old wood. Know who did it?”

I perched on the porch railing the day after Pat and Jackie’s visit, watching Dink Renfroe as he worked to fill in holes and replace the brass knocker on my front door. Pat had given me the phone number of this handyman. He seemed to be doing a great job.

“No,” I said. “It was probably just someone bent on vandalism. Nothing like that has happened since.” Spreading any more rumors about Granger Mansion seemed unwise. Dink didn’t need to know about the filmy figure nor my thought that somebody was trying to scare me away.

“In all the years Javin Granger was in prison and the house was empty, I never knew of anybody harming it,” Dink said, grunting with the effort of boring a new hole for a screw.

“Want me to hold the knocker?” I asked, and when he shook his head, I continued. “It seems almost miraculous that the house just sat here, unharmed. Not even any peeling paint.”

My handyman grinned. “With all due credit to the Lord, there wasn’t a whole lot about it that was miraculous. I understand that Javin’s parents left a sum of money to the local historical society for the maintenance of the house. They knew that it would go downhill while

Javin was in prison and they wanted him to have a place to come, if he outlived his sentence. My wife is a member of the historical society and she loves this old place. Besides that, there was a few of us around town that made a point of stopping by, sort of unexpected-like, to make sure that nothing was going on. There's a dusk to dawn light back there by the well. Didn't you see it?"

I turned to look. Sure enough, in the tangle of trees around the well, a tall pole jutted with a large lamp globe at the top of it.

"The bulb must have burned out," I said. "Maybe my uncle prayed for angels to protect this place."

"Could be. He was right religious. Call the electric company. They'll come out and give you another bulb. What with ol' Javin's murder and this here vandalism, I think you need a light over here. Must get pretty dark, with all these trees around."

"I'll do that right away," I agreed. "And, you're right, it does get dark when there's no moon."

"We had a full moon the other night," Dink said. "Did you notice?"

Oh yes, I had noticed.

Without waiting for my answer, he continued, "Not that I'm superstitious or nothin' like that, but, well, the full moon sure affects some people sometimes. You know? There's an old story that on the night the Decker man died, the moon was as bright as day, and if I'm not mistaken, there was a full moon the night Javin Granger died too. Is that right?"

So there was a superstition about the moon and Granger mansion? I said, "I hadn't thought of it." Uncle Javin died on Monday, December 1. The noise of somebody hitting the door and the wispy figure by the carriage house happened a couple of nights later. I didn't know if the moon was full on Monday because the sky had been covered with snow clouds, but it was certainly bright enough a couple of nights later to see all around the yard including that ghostly figure.

Seeing me shiver, Dink scowled. "You can go on in. I'm about finished and looks like you're gettin' cold."

"I'm fine," I answered, pulling my coat closer. This man was a gold mine of information. I wasn't about to leave the porch as long as he wanted to talk.

"I knew ol' Javin Granger," Dink continued. "Knew him before he went to the pen too. I couldn't figure how he would have killed that Decker man on purpose. He said it was an accident and I believed him. It was all that gossip that caused the jury to be so hard on him. Never believed none of it, myself. No, sir!"

Mr. Renfroe didn't need any input from me. He was a man who liked to talk. All he needed was a listener, so I listened.

"And now, Javin Granger himself turned up dead here." He shook his head. "Don't that beat all, how sometimes one bad thing causes another? I heard my grandpa talkin' about that young woman who lived here, maybe a hundred or so years ago. Story was she ran off with some preacher. All anybody knew was, she just disappeared. Grandpa said that some folks didn't believe that."

"I've never heard that story," I told him. Would that have been Constance Reilly? Of course, I probably wouldn't have heard anything about it. If Dad and Mom knew that particular bit of gossip, they wouldn't have shared the information with a child.

I cleared my throat. "Folks like to talk. Surely her disappearance was investigated at the time, and I don't see how Eldon Decker's death forty years ago could be related to my uncle's," I said.

Renfroe put his tools back into a zippered bag and faced me. "Don't you now? Think about it. Maybe somebody decided that your uncle got off too easy."

"Too easy?" I frowned. "He wasted forty years locked away from people who knew and loved him. I hardly think that could be classified as easy."

My handyman squinted off into the trees and rearranged a wad of tobacco in his mouth. "Well, now, to you and me, that sounds pretty bad, pretty rough, but there are others who put gettin' even at the top of their list of reasons to wake up every mornin'."

He stood still, as if he were listening for something or was lost in thought. A puff of wind blew through the porch. The day took on a grim chill.

“Do you mean the Decker men? Do you think they might have killed Uncle Javin?” I asked.

“Now, I ain’t accusin’ nobody of nothin’. I’m just sayin’ Moe and Verm Decker are about as mean as they come. I wouldn’t put anything past them.”

“And you,” he said, “You be careful now. A young gal like you livin’ out here all alone is not very sensible, if you ask me. I’ll send you a bill for that there knocker.” He waved and started down the steps.

Watching him go, I digested his conversation. He was a talkative man and calling me a “young gal” almost made up for a bad case of jitters his information gave me. The Decker brothers—I got the same impression as Dink. Mean and vengeful. If those men were responsible for my uncle’s death, I was determined to find out. I’d ask directions on how to reach their house. It seemed a trip to the Decker homestead was in my immediate future.





## *Chapter 20*

Maybe Cade Morris and Gerald Mills were right—I did need a dog, preferably an Irish wolfhound. Someone riding with me as I drove out of Ednalee into the wilds of the countryside would have been comforting. Pat or Jackie might have been willing to come with me on my pursuit of the dreaded Deckers but I did not want to put my friends into a prickly situation, and I had a niggling suspicion they would not have approved of my plan. They would have tried to talk me out of going, as would Cade. So, after Dink Renfroe left, I took action. The service station attendant at the corner of Lee and Jones Streets gave me directions on how to reach the Decker homestead, and, with my cell phone fully charged and ready, I set off in search of Moe and Vermouth. Simply engaging in a civilized conversation surely couldn't be considered confrontational. It was amazing what could be learned in a polite chitchat.

The man at the service station, Tub Ginnis, said that the Decker brothers lived on the same forty acres, in houses that were nearly side by side. Vermouth was married but Moe remained a bachelor. I would try talking to one brother at a time.

Thankfully, the sun shone and the temperature was above freezing. Snow lay mounded under trees but it was melting fast. The sky, arching above stark hills gray with leafless trees, shone an azure blue. Gradually,

Ednalee was awakening childhood memories of open spaces, the fragrance of fresh air, and the quiet of country living. It was beginning to feel a little more like home.

After I turned off a paved county road, my Escape bounced along a deeply rutted lane. The limbs of scrub oak and persimmon trees scraped the sides of my car. I only hoped scratches did not show up in its shiny finish.

At last, a small, frame house appeared ahead of me. I rounded a curve, and saw another house. Both were painted green and both sat in a cleared area devoid of trees or any kind of shrubs. An old truck that once had been white sat close to the house. I glanced down at my notebook with the scribbled directions. This must be the Decker compound, and now that I was here, my heart pounded and my hands gripping the steering wheel were slippery with sweat.

The phrase, “bearding a lion in his den” came to mind. But this was silly, I told myself. All I wanted to do was have a polite conversation and guide the topic around to the night my uncle died. Maybe either Moe or Vermouth would slip and tell me where they actually were on December 1. Cade said a neighbor swore the brothers were helping him track down a runaway steer at that time. Would one of the brothers say something that would destroy their alibi?

I got out of my car. The place looked deserted, but as I approached the nearer house, a tall, bony dog appeared around the corner. It growled. I stopped. The animal didn’t look in the least friendly. It bared its teeth, snarled and started toward me.

Everything I had ever read about unfriendly dogs said I should not run. A dog has four legs; I have only two. And I shouldn’t stare at the animal; that would make him nervous. I held my empty right hand out to him, hoping he wouldn’t notice it was shaking, and spoke softly, keeping him in my peripheral vision as I gazed at the house.

“Hi there, fellow. Is your owner home?”

His answer was a rumble deep in his throat. The nerves at the base of my skull bunched together. Evidently being kind was not working.

The only weapon I had was my purse. Slowly, I eased out my cell phone. If worse came to worse, I would hit the button which dialed 9-1-1.

Just as the dog prepared to lunge and I prepared to scream, the door of the house opened. A tall woman, slim to the point of emaciation appeared. Her tired eyes swept me from head to feet and she spoke to the dog, "Down, Ulysses!"

Ulysses sank to the ground, the growl dying to a low muttering.

"Thanks," I called, drawing a shaky breath. "He's not very friendly, is he?"

"Don't take to strangers. Who are you, and what do you want?"

Mrs. Decker (or so I assumed) wasn't a bit friendlier than her husband and brother-in-law. Who were these people with names like Moe and Vermouth and a dog named Ulysses?

My face felt stiff when I tried to smile. "I'm Nettie McNeil, Ma'am. I wonder if I could come in and talk for a bit?"

Rough hands pushed the woman aside and a man stood in the doorway.

"You're old Javin's niece, ain't you? The one I saw at the funeral. I don't have nothin' to say to you. You shouldn't a come out here." His voice chilled me more than the wind ruffling Ulysses' fur.

"Um, Mr. Vermouth, is it? I've just moved back to Ednalee and I'm trying to talk to people who used to know my Uncle Javin, people who might know some reason that he was shot."

"Yep, I'm Vermouth Decker and I'm here to tell you that we Deckers don't hold with none of the Granger kin. I gave you a fair warning, now I'm tellin' you plainly. Git on out of here and go back to where you come from. Git!"

Never, in all my life, had anyone spoken to me with such venom. Pure hatred blazed from Vermouth Decker's eyes and the dog's hackles rose.

Slowly, I backed up, one step at a time. Ulysses stood, white fangs bared. Why didn't Vermouth call off his dog? I had visions of lying at the Decker doorway, chewed full of holes and lifeless.

Keeping my eye on the menacing animal, I inched backward until I collided with the reassuring hood of my car. Sliding my hand around to the side of the Escape, I kept moving until I touched the door. Just as my fingers closed around the handle, Ulysses sprang for me. Kicking backward, I jerked the door open and scrambled into the car. Safely inside, I leaned my head on the steering wheel and gasped for air. Vermouth stood in the doorway, laughing.

Anger began deep in my stomach and worked its way to my throat, nearly choking me. How dare that evil man do nothing to stop his dog from attacking me? How dare he stand there and laugh while I escaped what could have been a severe mauling? I remembered Martha saying if anybody needed killing, it was Eldon Decker. Did evil run in the Decker family? If Eldon had been anything like his brothers, he must have made life miserable for poor Anne.

Putting my purse on the seat, I started my car. Should I call Cade right now and stay here until he arrived? I looked in my purse for my cell phone. Gone! Frantically, I searched the pockets of my coat, then I saw it lying on the ground, halfway between my car and Vermouth's house. Would it do any good to ask him to give it to me? I knew the answer to that and there was no way I would risk leaving the safety of my vehicle to retrieve the phone. I could still hear Ulysses snarling and snapping, doubtless trying to find a way to chew a hole in metal.

Sighing, I backed my Ford down the road. So much for my attempt to find a discrepancy in the Deckers' alibi on the day Uncle Javin died. If I never saw Vermouth Decker again, it would be too soon.



## *Chapter 21*

My welcoming committee of one small cat waited at the door as I went into the shelter of my uncle's house. The parlor, with its bay windows, seemed to enclose me like a warm embrace after a bone-chilling day.

"Do you want a fire in the fireplace, Penny?" I asked, shedding my coat and hurrying through the parlor into the dining room. A few coals left in the grate needed only a bit of coaxing with a handful of kindling to blaze. Holding my hands out toward the warmth, I was grateful once again for my uncle's generosity.

Still feeling numb from my encounter with Vermouth Decker and his dog, I went into the kitchen, pulled a pan out of the cabinet, added a cup of milk, mixed cocoa and sugar together, and waited for my nightcap of hot chocolate to heat. I needed something more relaxing than coffee. A hot drink with sugar, I had heard, was good for a person suffering from shock, and I definitely felt I was suffering.

Penny sat demurely, like a gentle little lady, tail curved around her feet while she watched me mix the hot chocolate.

"You still have Krunchies in your bowl, but would you like to share a cup of milk with me?" I asked.

I found a bowl in the cabinet, poured some milk into it and set it in front of her.

Trying to block the memory of the frightening episode at the Decker home from my mind, I carried my warm cup of comfort back to the dining room and sat down on the sofa. Penny finished her milk and came in to sit beside me.

The warmth of the fire and hot chocolate, along with Penny's hypnotic purring, relaxed me. My mind fuzzy with sleep, I was dozing off when the newly-installed door knocker sounded.

I jumped, every nerve on edge. Had Vermouth Decker followed me, determined to kill me as he had Uncle Javin? Did he have Ulysses with him? I flipped on the porch light, crept to the window and peered out.

In the glow of the light, a tall figure in a long, black coat shivered in the wind. For one brief instant, the term, "the angel of death" crossed my mind, then I shrugged that morbid thought aside, stepped to the door, and cracked it open.

The woman who had been at Vermouth's house stood before me. Before I could say a word, she thrust my cell phone through the opening and into my hand.

"You dropped this," she said.

She didn't threaten nor did she apologize for the episode earlier. In fact, her action was such a reversal of her previous rudeness, that I grasped the phone with one hand and held onto the door facing with the other, not knowing what to expect next. "Well, thanks," I muttered. "Come in out of the cold, Mrs. Decker."

She shook her head. "No. No, I can't come in. Vermouth and Moe are playing cards at Moe's house and I slipped out. I can't be gone long or he might miss me."

Had she walked through the woods into Ednalee? Had she driven a car? I didn't see a vehicle in my driveway. Plainly, this woman was afraid of Vermouth. I didn't blame her. I would be frightened to death. Pity brought tears to my eyes.

"I'm sure you are freezing," I said. "Please come in for just a moment and get warm. Surely, your husband doesn't keep tabs on you every minute."

Her mouth twisted in an attempt to smile. "Oh yes. Yes, he does that and more."

She turned to go and I reached out to touch her arm. The thought flashed through my mind that perhaps I could find out more by talking to Vermouth's wife. "I appreciate your returning the phone. Are you sure you can't come in, Mrs. . . .um . . ."

"It's Annabelle and no. I can't." Without another word, Annabelle Decker disappeared into the night, leaving me gazing after her and wondering just what terrors she had to endure in her relationship with a vicious man.

Closing the door, I looked down at my phone. What a strange family were the Deckers. With names like Vermouth, Moe, and Ulysses, I would have expected this gaunt, black-garbed woman to be named Medusa. But no, her name was the lyrical "Annabelle." If circumstances were different, would Annabelle and I become friends? Was there any way I could help her out of her obvious plight?

"This has been quite the day," I said to Penny. The little cat rubbed against my ankles and meowed in agreement.

It was amazing how I depended on my cell phone. Without it, I felt vulnerable but Annabelle had remedied that situation, at the risk of her husband's displeasure. She had a lot of courage, maybe more than I. But, come tomorrow, when I was able to think more clearly, I would figure out my next move. I needed to go see Ron Murray about the validity of Jefferson Reilly's will. Should I tell Cade about my near escape from Ulysses? Would he be angry that I was meddling in a police matter? If I told him about finding the ring, he might confiscate it as some sort of evidence. An adage I had heard from my mother many times came to mind, "Least said, soonest mended." It might pay just to keep my mouth shut and my eyes and ears open.



## *Chapter 22*

“I had forgotten that Oklahoma gets so much snow this early in the winter,” I said to Ron Murray as I settled into a leather chair in his office.

He glanced out his office window and shook his head. “Yeah. This is unusual. Maybe we’ll have a nice warm spell soon to make up for it.”

Curling my cold hands around the cup of coffee he handed me, I leaned toward his desk. “You said on the phone that you wanted to talk about that will Sherman Lloyd left,” I prompted.

The hot coffee did nothing to dispel the cold knot of fear in my stomach. Was Ron going to tell me I would have to vacate Uncle Javin’s house, that it actually did belong to Mr. Lloyd, as he claimed?

Ron glanced at the papers on his desk then looked up at me. “Jackie told me about your visit from the younger version of Sherman Lloyd when she brought these copies home. It must have been a shock. Didn’t it seem odd to you that he would just appear abruptly like that and claim your house?”

“Well, sure,” I said. “He certainly startled me and did nothing to make the day any cheerier.”

“Ned, this Jefferson Reilly, the man whose will is here on my desk, was the builder of the house you’re living in. He built the house way back in the last part of the nineteenth century and he wrote the will before statehood. Ednalee wasn’t much then besides a store, a post office, a house or two and lots of farm land. In fact, your place, the



Granger house and its two acres, used to be a thriving farm of maybe 300 acres or so. Mr. Reilly was a wealthy man.”

I nodded. “Judging from an old ledger of his, he had cattle, chickens, horses, and a lot of pasture. It’ll be interesting to read it when I have time.”

Ron chuckled. “Do you mean when you can catch a breath between searching for your uncle’s murderer and adjusting to being an heiress?”

Ron didn’t seem upset about the will. Hopefully, this was a positive sign. Deciding that confession might be good for the soul, especially if my confidant was my lawyer, I said, “Yes, and there’s something else, Ron. I guess I should tell you and probably should mention it to Cade.” And I proceeded to tell him about my run-in with Ulysses and Vermouth Decker.

Ron’s eyes grew stern. “Ned, I’m talking to you as I would to my own sister. Leave those Deckers alone. They are mean and they are ruthless. Let Cade handle it. Do you hear?”

Drawing a deep breath, I said, “I hear you, Ron.”

“Anyway, back to this goofy will of Mr. Reilly’s . . .”

“Goofy?”

“From what little I know of that old man, not to speak evil of the dead, he was a controlling, stern dictator. He wanted to make sure that his wishes were carried out, even if he wasn’t around to oversee things. My grandpa knew his family. Grandpa said his meanness was the reason his daughter Constance did what she did.”

Ron’s face got red and his eyebrows drew down. Jefferson Reilly had died a long time ago but Ron spoke as if he were still around, manipulating folks.

“What exactly did Constance do?”

“She married the first Sherman Lloyd, Grandpa said, only because he was her father’s choice, not because she loved him. Then, one day, she up and disappeared, leaving her husband and a young son behind. Word was that she ran off with a traveling preacher, one of those circuit riders who came around.”

“And you don’t think Constance would have done that?” I asked.

Ron’s mouth was a straight, grim line. He shook his head. “I know she wouldn’t have. You see, Constance was my grandfather’s cousin.

Grandpa said there wasn't a sweeter person around than Constance Reilly Lloyd."

I sipped my coffee, digesting this bit of news. "So, if Constance didn't run off, what happened to her? I understand she disappeared one day."

Ron's direct gaze bored into my eyes. "I think either Jefferson Reilly or the first Sherman Lloyd, Reilly's son-in-law, killed her and buried her somewhere on your property."

Grasping my cup with both hands to keep from sloshing coffee, I stared at my lawyer. "Are you serious?"

He nodded. He seemed to be looking past me, perhaps gazing into the past.

"But, Ron, there were laws even back then. Surely someone would have known. Someone would have found her body. How about that person she was supposed to have run off with? Did anyone talk to him?"

"Nobody ever found him either," Ron said. "Either somebody killed him or paid him off."

Seized with a sudden shudder, I set my cup on Ron's desk and hugged my arms around myself. "Maybe Cade was right," I said. "Maybe the Granger place is bad luck."

"Thing of it is, Ned, it is *your* place and I'm not going to let Sherman Lloyd take it away from you."

Getting back to the reason for my visit, I asked, "So Mr. Reilly's will is invalid?"

Ron picked up the copy, flicked it with his forefinger, and leaned back in his chair.

"The minute Mr. Reilly's son-in-law, the first Sherman Lloyd took the house and acreage by inheritance, it became fully his, to do with as he wished. Evidently, he wished to sell it to your grandparents, which he did, no strings attached. When they died, they willed the house to your uncle Javin Granger. Old Jefferson can't reach a bony hand out of the grave and rearrange life in present-day Ednalee." Ron chuckled and muttered, "As much as he might like to."

Drawing a deep breath, I felt my muscles relax. "So, Sherman Lloyd has no claim to it?"

“None whatever.”

“But why on earth would he have thrust the will and deed in my face? Why, after all these years, would he think he could get his hands on it?”

Ron carefully creased the copies of will and deed and slid them into a manila folder. “Your uncle’s death seems to have spurred a number of happenings,” he said. “There’s an old legend about silver on the place, but to my way of thinking, that’s all it is—just a folktale. I don’t even know whether the silver is supposed to be money or silver ore and I don’t think that’s the issue here. What is at issue is the house and two acres. I’m sure Mr. Lloyd knew that he could not intimidate Javin but he thought he’d give it a try with you.”

“But why would he want it? Sure, it is valuable but, my goodness! Sherman Lloyd was driving a high-priced SUV and if I’m any judge of clothes, his tastes are on the expensive side. I’m sure he has enough money.”

Ron Murray’s laugh held not one bit of mirth. “And how much money is enough? I’ve done some checking on your visitor, Ned. He is a land developer from Oklahoma City and he’d like to turn your place into a nice little area of small plots and cookie cutter houses. Mr. Sherman Lloyd is using subterfuge to gain what he wants. And he wants Granger’s Mansion.”



## *Chapter 23*

“This is far too much,” I protested, gazing at the boxes stacked in my living room.

“Nonsense, Ned,” Jackie said, as she opened a box and pulled out a garland of red ribbons.

Delving into a separate box, Pat lifted a string of outdoor lights. “This will work perfectly for the porch railing,” she said. “What do you think, Jackie?”

Jackie cocked her head, her pointer finger tapping her chin. “Yes, that will do fine and we’ll put these big red bows in between the lights.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Uncle Javin has been gone only two weeks and . . .”

Pat interrupted, “Now, Ned! It’s nearly Christmas. True, you have had a lot of grief, but do you think your uncle would want you to sit around feeling sad or do you think he would want you to be happy with his house and fix it up to look festive?”

Gazing at the boxes of bright decorations, I felt myself relenting. “Well, maybe just a bit of decoration,” I said.

Jackie put her arm around my shoulder. “That’s the spirit. When did the Three Musketeers ever sit around feeling gloomy?”

Pat held up a box of candles. “Oh, Jackie, look at these! Won’t they be perfect for the mantel?”

“Okay,” I decided, “but no Christmas tree. Agreed?”

The two conspirators grinned. “Agreed!” they echoed.

“I’m going to put on a pot of coffee,” I called, heading for the kitchen. “Martha brought over a plate of cookies last night. We can have those too.”

“Martha again?” Jackie asked. “Maybe we should include her and call our group the Four Musketeers.”

By noon, huge red bows and a string of Christmas lights festooned the porch railing of Granger mansion. Inside, red and silver ribbon twined around greenery, brightening the stairway. A green wreath hung above the fireplace, and silver candles in graduated sizes marched across the mantel.

A manger scene sat on my bedside table upstairs and scented candles decorated the bathroom.

Jackie, Pat, and I sat in the bright sunroom, munching cookies and sipping coffee while we surveyed our handiwork. With snow falling outside, Christmas embellishments emphasizing the beauty of my Victorian house, the warmth of the fireplace, and the presence of Pat and Jackie, I felt blessed and at peace.

Gazing at my festive-looking house, I said, “Thanks, you two. What a neat thing to do and all this color does make me feel more cheerful.”

“Of course it does,” said Jackie. “What did you find out from Ron about that old will?”

I told my two friends about Ron’s decision and about Annabelle Decker’s visit two nights ago.

Pat shook her head. “Ned, why don’t you move in with Gerald and me? I think it is dangerous for you to be here all by yourself.”

Trying to lighten the mood, I scooped up Penny and settled her on my lap. “I’m not alone, Pat. Penny is pretty good company.”

“I can’t see that she would do much to stop an intruder,” Jackie said. “I worry about you too, Ned.”

“Actually, I’m beginning to feel more at home here, in spite of all the bad things that have happened.” I paused to finish off my cookie.

“Thanks for inviting me to your church again, Pat. I really enjoy Pastor Williams’ sermons. He seems to be a good, honest man.”

Pat nodded. “He does love the Lord and he has a compassion for others, which is rare. I hope you make Rose Chapel your church, Ned.”

“Maybe that’s what Pastor Williams wants to talk to me about,” I said, refilling all three cups with fresh coffee from the carafe. “He told me after the service yesterday that he would like for me to stop by his office tomorrow.”

Jackie reached across the table and patted my hand. “I’m glad that you are settling in, Ned. You’ve had nothing but trouble since you got here and even the weather has been bad. Maybe things will take a turn for the better. Maybe you should tell Gabe Williams about all the things you’ve learned, and all the trauma you’ve endured. As much as I like having you here, your safety is what’s important. Maybe Pat’s pastor can give you some advice on what you should do.”

“Yes, maybe,” I agreed. “However, I don’t intend to be run off from the home Uncle Javin left me.”

I looked forward to my meeting with Pastor Williams. In his will, Uncle Javin said Mr. Williams had hinted at some things and my uncle didn’t know what to make of them. At the funeral, Pat’s pastor had mentioned there was something I should know. My curiosity aroused, I could hardly wait for the next day.



## *Chapter 24*

The weatherman had predicted a beautiful Tuesday and the morning proved him right. Sun shone on snowbanks, sparkling with crystallized jewels. The temperature climbed above freezing and melting snow dripped from trees and the eaves of Rose Chapel's parsonage.

Pastor Williams' small house sat only a few yards from the church. It looked warm and snug, nestled between two large pine trees. When I phoned Gabe Williams this morning to ask if our appointment was still on, he sounded cheerful and said he looked forward to talking with me. He said he had a few confessions to make, several things that he wanted to set right and he would have the coffee pot on.

"I thought confession was for your parishioners," I joked. "Aren't you supposed to be the person who listens to all our sins?"

Somehow, he didn't think that was funny. "I think you've got us mixed up with a different church, Miss Nettie," he said.

Sliding out of my SUV, I glanced around. Buildings and grounds looked well cared for. The front door of the parsonage was ajar. This seemed a welcoming gesture as the pastor was expecting me.

Knocking on the door, I peered in past the screen. "Pastor Williams!" I called. "It's Nettie McNeil."

Thirty seconds later, I knocked again. No one came to the door nor called a welcome.

I cracked open the screen door and said, "Are you there, Mr. Williams? Shall I come in?"

Complete silence met me as I stepped inside the small house. The living room was furnished with old but well cared for furniture. The floor was hardwood with a few bright rugs scattered across it.

Unease pricked at the nerves between my shoulder blades. My heart beat faster. Another time when I had entered an empty house and found a dying man on the floor jabbed my memory. I had a curious feeling of déjà vu as I walked quickly from the living room into the kitchen.

Pastor Williams sat at his dining table, an empty cup in front of him. His head rested on his arms which were crossed on the table. Deciding he must have dozed off while waiting, I hurried toward him and touched his face.

Jerking my hand away, I think I may have screamed. Afterward, I couldn't remember if I did or not. The pastor's face was cold, his hands still. Frantically, I felt for a pulse. There was none. My heart hammering against my ribs, I stood frozen to the floor. How could this be happening again? I had talked to Gabe Williams only a short time before. He had been expecting me. Had he suffered a heart attack? Had he felt faint and sat down at the table until he felt better? That must be the answer. He had sipped a cup of coffee, thinking it would help. I saw the coffee maker sitting on the counter top. Its red light shone, indicating it had finished brewing. The carafe was nearly full.

I stared down at the minister of Rose Chapel. I would never know what he wanted to tell me. Gabe Williams would never speak to me or anyone else again.

I'm not sure how I had the presence of mind to dial Cade but I did, then I stumbled out to my car to wait for the police and ambulance to arrive.

My first coherent thought was for Pat. My poor friend, to suffer the death of her pastor. She would be devastated. And Gerald, who sometimes filled in at the pulpit when Gabe Williams was absent. I would have to go to her, but I couldn't until I had talked to Cade. Since



I was the one who had found Pastor Williams, the police would want my statement. Yet again. Who knew how long that would take?

Pulling my cell phone from my purse, I phoned Jackie and filled her in on what had happened.

"Oh, no!" she said. "Not Reverend Williams!"

"I'm afraid so. It must have been his heart. He was getting up in years although I'm sure he wasn't as old as Uncle Javin. I'm concerned about Pat. Could you go sit with her, maybe tell her as gently as you can?"

"Of course," Jackie said. "And, how about you, Ned? Are you okay? I can't believe you found another body! This is just too much."

Feeling a headache begin in the area of my right temple, I slumped in the car seat. All the adrenalin deserted my body, leaving me tired and sad. "I can't believe it either, Jackie," I said. "Cade's car is barreling up the street. Talk to you later."

Cade and Gerald spilled out of the police cruiser and strode toward my Escape. I opened my car door and stood facing them.

Looking into Cade's eyes, I felt a rush of relief. Another tragedy had taken place, but it was Cade's responsibility and this capable man would handle it.

"Tell me what happened, Ned," he said quietly.

"It's Pastor Williams, Cade. He's dead. I phoned him earlier to ask if he was ready for my visit because he said he wanted to talk to me. When I got here, the house was unlocked so I walked in. He was there at the kitchen table, his head on the table and an empty cup in front of him, as if he had felt ill, thought coffee would help, and died of a heart attack or something."

Gerald Mills, who had stopped beside Cade, paled and his eyes glistened with tears. "Are you sure he's dead?" he choked.

I nodded. "I'm sorry, Gerald."

Cade put an arm around my shoulders. "You look like you're going to fall over, Ned, but I'm going to ask you to go back inside with us, tell us exactly what you saw, whether you heard anything, and whether you touched anything."

Obediently, I walked in front of the two men. “I didn’t touch anything except Pastor Williams’ face,” I said. “I thought he might be alive but he wasn’t. He was cold and so still.” I shuddered.

The sunshine on my back did nothing to melt the knot of ice in my stomach. Somewhere in one of the pines, a redbird sang his song of cheer. Steeling myself against what waited for us in the kitchen, I led the way into the parsonage of Rose Chapel.



## *Chapter 25*

I parked behind Jackie's gray truck already sitting outside of Pat's house. Hurrying to the door, I knocked and heard Jackie call, "Come in."

Pat met me in the hall, eyes red from crying. "Oh, Ned," she said, "I can't believe that my pastor is gone."

My tears mingled with hers as we held each other. Jackie came in from the kitchen.

"Ned, I'm glad you're here," she said. Her firm voice steadied my shaky nerves. Jackie always knew the right touch, the right tone for every occasion.

"I've made coffee," she said. "Come on into the kitchen."

As we sat down, Pat said, "Ned, I'm sorry to be such a baby. You are the one who found him. Are you all right? What a shock that must have been!"

I drew a deep breath. "I'm okay now. I admit I was pretty shaken. I had just spoken to Pastor Williams an hour before I found him. I assume he had a heart attack or a stroke. Nothing else could be so sudden."

Melting snow dripped from the eaves and splashed into puddles. The hot, strong coffee along with the comfort of being with Pat and Jackie returned me to a sense of normalcy. I could think more clearly about what I saw in Pastor Williams' house.

“Rose Chapel won’t be the same,” Pat mourned. “I don’t know what our church will do.”

“You’ll miss him but you will carry on,” Jackie told her. “That’s what Gabe Williams would want you to do.”

We were all three still sitting at Pat’s table when Gerald came home. He hugged his mom, poured another cup of coffee, and sat down across from us.

Looking at his mother, he shook his head. “I guess I’m sort of in shock. This seems unreal.”

“Of course,” Pat said. “Pastor Gabe was your friend and mentor. You two were close.”

Gerald sighed and picked up his cup. “Doc Kelly came. Cade wouldn’t let anybody move Mr. Gabe until the doc checked him over.”

“Oh,” Jackie said. “That’s unusual, isn’t it? Doesn’t the coroner usually look in on the deceased at the hospital?”

“Cade said he didn’t feel quite right about the way things looked,” Gerald said. “Something about a coffee cup and the amount of coffee in the pot. I didn’t really understand and I guess I wasn’t thinking straight enough to ask him to explain.”

“How odd,” I said. “I noticed that the pot was nearly full but I sure didn’t measure it. What would be the purpose? Doesn’t Cade think Pastor Williams died a natural death?”

Gerald shrugged. “Cade said he just didn’t want to take any chances.”

Jackie blotted up a coffee drip with her napkin. “Actually, in a sudden and unexpected death, the police always check thoroughly. There’ll probably be an autopsy, too.”

Pat’s hand flew to her mouth. “An autopsy?”

Jackie nodded.

“It’ll just be a formality, Mom,” Gerald said.

Pushing my chair from the table, I said, “I suppose I’d better go. Are you going to be all right, Pat?”

Pat clasped my hand and smiled. “I’ll be fine. I have Gerald and Jackie. The question is, will you be all right?”

I stood and smiled at the three people who seemed to have become my family. "Oh, yes. I've always felt the Lord is with me and I'm seldom lonely, just sad about Uncle Javin and now Pastor Williams."

Pat, Jackie, and Gerald walked with me to the door. "You know," Pat said, "it's almost as if Ednalee has been sleeping for forty years and woke up in a bad mood."

"Like Rip Van Winkle," Jackie said, "Only, I don't think he was in a bad mood when he woke up, just bewildered."

I nodded. "Bewildered is how I feel."

"Who's Rip Van Winkle?" Gerald asked.



## *Chapter 26*

By the time I turned into my driveway, the sun had disappeared behind gray, scudding clouds. Wind whipped the bare limbs of trees. The new bulb in the dusk-to-dawn light flickered on, even though the hands of my watch pointed to half past one. Oklahoma's weather was as changeable as a moody person. If this had been May instead of December, I would have suspected a thunderstorm was in the offing.

The Christmas lights Jackie and Pat had strung along my porch railing welcomed me as I parked by the yard gate. With a heavy heart, I thought about the emptiness of Rose Chapel's parsonage. It would be hard for the congregation to celebrate Christmas when their pastor would not be there to lead them. Although he would be joyful in the Lord's presence, his little flock would be lonely.

Penny greeted me as she usually did, meowing and doing figure eights around my ankles.

"Oh, Penny," I told my welcoming committee of one, "this has been quite a day and it isn't even finished. I suppose I should eat something since I missed lunch. Would you like a bowl of half and half or do you have Krunchies left?"

By answer, she trotted into the kitchen, her tail ramrod straight.

Surprised that I was actually hungry after the devastating morning, I built a fire in the fireplace then made a sandwich of chicken salad

and poured a glass of tea. Sitting down at the kitchen table, I munched my sandwich while Penny, her tail curved sedately around her hindquarters, lapped up her bowl of cream.

Quiet reigned throughout the house except for the popping of the fire and Penny, finishing off her treat. Try as I might, I could not rid my mind of the image of Pastor Williams, head on his arms, looking as if he had simply fallen asleep.

A tremendous crash rattled the windows. I must have jumped six inches off my chair. My heart racing, I glanced out the window. Unbelievably, rain peppered onto the trees and dripped from the eaves.

"Penny," I said, when I could speak, "that was thunder. Can you believe it?"

But Penny had vanished, probably upstairs under my bed or under Uncle Javin's bed. I gathered up my glass and plate, carried them to the sink, and gazed out at the rain. The snow would soon melt under this onslaught. While I watched, lightning sliced across the dark clouds and another clap of thunder echoed through the heavens.

Maybe Penny had the right idea. Maybe I should hide too, shut out the world and all its horrible happenings. The best way to do this, I had always found, was to lose myself in a book. Constance Reilly's journal came to mind and there was no better day to go back a hundred years or so to a quieter, saner time.

The rain sounded louder in my room upstairs. I went next door to the unused bedroom, dug Constance's journal out of the desk, and carried it downstairs to read by the fireplace.

The date on the journal was 1910. I opened to the month of May and was immediately captured by the strength of a young girl's dreams.

*"Was there ever a lovelier month?" Constance wrote. "It seems that the whole world has fallen in love with spring. The fields are bursting with blades of corn and Father says the cotton crop will be good this year. I saw Carl Chalmers at church last night. He is such an upstanding, sincere young man. Something about him makes me want to know him better. Father has no use for itinerant preachers. He keeps pushing me*

toward Sherman Lloyd. Although Mr. Lloyd is quite handsome and a good horseman, there's something about him I don't trust."

So engrossed was I in the world of Constance Reilly that I didn't realize when Penny crept down the stairs to join me until she leapt up on my feet as I half lay on the sofa in front of the fireplace. Absent mindedly scooting over to give her room, I read on.

With each day, the attraction between Carl and Constance grew while she mentioned ever more frequently that Sherman Lloyd was allowed to come courting.

At last, the journal entries became more sporadic. Sometimes Constance let months go by without writing. Finally, she recorded the day she wed—not Carl Chalmers but Sherman Lloyd, the man who was clearly her father's choice, not hers.

Constance made one last entry in the journal, two years after she began writing. "*I'm afraid of Sherman,*" she said, evidently writing hurriedly, "*but I'm afraid to tell Father or Mother. Sherman has his eye on a political appointment and he wants our home life to appear perfect. Such a travesty! Sometimes, I have the terrible thought that Father knows and doesn't care. He would like to be the father-in-law of a powerful politician. I would leave with little Sherman but where would I go with a young child? It would help if Carl would leave town but he refuses to go. He says he wants to be near if I need him. But now, I hear Sherman coming home. Why does he always slam the front door?*"

At that moment, the door knocker rattled. Jumping to my feet, I looked wildly around me, thinking for a brief moment that I was transported backward in time and Sherman Lloyd was once again slamming the front door.

Penny, dumped unceremoniously on the floor, glared at me. Pushing my hand against my chest to slow my hammering heart, I took a deep breath and tried to see out the front window. A gray curtain of rain slanted against the pane, running in sheets down the glass. Who would be out in such a storm?

The journal clutched in my hand, I hurried to the door, wondering if Pat or Jackie had decided to come and spend the stormy afternoon with



me. Flipping on the porch light, I cracked open the door. A profusion of yellow, orange, and pink flowers bloomed in the arms of my caller. Swallowing, I felt the blood drain from my face. Was there something about Constance Reilly's journal that emanated into the darkness, recalling a face from the past? With lightning flashing behind him, the tall figure of her great grandson stood on my porch, holding out to me the biggest bouquet of flowers I had ever seen.



## *Chapter 27*

“I want to apologize for scaring you the other day,” Sherman Lloyd said.

Actually, at our first meeting, he hadn’t frightened me as much as made me angry. But this time, I was terrified. With his face in shadows, black hair glistening in the porch light, lightning and rain as a backdrop, he could have been the epitome of evil.

I stepped away from the door and Mr. Lloyd seemed to take that as an invitation to come inside.

“Thanks,” he said, edging into the entryway. “It’s pretty wet out there.

“These are for you,” he continued, thrusting the bouquet into my arms, “by way of apology.”

Automatically, I took them and Constance’s journal slipped to the floor.

Sherman Lloyd bent and picked up the book. Holding it up to the light, he scowled. “I believe this belonged to one of my ancestors. Do you mind if I keep it?”

I snatched it out of his hands. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Did you find anything interesting in it?” he asked.

“Very,” I answered. “Without meaning to be rude, Mr. Lloyd, what are you doing here?”

“I want to apologize for our first meeting. I’m sorry if I came across as too direct. That’s pretty much just my way.”

“Forget it,” I answered. The longer he stood in my house, the more I wanted him out of it. I determined that he would get no farther than the front door. “Your deed and will are worthless. Surely, you knew that.”

He smiled, flashing those perfect white teeth. “I honestly thought they were valid or I would not have given them to you. Recently, though, my lawyer tells me there may be some question.”

I nodded, tapping my foot on the floor and making a point of not closing the door.

He fidgeted, glancing around at the parlor. “It looks like you’ve worked wonders with this old place.”

“Actually, I haven’t done much. Uncle Javin is the one who spent a lot of time on it. It was his home, you know, and my grandparents’ home before it was his.”

Sherman Lloyd was silent for a few seconds, his eyes narrowing as he gazed at me. “And now it’s yours,” he muttered.

At last, he must have seen I was immune to his charms and he was not going to be invited to sit down.

Taking a deep breath, he turned to go and paused on the porch.

“I’d like us to be friends, Mrs. McNeil,” he said. “Who knows, if you really got to know me, you might actually like me.”

Flashing another grin, he jogged to his SUV. I closed the door and locked it. Glancing down at the bouquet, I realized the flowers were beautiful, no matter who brought them. Hurrying to the kitchen, I dug through the cabinet for a large vase. It would be too bad if they were to wilt.



## *Chapter 28*

The day of Gabe Williams' funeral dawned sunny and spring-like. I was thankful for the brightness. Funerals are sad any time, and they seemed to be especially so under a cloudy sky. Rose Chapel was packed, but on the front pew, reserved for family, none were present. Mr. Chalmers, the funeral director, asked Pat to occupy that space so, of course, Ron, Jackie, and I joined her. The service was terribly reminiscent of the one for Uncle Javin only two weeks before. Gerald did an admirable job of eulogizing Rose Chapel's minister.

The funeral took place on Thursday morning. I half-listened to Gerald, my mind straying to my uncle's murder and the culprit who had taken his life. I decided I would bait a trap. Foolish? Maybe. And maybe it wouldn't prove a thing. Perhaps I was barking up the wrong tree but I felt that the gold ring I found under the washing machine might have something to do with the murderer. Or, maybe nothing at all. It could have been Uncle Javin's ring, perhaps given to him when he was a lot younger and his fingers were smaller. If it had not belonged to my uncle, I was determined to try to lure the owner of that ring into the open. After leaving Rose Chapel, I went to Ednalee's newspaper office and placed an ad about finding a ring.

"You did what?" Pat asked, her eyes wide with astonishment.

We Three Musketeers sat at the sunroom table on Friday evening. I had decided to share with my friends my plan for baiting a trap, but instead of congratulating me for thinking of a way to flush out the ring's owner, their faces registered dismay.

I placed the gold ring on the table. Jackie glanced at it and then at me. "Do you think that was wise, Ned?"

Feeling defensive, I said, "I thought you two would support me in this. Remember the 'one for all and all for one' thing? Yes, Jackie, I put an ad in the paper yesterday, saying a ring had been found and if the owner could identify it, I would give it to him. I certainly didn't tell him my name nor where to find it, just my phone number."

Jackie nodded. "That's a good idea not to have the person come to your house, or even to let the ring's owner know who you are. Since no attempt has been made to claim the ring yet, the owner might not be sure where he or she lost it."

If Pat's eyebrows went up any farther, they would be lost under her bangs. "I still don't like the idea, Ned," she said. "Why not give the ring to Cade and let him take care of it?"

"If the person was up to no good when the ring was lost, do you think he'd go to the police station to claim it?" I asked.

Slowly, Pat shook her head. "No, I guess not."

"Speaking of Cade," Jackie interrupted. "I believe that's his white truck coming up your driveway."

I met Cade at the door before he could knock. "Come in," I said. "You're just in time to have coffee with Jackie and Pat and me."

Cade grinned, removed his hat, and stepped inside the parlor. His gaze took in the huge bouquet that Sherman Lloyd had brought. It was so large, I could find no place to set it but on the floor beside the front door.

"Pretty flowers," Cade said, nodding toward the oversized bundle.

I didn't want to discuss my caller who brought the bouquet so I just grunted, "Thanks," and went to the kitchen for another cup while Pat and Jackie invited him to sit at the table in the sunroom.

Cade noticed the ring right away and picked it up. "Pretty," he commented. "Is it yours, Ned?"

"No," I said, pouring his coffee. I didn't elaborate and he didn't ask anything else. If I told him where I had found the ring, I felt sure he would confiscate it as possible evidence and that was not in my plans.

"I've got some news about Pastor Williams," Cade said as I sat down. "It's just as well that you are all together. Pat, you'd hear it anyway from Gerald, and Jackie, you might want to tell Ron. That'd be okay."

"What about Reverend Williams?" Pat asked.

"As you know, Doc Kelly did an autopsy. He would have anyway, because the death was unexpected but I specifically requested it because something about Gabe Williams' position at the table, the coffee, and the fact that he was expecting you, Ned, just didn't quite ring true."

Cade stopped and sipped his coffee.

"Well?" Jackie asked. "You're keeping us on pins and needles, Cade Morris."

Cade smoothed his mustache and gazed at each of us in turn. "Gabe Williams was murdered."

The old-fashioned clock in the parlor ticked loudly as we three women sat in stunned silence. At last, I found my voice.

"Murdered? How? He looked perfectly normal to me, as if he had gone to sleep."

Drawing a long breath, Cade said, "I imagine that's what he did—just went to sleep but he never woke up. You see, Ned, the autopsy revealed that Pastor Williams had enough poison in his system to kill an elephant."

I shook my head. "But who . . . why . . . I don't understand."

Cade drained his coffee, pushed back his chair, and crossed his legs. "Ladies, Ednalee is a small town and things like this just don't happen here. Your uncle's death, Ned, was the first murder since Eldon Decker got his just desserts, forty years ago. I'm going to tell you some things that probably I shouldn't, but I think each of you can be trusted to keep it under your hats."

Cade's eyes narrowed as he gazed around the table. I felt like raising my right hand and saying, "I solemnly swear that what you are about to tell us will go no further," but I just sat silently as did Pat and Jackie.

"Gerald and I tried to find Gabe's next of kin, to notify them of his passing," Cade said. "We didn't find any relatives but we did find a few things that we didn't expect. It seems that our preacher was living under an alias. Gabe Williams' real name was Gideon Wilcox."



## *Chapter 29*

Pat's face was as gray as Cade's Stetson hanging from the back of his chair. "I don't believe it," she whispered.

"Believe it," Cade said, his voice grim. "And that's not all. Here's the really funny part." He paused and I think all three of us were holding our breaths.

"Gideon Wilcox lived here in Ednalee many years ago. He disappeared for three or four decades and then a few years ago, he came back."

Grasping my coffee cup with both hands, I raised it to my mouth, swallowed half the coffee and choked.

That broke the paralysis that gripped us at Cade's announcement. He sprang up and pounded me on the back. Pat tipped over her chair as she trotted around the table to where I sat, gasping; Jackie dashed to the kitchen for a damp towel.

Catching my breath, I wiped tears from my eyes, and tried to smile at the concern on the three faces staring at me.

"Sorry," I muttered, and grabbed Jackie's towel.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Cade asked.

I nodded weakly. "Please go on, Cade," I croaked, rubbing my throat. "Are you seriously telling us that Gabe Williams wasn't Gabe Williams but was actually somebody named Gideon Wilcox and that



he once lived here? But, that's crazy! Why wouldn't somebody have recognized him?"

Returning to his chair, Cade drew a deep breath and said, "Maybe somebody finally did."

"Wait! Wait!" Jackie waved her hand in the air like a school child desperate to get her teacher's attention.

"You're saying that somebody might have killed Mr. Williams because they finally realized he was Gideon Wilcox?"

Cade reached for the carafe and poured himself more coffee. "I don't know. Maybe."

"But, Cade," Pat said, her voice barely above a whisper, "he was a *preacher*. He was a *good man*. We trusted him. He preached the Word of God like he meant it. Why would somebody want to kill a man like that?"

Cade shook his head. "I don't know, Pat."

"And why did he leave Ednalee? Why did he come back? What did he look like when he was here that he could have changed so much nobody in town knew who he was?" Jackie asked.

"He had been gone a long time," Cade said, "thirty-five or forty years. That long ago, his hair would not have been gray. He might not have worn a beard and mustache."

"You're right," I said, gazing at the ring. "Uncle Javin still looked much the way I remembered him from forty years ago but if he had grown a beard and had longer, bushy hair like Reverend Williams, even I might not have known my own uncle."

"There's something else," Cade said, once again looking at us with those eagle eyes. "I'm telling you this only because I think you ladies might hear or see something that would be suspicious, since you know a lot of people and you, Ned, are particularly involved in solving your uncle's murder." His gaze flicked to me. "Not that I approve," he said under his breath.

Right then, I decided I would not mention Sherman Lloyd's visit nor finding the ring. I had told Cade about the narrow escape from Vermouth Decker's dog and he warned me to quit being Nancy Drew.

Nancy, I had reminded him, was only a young woman with a lot fewer years' experience in her repertoire.

He paused for so long, I nearly said, "Spit it out, Cade," but was glad I didn't.

"The whole scene in the pastor's kitchen the morning he died didn't look right. He was expecting you, Ned, and told you he would have the coffee pot on. Well, he evidently did. The fluid level on that pot was six cups. When Gerald and I arrived, the level was down to four cups but the coffee had been up to six. I knew that from the moisture beading the full line. It looked as if Mr. Williams had been drinking a cup of coffee, waiting for you to arrive, Ned, and a heart attack or something overcame him there at the table. But, if it had, wouldn't there be at least a bit of the coffee left in his cup?"

"And there wasn't?" I asked.

"No. It had been washed out. Another cup was in the sink. It too was clean as a whistle. Now, maybe there's another explanation for that but it looks to me like your minister, Pat, might have had a visitor before Ned got there, somebody who had sat down with him for a cup of coffee and somehow, when the pastor wasn't looking, slipped a whammy of a dose of sleeping pills into his cup."

"But why couldn't he, the murderer I mean, have covered his tracks a little better?" I asked. "I would have placed that second cup back in the cupboard and sloshed a little coffee into Pastor Williams' cup, just to make his death look more natural."

"How long was it between your phone call and your actual visit to the parsonage?" Cade asked.

"Well . . . probably an hour or maybe less," I answered.

"I think I can guess," Jackie said. "Ned, that other person in Mr. Williams' house might have been in a rush to get out before you got there. Maybe he was nervous and in a panic, and didn't have time to think it all through. Try to put yourself in his place. Wouldn't you have wanted to hurry up and get things over with?"

I gulped. "Gosh, Jackie, are you saying I might have poisoned Pat's preacher?"

Jackie punched me lightly on the shoulder. "No, silly. I'm just trying to think like a killer, that's all."

I sniffed. "Well, don't try. You're too scary."

Cade looked from Jackie to me. "I don't think the person who put Mr. Williams to sleep permanently is a professional killer, so Jackie, I think you're probably right, but this guy is cool for an amateur. Committing murder is a nerve-wracking business. I don't think we can over-estimate the depth of his evil mind, but he acts only on the spur of the moment."

I actually didn't want to hear the answer to my question, but I needed to ask it. "So, Cade, do you think we are dealing with one murderer or two? Do you think the person who killed Uncle Javin also killed Pastor Williams?"

Pat shuddered, her eyes as big as saucers. "Can there be any doubt?"

"I wonder about that too," Jackie said. "Mr. Granger was shot and Mr. Williams was poisoned. It certainly isn't the same M.O."

"M.O., Jackie? What on earth is that?" I asked.

A grin tugged at the corner of Cade's mouth. "She means method of operation. Ladies, I don't want you to try thinking like a criminal or a detective either, for that matter. Once again, I'll ask, please let us handle this. We sure don't want another victim and yes, Ned, I believe there's only one killer in Ednalee. The reason his methods differ is that he uses whatever is on hand at the moment."

Pat glanced at her wrist watch and jumped up. "Where did the time go? Gerald will be home soon and I promised I'd bake a cherry pie for supper. I've got to run."

Jackie and Cade left soon after Pat. I locked that squeaky front door behind them and turned to Penny. The three cars had barely disappeared down my driveway when my cell phone rang.

Quickly flipping it open, I saw the caller I.D. gave no name nor number, just "Unknown Caller." I heard what sounded like a sigh and then the connection was broken.

A chill ran down my spine. I could do without harassing phone calls. Perhaps someone had seen my ad in the paper, dialed, and then

thought better of it. Or maybe somebody got a wrong number. That happens all the time, I told myself.

“It’s just you and me, girl,” I said to Penny, sitting back down at the table and pouring the last cup of coffee from the carafe.

Penny raised her head and immediately curled up again on the rug in front of the fireplace while I sat thinking over Cade’s news.

“You have the right idea, Penny,” I at last told my cat. “I am so tired that I can’t puzzle over this any longer. I’m going to bed.”

Feeling as if each of my feet weighed twenty pounds, I slowly climbed the stairs. Penny whisked up ahead of me.



## *Chapter 30*

Although my body had not one ounce of energy left, my mind would not rest. As Pat said, it seemed as if Ednalee had been sleeping for forty years and at last woke up in a bad mood. And who woke her? Me! I could not escape the fact that I seemed to be the catalyst for the two murders. Somebody in Ednalee knew I was coming to see Uncle Javin. Did this unknown person kill my uncle to keep him from talking to me? Why? What would he have told me that was dangerous to someone else? And the situation was similar for Pastor Williams. He didn't seem to be in any danger until he decided he needed to tell me something. Had someone killed him to keep him from talking? But, how would the killer have known about my pending visit? Inadvertently, just by my presence, I may have been the reason these two men lost their lives.

Who was that mysterious murderer lurking in Ednalee? Was it someone who lived here? Was it a stranger? When I thought of possibilities, the menacing face of Vermouth Decker came to mind. He and his brother Moe had the audacity to come to Uncle Javin's funeral and be glad that he was dead. Revenge was a pretty good motivator. Maybe they still carried a grudge about their brother, Eldon. In spite of their alibi, one of them could be the murderer.

But what about Pastor Williams? Why would anybody want to kill him? He was a mild-mannered man whose mission in life was to help

others. But even he was living a lie. In actuality, he was Gideon Wilcox. His death must be somehow tied to his past life in Ednalee. Would I be able to find and talk to someone who had known the young Gideon? What was the connection between Uncle Javin and Gabe Williams/Gideon Wilcox?

No one could have a stronger reason for getting rid of my uncle than Sherman Lloyd. Uncle Javin would never have relinquished his home to a land developer, no matter what an ancient will said. But, with my uncle out of the way, perhaps Mr. Lloyd thought he would have a better chance of convincing his niece to sell. Sherman Lloyd was greedy and his tactics were devious but would he commit murder to get what he wanted?

Another possibility, no matter how remote, was the kidnapper from Atlanta. Could he have found out my whereabouts? But why would he want to murder other people? I would be the prime target, to keep me from identifying him. I couldn't see that the deaths of either Uncle Javin or Gabe Williams would benefit that felon from Atlanta.

I must have tossed and turned for hours before dropping into a sleep fraught with dark, shadowy dreams. When I awoke and saw daylight seeping through my window, I felt a great relief that the night was over.

Penny wasn't in her usual spot, curled up on the foot of my bed, so she evidently awoke before I did and was probably downstairs munching any leftover food in her bowl. My eyes blurry from sleep or the lack of it, I descended the stairs and headed for the coffee pot. Once the aroma of brewing coffee filled the air, I looked around for Penny, thinking she might like a dab of cream to spice up her Krunchies, but Penny was nowhere to be seen.

Beginning to be alarmed, I searched her favorite spots, the rug in front of the fireplace, the sofa, even the utility room although she had avoided that place since Uncle Javin's death.

"Penny," I called, gazing up the staircase. "Where are you?"

A plaintive meow came through the back door. Opening the door, I saw Penny huddled on the porch. She dashed inside and went straight to her food dish.

“Penny, where on earth have you been?” I asked. “How did you get out?”

Ignoring me, she continued eating. I sat down at the kitchen table, a steaming cup of coffee in front of me. How had this happened? I was sure Penny had gone to bed when I did. Had a door blown open during the night? Immediately, I discarded that notion because I always made sure both the front and back doors were locked.

“I wish you could talk, Penny,” I told my furry friend. “Are you, perhaps, blessed with a special gift of going through locked doors?”

A suspicion began in the back of my mind and grew until it was a full-fledged fear. Picking up my coffee, I carried it with me into the parlor. I rattled the front door. Locked securely. So, how did Penny get outside?

As I passed the sunroom, I glanced at the table, remembering the revelations Cade had brought yesterday. I had neglected to put that gold ring back on the chain around my neck so I would do that this morning.

But the ring was gone!

My heart turned over and landed in my throat. I set the coffee cup on the table, dropped to my knees, and searched the floor. The wood shone from the cleaning I had given it earlier, but there was no gold ring under the table or anywhere else in the dining room.

My legs felt as weak as water. I plopped down into a chair. Coffee sloshed from my cup as I brought it to my lips. Penny was outside this morning even though she had been on my bed last night. The ring had vanished from the table. The muscles in the back of my neck pinched. Someone had been in this house while I slept. My pulse racing, I imagined a stealthy figure, perhaps with a flashlight, slipping into the house through—through what? A window? He could have left by either door, once he had gotten inside, but both the front and back doors were locked. So, how did he manage that?

How convenient of me to leave the ring in plain sight. But, if it hadn't been visible, would the intruder have searched the house?

What if I had awoken and startled him? Would I have become victim number three?

My hands shook so badly, I could barely dial Cade's number. It was time to confess to the chief of police about the ring. Maybe he and Gerald could find a clue and this time, I was not about to go outside and possibly obscure evidence. Did that anonymous phone call before I went to bed have anything to do with the break-in? Feeling unable to deal with any more shocks, I waited for Cade to answer. It was time to call in reinforcements.





## *Chapter 31*

Cade and Gerald arrived so quickly after my phone call that I barely had time to change out of my pajamas into a pair of blue jeans and a fleece-lined blue sweatshirt. The two men gave the grounds as well as the house, inside and out, a thorough inspection. At last we three sat down at the kitchen table. I poured coffee for everyone but I didn't do much besides sip mine. The cup felt good to my cold hands as I cradled it. Cade slowly swirled his coffee, gazing intently at his cup, as if he expected an answer to appear in its amber depth. Gerald drank his cup of brew in two or three long swigs, then turned concerned eyes on me. Irrelevantly, I realized Gerald's eyes reminded me of a puppy.

My voice, when I spoke, sounded shaky.

"Cade, what's going on? I just don't understand any of the stuff that's happening. Did you find out how someone got into my house last night? Did he leave any evidence?"

"No, none." Cade drummed his fingers on the table. "No footprints, no piece of cloth snagged on a bush. Nothing. Here's what I want to know, Ned. Why would anyone run the risk of slipping into your house at night after you were asleep and steal nothing but that ring? Where did it come from and why is it important? Is it yours? I think it's time you told me all about it."

Gulping a swallow of coffee for fortification, I said, "You're right, Cade. I should have told you about that ring before today, but I was afraid you would confiscate it."

"If it has nothing to do with either of these murders, I sure wouldn't confiscate it. And, if you were afraid I would, it must be that the ring is connected to the deaths in some way. Are you by chance obstructing justice, Miss Duncan?"

"Oh, for goodness sake!" I snapped. "I found it here, under the washer in the laundry room. It was in my house, so I think it was my ring, Mr. Morris."

Cade's eyes looked stony. "You found it in the laundry room, where your uncle died? I can't believe you didn't turn it in to me."

Feeling miserable, I rubbed at a tiny stain on the kitchen table.

"Why would anyone want that ring?" he asked. "It didn't look particularly valuable, at least not enough to risk getting caught or being shot if you had happened to wake up and see an intruder in your house."

"I don't know why anyone would want it," I answered. "It had some sort of inscription on the inside but Jackie and Pat couldn't read it, the letters were so faded. Neither could I."

"So, you told Jackie and Pat, but you didn't tell me," Cade muttered.

Gerald chuckled. "Aw, they're the Three Musketeers, Cade. Don't you know that?"

Maybe coming completely clean was the best option. I told Cade and Gerald about the ad I put in the paper and about the phone call after Pat and Jackie left.

"Somebody was checking to see whether that phone number was yours, Miss Nettie," Gerald said. "Your ad told the owner of that ring that you had it and, because he didn't show up in broad daylight and claim it, but snuck in at night, that looks pretty suspicious."

With a disgusted look on his face, Cade stared at me, shaking his head for so long that I was ready to scream or cry or anything to break the silence.

At last, he sighed and said, "It looks like the person who took your ring may have a key to the house."

"A key?" I echoed. "Why, that's awful! Who would have a key to Uncle Javin's house? If someone has a key, he could come and go as he pleased."

"That's right, Miss Nettie," Gerald affirmed.

"I want you to get all your locks changed," Cade said. "I wish you would forget about living here alone and move into an apartment or . . ."

"Or come live with us," Gerald interrupted. "I don't want to keep bugging you, but Mom and I would be glad to have you, Miss Nettie, and we have a spare bedroom."

I shook my head. "Thanks, Gerald, but I'm not going to be run out of my home by some sneak."

Cade rubbed his chin. "Your intruder may be more than a sneak," he said. "The person who was in here last night might be the murderer."

"Do you mean Uncle Javin's killer?" I squeaked.

Cade nodded. "And Gabe Williams."

"I know a man who can change out those locks for you right away," Gerald said. "Dink Renfroe."

I gave up on drinking the coffee and set my cup on the table. "I know Mr. Renfroe. He repaired my front door and replaced the door knocker. I'm probably one of his best customers."

Cade pushed back his chair and stood up. "I'll make sure he gets out here this afternoon," he said. "And Ned, don't forget to lock these doors before you go to bed."

"You can bank on that," I answered.

Gerald's eyes grew larger. "Maybe it's something that no locks can keep out. Maybe it's the ghost."

His statement would have been funny under other circumstances, but today I didn't find it amusing. A ghost? Well, who else would leave no evidence and have the ability to come and go at will?

Mentally giving myself a shake, I managed to smile. "I don't believe in ghosts, Gerald."

Cade drew a long breath and shook his head. "Neither do I. Come on, Mills, let's go. If you were right about this being a ghost, it'd be a whole lot easier to deal with than a person who's bent on mischief."

I shivered and walked with the two men to the door. Cade had not seen the white figure that I saw disappearing into the carriage house. I would never forget it and I hoped that I would never see it again.

When Mr. Renfroe came to replace the locks, I didn't chat on the porch with him as I had done the first time he came. A cold wind had sprung up, blowing low, gray clouds across the sky, and I was too upset to visit with this town crier. I didn't want him to know the reason the locks must be changed.

One of my cures for nerves was to bake something. I rummaged through pantry and refrigerator and found the ingredients for making a cream pie. Keeping my hands and mind off my present troubles and filling the old house with the fragrance of hot food might help calm my thoughts. I dug through my recipes until I found the one I wanted.

*1 cup of flour*

*½ cup of shortening or softened butter*

*pinch of salt*

*Mix flour and shortening thoroughly. Add a scant amount of cold water to make a stiff dough. Roll out on floured surface and shape into a pie pan. Bake this in a 420 degree oven, then cool.*

*Cream Filling*

*1 ½ cups of milk*

*½ cup of sugar*

*¼ cup of flour*

*pinch of salt*

*3 eggs*

*3 Tbsp. butter*

*1 Tsp. vanilla*

*Heat milk, mix sugar and flour together and add about ¼ cup of the hot milk. Stir mixture into the pan of milk, stirring constantly until mixture is thick. Separate eggs, whisk yolks together, adding a couple of spoons of flour/milk mixture to the yolks, then stirring eggs yolks into the thickened sauce. After the egg yolks have cooked into the sauce (about 3 minutes), remove from heat. Add butter and vanilla. Beat egg whites until stiff, add ¼ cup of sugar, and beat until mixed. Gently fold ⅓ of the whites into the sauce, pour into cooled, baked crust, top with remainder of eggs whites and brown in the oven.*

After I had taken the pie, piled high with meringue, from the oven, I wondered what I would do with it. A cream pie tastes best if it's eaten the same day it's baked and my creation was certainly too much for one person. With a sudden burst of inspiration, I decided to traipse through the pines to my neighbor Martha's house. She had brought food to me faithfully and now was a good time to repay her neighborly gesture by taking the pie to her and her mother.



## Chapter 32

Martha's face, when she opened her front door, registered shock. Behind her glasses, her eyes opened wide. Her mouth formed a perfect O, and she stared at me without speaking.

Maybe I shouldn't have come unannounced, but I didn't have Martha's phone number. "Um, I baked a pie and thought I'd share it with you and your mother," I said.

She recovered and held open the door. "Why, Nettie, this is a nice surprise. Come in."

I stepped into the Decker's dim entry. Martha took the pie from my hands and led the way down the hall to the kitchen. Here, at least, a bright ceiling light revealed a wood table and chairs, spotless countertop and sparkling appliances. Martha carefully set the pie on the cabinet and flicked a crumb of crust into the sink.

"Do you have time to sit for a piece of pie and a cup of tea?" Martha asked.

Before I could answer, a plaintive voice from upstairs called, "Martha! Do we have company at last? May I come down?"

Martha turned toward the stair well and called, "No! Not yet, Mother. I'll bring some pie up to you."

She turned to me and said, apologetically, "Mother forgets that she can barely walk any more. It would be impossible for her to get down those stairs."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I would like to meet your mother. Anne, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, that's her name," Martha said. "She is really nervous and fidgety today, Nettie, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to take back that invitation for pie and tea. It's time for her medicine and I must go give it to her. I'm sure you understand."

Thirty seconds later, I was standing once again on Martha's front porch, wondering just how I got there. What a strange woman! I wanted to meet her mother, this person who inadvertently wrecked the lives of two men. I felt a great curiosity to see what she looked like. Would she remember my family and connect me with Uncle Javin? Did she still have tender feelings for my uncle? Did she even know about his death? Was there some truth in the gossip about their romantic involvement or were they merely friends?

I went back home with my head down against the biting wind. Dink Renfroe had done his job and left. I got out my new key to unlock the front door. I had left all the lights blazing and a few logs burning in the fireplace. Penny got up from her rug, stretched, and strolled over to rub against my ankles. It was nice to come into my warm, bright home after the dismal interior of the Decker house and the murkiness of the winter day.

Shedding my coat and gloves, I trudged into the kitchen. "Maybe Anne Decker would feel better if Martha pulled back those drapes and turned on a few lights," I told Penny. "If I had to live in semi-darkness all the time, I think I'd be off-kilter too. Wouldn't you?"

Penny meandered to her food dish and looked up expectantly. "What a creature of comfort you are," I told her, going to the pantry for her food. "You have probably already forgotten about your night out in the cold. I wish you could talk and tell me who opened the door. Next time, wake me up, will you?"

Shuddering, I realized what I had said and prayed there would not be a next time. Hopefully, the new locks would keep out all unwanted visitors.

What would happen tonight? Would someone try to get into my house again? Were Pat and Gerald right? Maybe I should move in with them; at least, I would feel safer.

I mixed up a cup of hot chocolate, found the mystery I was reading, and settled down in front of the fire. Penny leaped up beside me.

The comfort of the crackling blaze, Penny's gentle purring, and the warm drink made me drowsy. Closing my eyes, I was on the verge of dozing off when a loud banging brought me to my feet.

Sleep fled as my eyes flew open. My heart hammering, I gazed wildly around. What was that noise? Was someone threatening to break in? I grabbed the cell phone from my pocket and tiptoed to the window. Annabelle Decker stood on my porch, a sprinkling of grainy snow peppering her dark hair. With a feeling of *déjà vu*, I trotted to the door and pulled it open.

"Annabelle . . ." I began.

She pushed me inside and shoved the door shut. "Lock it," she snapped. "Hurry."

Quickly, I did so and stared at my unexpected guest. She clutched her worn cloth coat tightly around her and stood shivering in the entryway, her chest heaving with labored breaths. An ugly purple bruise circled one eye.

Touching her arm, I said, "What's wrong? You look half frozen. Have you been running?"

She gulped and nodded. "Yes, I've been running. I had to get here before he did. I had to warn you . . ."

"Wait. It's going to be all right, Annabelle. Let me fix you a cup of coffee. Go over by the fireplace and get warm," I said, trying to urge her farther into the room.

She shook her head so violently that droplets of melted snow flew against me. "No! You don't understand. We have to go to the police station. Now. We can't wait. I came here to warn you first. Verm is coming, and he's going to kill you. I know he'll kill me too if he catches me. You see, he just today found out I returned your phone. He and Moe were playing cards and drinking, and the more he drank, the madder he got. He said he thought he had seen the last of the Granger kin and then you showed up and started asking questions." Annabelle stopped and shuddered.



"No, I'll call 911. That will be faster and we can barricade ourselves in the house," I said.

"Okay. Call. But, hurry!"

Flipping open the phone, I punched in the emergency number. Nothing happened. No light shone. Shaking my head, I muttered, "I forgot to charge it."

"Oh, no." Annabelle's eyes were wide. "Then we've got to make a run for it. He'll get into this house, one way or the other. You see, he's scared and when he gets scared, he's like a wild creature."

I shrugged into my coat as she spoke. "Yes? What's he afraid of, Annabelle? Does he think I may prove that he killed my uncle? Did he shoot Uncle Javin?"

Annabelle bit her lip and grabbed my arm with fingers of steel. "I don't know if he did or not. That's the truth! But, he thinks you may keep poking around and find where he and Moe have their meth house and—"

"Meth? Are they into making methamphetamine?"

"Yes, yes, may the Lord forgive them. You see, that stuff and whiskey make Verm go out of his mind and he got to stewin' over my returning your phone 'cause he doesn't want us to have anything to do with you and then he said he was going to see to it that you didn't meddle any more. He hit me and I ran into the bedroom. I climbed out a window but he'll be coming here to silence you . . ." Annabelle trembled from head to foot as if a wind shook her.

Her terror communicated itself to me. She was right; we must leave before Verm got here. Our only choice was to go to the police station and hope we got down my long driveway before Verm started up it. No time to dash upstairs for my gun. I was shaking so badly, I couldn't have pulled the trigger anyway.

Annabelle tugged me onto the porch and I turned to lock the door.

"You don't have time!" she screamed. "Forget the door!"

"Gotta lock it," I muttered. "I don't want somebody hiding inside."

Running to the Escape, I slipped on the icy sidewalk and regained my balance barely in time to keep from landing on my face. Annabelle

dashed to the passenger door, yanked it open, and fell inside. I jumped in, started the engine, turned the SUV around and sped down the driveway. If Verm got to the long lane leading to the house before we reached the street, our only exit would be blocked.

Without slowing down, I wrenched the steering wheel to the right and slid around the corner of the driveway and onto the street. "We made it," I breathed, relief flooding me. "We're on our way to the station."

The icy conditions were evidently keeping many drivers inside their homes today. The street seemed deserted.

"Hurry!" Annabelle said. "Drive faster, Nettie!"

Good advice, but the snow/sleet mixture had frozen on the pavement, making it hard to keep the car on the road. Lights glinted in my rearview mirror and I glanced behind me. A gray sedan was approaching fast.

My lips felt stiff. "I thought you had a light-colored truck," I said to Annabelle. "Does Moe, by chance, have a car?"

She shook her head. "No. There's only the truck. Why?"

"Because a car is following us and it's not light-colored and it's not a truck. Look out!"

The words barely out of my mouth, the pursuing vehicle struck the bumper of my Escape. I gripped the steering wheel, trying to stay in the street. Once again, the sedan eased behind me. Bumper to bumper, it pushed and the steering wheel became useless in my hands. We were heading toward the curb. Even though we were traveling far above the speed limit, the next thing seemed to happen in slow motion.

"Hold tight, Annabelle!" I yelled. The large trunk of a tree loomed closer. The Escape left the street, bounced over the curb, and smacked into an oak. Pain sliced through my chest as the air bag deployed and we crunched into the tree.

Tasting blood but otherwise intact, I turned to Annabelle. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm okay," she said, sounding tired and emotionless.

Without warning, my door flew open and a rough hand grabbed my arm. "Get out of that car," the man snarled.

I looked into the angry, blood-shot eyes of a stranger. I gasped. "You . . . you're not Vermouth."

"Quit acting so dumb, little Miss Busybody. I finally tracked you down, all the way from Atlanta. I don't plan for you to be testifyin' against my pal and me." He laughed. "No, I don't reckon you're going to be doing much, after today. Who you got in the car there with you? Git out, you!" The man shoved a gun past my nose and waved it in Annabelle's direction.

He yanked me from my seat and Annabelle crawled out behind me. We stood, shivering in the sleet, holding onto each other.

So, this was one of the men who had abducted Congressman Langlier. He needn't have gone to all this trouble, compounding his felonies, because I had not seen him well enough to identify him. That is, until today. With a knot in the pit of my stomach, I realized that after today, I could identify him with no trouble, and there was no way he was going to let me live.

"March!" the man ordered, motioning toward the sedan.

Warning bells rang. Remembering that I had read never to get in the car with an abductor, I shook my head. "Uh-uh. I don't think so."

He shoved me toward his vehicle and I skidded on the icy street.

"Leave her alone!" Annabelle yelled.

"Shut up, you," he snarled. "You're in the wrong place at the wrong time. You get into the car too. Back seat, both of you. I got some rope to tie you up nice and snug. Move!"

Sometimes in an acute situation, senses are sharpened. Maybe we revert to primal reactions; maybe the Lord gives us a shot of adrenalin to clear our brains; but, in any event, I prayed silently and fervently and knew what I must do. Sleet stung my eyes and standing up on the ice was hard for all three of us. I edged close enough to that sedan to touch its fender.

"Oops!" I said and shoved myself backward.

"Hey!" yelled the kidnapper as I slid into him, knocking him off balance.

Annabelle lunged for his legs and he toppled, his gun flying.

I scrambled toward the pistol. Annabelle jumped onto his back as he writhed on the street.

Pointing the pistol at him, I shouted, "Stop it! Lie quietly or I swear I'll shoot you dead!"

Amazingly, the man grew still. "All right, all right. Be careful. That thing is loaded and it's hair-triggered, mighty easy to go off."

"He said he has rope in the car, Annabelle," I said. "Tie him up while I make sure he doesn't move."

The man was lying on the ground, soundly, if inexpertly trussed, when Cade's truck eased up behind the sedan.

He looked at the man, at me, and at Annabelle then asked quietly, "What's going on?"

My legs gave out and I sat down on the icy curb, gun still pointing at the kidnapper. Annabelle sank down beside me.

Fear and tension gave way to relief and suddenly, the whole scene was funny. I giggled and gazed up at him. "I'm glad to see you, Chief. My phone is down, Annabelle doesn't have one, and I had no idea what we were going to do with this guy."

Cade nudged the man's legs with the toe of his boot. "Lucky for him I came by then, 'cause he'll soon freeze lying on that ice. Want to tell me about it? And, give me that gun, Ned. It's looking wobbly."

"These women waylaid me, officer," the man said, speaking from the corner of his mouth that wasn't in contact with the street. "They half-killed me and I'm about stuck to this ice. Get me up, will you?"

Cade cocked an eyebrow at me and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well, you see, it was this way . . ." I began.



## *Chapter 33*

“Good heavens, Ned! Why didn’t you call me? Or Jackie? Oh, you just missed being killed!”

Jackie sipped her coffee. “Because her phone was down, Pat,” she said.

Pat blinked. “Oh, yes. I forgot. Well, don’t let it run down any more, Ned. That’s your lifeline.”

“Maybe you should get a land line,” Jackie suggested.

Seeing the concern on the faces of these two friends made me realize anew how blessed I was to have them in my life. They must have had a lot of things to do today—Jackie was putting the finishing touches on a Christmas party which was to take place at her house in a couple of days and Pat was in charge of a quiet candlelight service at Rose Chapel on Christmas Eve. The congregation decided, in light of Pastor Williams’ death, that a simple service consisting of Gerald reading the Christmas story from the second chapter of Luke, lighting candles, and singing “Silent Night” would be the proper kind of commemoration.

Today, the day after Annabelle’s and my ordeal with the Atlanta crook who tried to kill us, we three sat in our favorite booth at the back of Grandy’s enjoying a cup of coffee. Outside, a weak lemon sun shone fitfully through scudding clouds but inside, the coffee shop was warm and fragrant with the aroma of flavored brew.

I caught my friends up on the disappearance of the gold ring, and the unsatisfactory visit to Martha Decker.

"I really wanted to meet her mother, Anne Decker. She is sort of the shadowy figure in this mystery." I sipped the rich coffee and felt it warm me all the way down. "Or at least she's one of the pivots. Seems like there's a bunch of them."

"I would be in bed today if I had gone through such trauma," Pat declared, thumping the table to emphasize her words. "I don't see how you are able to keep going, Ned, with all this stuff swirling around you."

"Actually, after yesterday, I am relieved," I said. "I'm shed of two worries. In the back of my mind, I kept wondering if that kidnapper had followed me here. By the way, his name is Ralston. So, he's locked up and waiting to be shipped back to Atlanta. And, I always harbored a dread of that Vermouth Decker. What an awful man!"

"What happened to him?" Jackie asked. "Surely, Annabelle isn't going back to him?"

I dabbed whipped cream from my mouth. "You may rest assured she's not. She has relatives in Arkansas and she told Cade she just wanted to go home. He took her to the bus station this morning."

"And Vermouth and his brother are into meth?" Pat asked. "Did they put up a fight when Cade went out there?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Vermouth was passed out cold and Moe wasn't in much better shape. It was Moe, though, not Vermouth who finally led Cade to their meth lab. I don't think those two are going to bother Annabelle or anybody else for a long time."

"Did either of them confess to murdering your uncle, or Pastor Williams?" Pat asked. "I think both or one of them did it, don't you?"

"Annabelle said she didn't know if her husband was a murderer or not, but he would get my vote. I've never seen a ruder, viler man. I'm hoping Cade will get him to confess. Or, if he doesn't spill the beans, maybe Moe will. Vermouth seems to be the ringleader."

Jackie, who had listened quietly, suddenly changed the subject. "You know, Ned, if you had that carriage house fixed up, you could probably rent it. If you screened your renters carefully, you might get someone

trustworthy and reliable in there. Then, you wouldn't be completely alone in that big old place."

Pat shook her head. "Oh, no, Jackie! Not that carriage house. If there is a ghost at Granger Mansion, the carriage house has got to be its headquarters. I get the most awful feeling about that old place. Besides, it's really tumbledown. It'd take a lot of money to fix it up."

Slowly, I nodded. "That's an idea, Jackie. Pat, I don't feel that way about it at all. Maybe it's just because it is empty and falling to staves that you have a negative feeling. Maybe if it were fixed up, you'd like it."

"Somehow, I doubt it," Pat muttered.

"I've got a million things to do to get ready for that party," Jackie said, scooting toward the end of the bench. "Ned, you will come to my party, won't you? It'd do you a world of good."

"Thanks, Jackie. I'm sure it'll be beautiful, but I don't know whether I should. After all, I'm still in mourning for Uncle Javin."

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Pat interrupted. "People don't go around in black and long veils any more. I'm going, and it'd make you forget all your trials for a while."

"That's a pretty tall order for any party, Pat," I murmured. "Make me forget Uncle Javin's murder, Pastor Williams' death, my stolen ring, and near-kidnapping? If you can guarantee it'll all disappear, I'll go."

Pat grinned. "I guarantee it."



## *Chapter 34*

I was too restless to go home after Grandy's. I had left the fireplace banked and plenty of food and water for Penny. While my Escape was in the garage, I was driving a compact loaner car. Getting in, I leaned against the steering wheel and thought of my options. The library would be a good place to spend a few hours, and if Greta Anderson were not busy, maybe she would have time to sit down for a chat.

Greta, however, was swamped. It seemed that everyone in Ednalee thought the library was the perfect place to spend a winter afternoon, four days before Christmas.

When I told her I wanted to read through old newspaper items, she smiled and motioned me toward the right section of microfiche. I sauntered back to the files, and dug into the past. Instantly, I forgot about everything except Ednalee forty years before.

Sadly, I read the account of Eldon Decker's murder, the trial, and the outcome. Going backward, I found the news of the year before Decker's death and my uncle's imprisonment.

Reading through the mostly uneventful accounts, I saw an article or two mentioning my parents and their activities in the local PTA, read about a drought that ruined a corn crop, and a winter blizzard which froze cattle in the pastures. Idly, I flicked through these ordinary



accounts of a small but thriving Oklahoma town and the comparatively quiet life of forty years earlier.

I was about to call it a day when a familiar name stared up at me. The date was January 2, 1974, the column titled, *In the Romance Department*. “Seen about town, Miss Martha R. Decker and Mr. Gideon Wilcox. The roving reporter asks, *Are they sweethearts?*”

This was all, just the short, inexplicable news item, rather like town gossip, but it stunned me. Gideon Wilcox? But, according to Cade, Gideon was actually Gabe Williams. It sounded as if Gideon/Gabe and Martha were intimately acquainted, but I had never heard anyone mention the two together since my return to Ednalee. I did not see Martha at his funeral, which was not unusual as she didn’t attend his church. It seemed that they didn’t know each other. That news item made no sense whatsoever.

Martha had, however, attended Uncle Javin’s funeral and Pastor Williams preached the sermon.

Perhaps Martha had not recognized him. I said, “Oh!” so loudly that several library patrons frowned in my direction. That would explain it. Pastor Williams, grown old, gray-haired, and with a bushy beard, would not have looked like the young man Martha knew so long ago. But, surely he would have recognized Martha. Why hadn’t he contacted her? Why would he come back to Ednalee and not get in touch with an old flame?

I wondered how Martha would react if I told her Gabe’s true identity. Or, perhaps the item in the paper was merely gossip and there was no truth in it. Slowly, I turned off the machine and stood up. I had not wanted to go home a short time earlier, but now I did. Too much was happening too fast. I did not want to read more, nor did I want to deal with any more revelations. Sitting in my warm, bright sunroom in a house decorated for Christmas, enjoying the fireplace, and thinking about nothing at all sounded appealing. At the moment, my brain was on overload.



## Chapter 35

The cozy mystery I had been reading slid off the sofa and fell to the floor with a *plop*. Sitting bolt upright, my eyes flew open and I stared wildly around the dining room. In my dream, a dog, perhaps Ulysses, chased me down an icy street which was so slick, I could not run. He came closer and closer. Just as he sprang, my book dropped and woke me.

Penny looked up from her rug in front of the fireplace. The logs had burned down to smoldering embers and the room had grown dark. How long had I slept? Glancing at my watch, I saw it was 11:20. Should I change into my pajamas and climb the stairs to the bedroom or just spend the rest of the night on the sofa?

“What do you think, Penny?” I asked.

She sprang to her feet and arched her back, her fur standing up like an animated bristle cone. She stared at the window then whirled and dashed upstairs.

“Well, my goodness, it was just a question,” I called after her.

She was clearly frightened. Could someone be lurking around the house again? Listening, I didn’t hear anyone trying the new locks. All seemed serene.

Deciding to check the yard and porch, I went to the dining room window and glanced out. Like a full moon, the dusk-to-dawn light

illuminated the yard, throwing long shadows of trees and bushes across the lawn and sidewalk.

I saw nothing alarming. Penny's imitation of a bottle brush must have been caused by her imagination. Perhaps she had a bad dream too. I was turning away from the window when, in the edge of my vision, I glimpsed a movement. My heart in my throat, I drew the curtain aside and stared into the night.

A figure in white moved swiftly and silently from behind the pines and disappeared inside the carriage house. Pressing my hands together to still their shaking, I stood like a statue, gazing at the ramshackle building. I was almost afraid to blink, afraid I would miss seeing it again, but the figure did not emerge.

Should I dial Cade? Did I dare go upstairs for my gun? Afraid to take my eyes off the carriage house for even an instant, I discarded both ideas. Besides, that slight, silent shape did not seem threatening to me, not like Vermouth or the Ralston man.

Fear gave way to curiosity and a rising anger that someone or *something* would trespass and find it necessary to sneak around in the dark instead of coming to my door.

"Please, Lord," I whispered, "Protect me and help me find out what is going on."

Remembering the squeak in the front door, I slipped out through the kitchen and tiptoed down the back porch steps, keeping in the shadow of the house. Darting from porch shadow to tree, to bush, scrunching down and hiding as much as possible, I reached the carriage house.

The intruder had not needed to open the wide door hanging by its hinges. The gap between door and building was plenty wide enough for a person to pass. Holding my breath, I cautiously edged through the opening.

At first, I couldn't see anything. The interior was dark except for the yard light slanting in through cracks in the wall and the broken window, but then I heard a skittering, shuffling sound, and a small whimper, like a puppy lost from its mother.

Straining my ears, my eyes probed the darkness. No movement, no noise, nothing. Then the sound came again from above me. It was a voice, a woman's thin, frightened voice.

"I've got to find it," she murmured, then, frantically, "I *must* find it!"

Chills chased each other up and down my spine. I hadn't taken time to throw on my coat but I shivered, not from the cold, but horror. What or who was in the loft?

Someone in the upper room walked softly across the floor. The hem of a white gown appeared on the stairs and a slim figure drifted down the steps. Slowly, silently, it descended until it stood on the ground floor, mere inches from me.

A small woman with snowy white hair and dressed in a long gown stood uncertainly, swaying on her feet.

She must have heard my quick intake of breath. I pressed my hand against my mouth and shrank back against the wall, but she whirled in my direction.

Without saying a word, she ran toward the door. I stepped out of the shadows and grabbed her.

## Chapter 36

She struggled feebly and I was reminded of a moth fluttering its wings against a light.

“No, no!” she shrilled. “Let me go! Oh, please, let me go.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I said, panting with the effort of holding onto her arm. “I just want to talk. Who are you and what are you doing in my carriage house?”

She grew quiet although she still trembled.

“You—are you Javin’s niece, then?”

“Yes, yes, I am. Did you know my uncle? Why are you here? What are you looking for?”

As I spoke, I was pulling her toward the crack in the door. At last, we stepped out of the dark building. The yard light shone on a small, thin woman, unruly hair like a ball of fuzzy cotton around her face and with the most beautiful, large, dark eyes I had ever seen.

She stared at me intently. “Yes, yes, I can see you look like him a bit. But, please, I must go before Rose knows I’m gone.”

“Rose? Who is Rose?”

She didn’t answer. With a sudden jerk, she was free and running across the yard toward the copse of pines between my house and the Decker home.

Had I just met Anne Decker? Martha assured me her mother was practically bedfast. But this woman ran like a scared deer. She was about the same age as I supposed Anne to be, and she disappeared in the direction of the Decker house. She was dressed in gown and robe as if she had gotten up from her bed. But, if she wasn't Anne, who was she? And who was Rose? Why would Anne feel it necessary to slip out of her house at night? I gazed after her so long that I felt myself growing numb with cold. Slowly, I turned back to Granger Mansion.

Safely inside my kitchen, I turned the fire on under the kettle, hoping that a nice cup of herbal tea would calm me. My thoughts were scattered all over these last three weeks and I needed to settle down, and think.

Putting a bag of chamomile tea into a cup, I poured in the hot water and added a dollop of honey. Wrapping an old, green afghan around my shoulders, I sat down at the kitchen table. If only there were someone to talk to, to help me figure out this puzzle. Pat and Jackie came to mind, but, at this hour they would surely be asleep. The same thing applied to Cade; besides, what was there to say? I had never told him about seeing that first ghost-like figure.

This was one of those many times I missed Sloan. My husband and I used to talk over every problem and enjoy a good, gossipy chat. Taking a gulp of tea to stave off any self-pity, I gave myself a mental shake. I may not have asked for these traumatic events, but here I was, in the middle of them, and I would deal with them the best I could.

Penny, having rediscovered her courage, crept over to my chair. Bouncing her nose gently against my shoe in catly fashion, she assimilated the scents of the carriage house and knew instantly where I had been.

My kitchen in Atlanta had a catch-all cabinet drawer and Uncle Javin's kitchen had one too. I rummaged through for a pencil and paper and brought them to the table. I sat for a long while, thinking about the amazing interlude in the carriage house. The ghost of Granger Mansion, or one of the ghosts, at least had turned out to be

nothing more than a frail, frightened woman. Finding her didn't solve anything, however, but only added to the mystery.

"Now, Penny," I said, "I want you to listen and give me your opinion, please, on what to make of all this stuff. Maybe if I jot my thoughts on paper, I can see the answer in front of me, sort of like putting the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle into their proper places."

The trouble was, I had no idea where those pieces went. Some of them seemed totally disconnected, but surely they would fit if I thought about them long enough. My uncle's murder started this whole thing, but why did he die? He already had paid the price for taking the life of another human being. After his return to Ednalee, he lived a quiet life, but something troubled him and he had asked me to come and help him figure things out. He mentioned Pastor Williams. Were these two men and their deaths connected? Had Mr. Williams' murder been due to something in his past or did it have something to do with me and my return to Ednalee?

Glancing down, I saw that I had sketched, in the corner of my paper, a spider web with attached spider. Was Ednalee or Granger Mansion the web? If so, who was the spider? And how many more victims would it catch?

Writing "Suspects" at the top of the page, I prepared to make a list. "Now, listen, Penny," I said. "Vermouth Decker is the strongest possibility as murderer. He was a lawbreaker, proven by his manufacturing meth, and he hated Uncle Javin and might have transferred that hatred to me. His brother Moe is as much a suspect as he is. Those two are a team. But why would either brother hate Pastor Williams?"

Next, I wrote the name Sherman Lloyd. Since Penny had deserted me in favor of the rug in front of the fireplace, I gave up talking to her. Mr. Lloyd certainly had motive for getting rid of my uncle. He wanted Granger Mansion for his housing project or, perhaps, for other nefarious purposes. But again, why would he murder the pastor of Rose Chapel?

Staring into space for several minutes didn't help with answers. I shrugged and decided to list everyone, even those who would not,

as far as I knew, have had the slightest reason to kill. I would try to imagine what might drive these citizens of Ednalee to shoot Uncle Javin and/or Gabe Williams.

Feeling like a traitor, I wrote: Cade Morris—perhaps he hated all lawbreakers and felt it was his mission in life to rid the world of any who had ever committed a felony. That would account for Uncle Javin. Maybe he hated Mr. Williams because he disliked all ministers and blamed them for marrying him and his wife.

Gerald Mills—he could have killed Uncle Javin because he emulated Cade's hatred of felons. Perhaps he poisoned his pastor because he wanted to be the pastor of Rose Chapel himself.

This was getting to be so silly that in a fog of frustration, I lumped the next ones together: Pat, Jackie, Ron, Martha, Anne.

My head hurt and the chamomile tea at last was making me sleepy. The only conclusion I came to was that someone who lived in Ednalee harbored a very dark secret or two and perhaps there was more to the good citizens here than met the eye.

I pushed back from the table, crumpled my sheet of paper with the spider on it into a ball, and tossed it into the fireplace. One thing I was sure of—come daylight, I was going back to the carriage house, and turn the old place upside down until I found whatever it was that my night visitor thought was hidden there.





## *Chapter 37*

Even though I was sure I could not actually sleep, the minute I stretched out on the sofa and pulled the afghan up to my chin, the chamomile tea took over and I napped. I tossed and turned, waking and dozing, until Penny gently batted my nose, telling me it was time for her breakfast.

Setting my cat on the floor, I stood up and stretched. The Lord willing, this would be the day I would find some answers, or at least partial answers, about the identity of the murderer in Ednalee. I shook out some dry food for my cat, put coffee and water into the pot, bread in the toaster, and poured a glass of grapefruit juice. The sun was already far up in the sky when I pulled my parka over a red sweatshirt and jeans, stepped into my fur-lined boots, and headed for the carriage house.

Inside, the small building was lit by fingers of sunlight poking through cracks in the wall. When I began to restore this old place, I would install electricity and ceiling lights as a first order of business. I pulled open the heavy double doors to let in more light, and I carried a flashlight to shine in dark corners.

Debris had accumulated through years of neglect. Dirt, cobwebs, and paper that had blown in through openings in the wall littered the interior. Finding a stick in the corner, I began poking through many years' worth of trash and dust. At the end of an hour, a couple of stacks

of very old and weathered novels, a wood crate holding empty soda bottles, and a Heppelwhite chair, evidently a reproduction and missing the upholstered seat, waited for me to move them to the attic in the house.

Taking a deep breath, I eyed the stairs leading to the loft. Anne (for I was pretty sure of her name) had been up there last night. Since she thought the attic was important, I would search there too.

Carefully, I climbed those oak steps, which once had been polished, to the upstairs room. The pale sun made more of a headway up here, through a couple of windows which, miraculously, were unbroken. I saw no sign of leakage either, so the roof was still holding. This small room was bare except for a metal cot, devoid of mattress, and a square, plain, wood table.

Where should I start searching? It would be easier if I knew what I was looking for. Was it large or small, and, if Anne couldn't find it, why did I think I could?

Whoever had finished this room had taken great care with the woodwork. The wall moldings were beautifully carved. After poking under the bed and into the corners, I was ready to give up, just as Anne had. The room was mostly bare and I could see no places where a secret could be hidden.

The search was tiring and sleep had been fitful last night. Feeling weary, I sank to the floor, leaned back against the wall, and admired the exposed rafters and beams above me. Even they had been finished and looked smooth and solid. Except one. The rafter near the peak in the roof seemed a little out of line with the others.

The more I gazed at this rafter, the more I realized something was wrong. Getting to my feet, I pulled the table over, climbed up on it, and tried to touch that tantalizing crossbeam. It was too high. I couldn't reach it.

Now that my curiosity was running full throttle, I had to check out this aberration in fine workmanship. I quickly descended the stairs, and retrieved my poking stick from a corner. Climbing the stairs again, I heaved myself up on the table, and reached toward the rafter with

my stick. It touched something that had been wedged between rafter and ceiling. That was the aberration, protruding from the straight line of the rafter and making it look crooked. Whatever that object was, it moved beneath my probing.

Standing on tiptoe and pushing as hard as I could with the tip of the stick, I felt the thing scoot an inch or two. Another push, and it slid more, then dropped off the rafter onto the table at my feet.

Jumping to the floor, I picked up my treasure. It was a black tin box about five by seven inches. My mother had a similar one among her belongings. Years ago, diaries were sold in boxes like this. Something slid against the sides as I shook it. Could this be what Anne had been searching for? Why? I dropped to the floor and tried to lift the lid. That's when I saw the tiny keyhole. The lid was locked and, although I searched, I could not find a key.

My pulse racing, I hurried back to the house. Surely, I could open this box. I didn't want to mar it because it must be an antique. I certainly did not want to damage whatever was inside, but one way or the other, I was going to find out what this box contained.



## *Chapter 38*

As I ran up the steps of the back porch, the cell phone in my pocket jingled. I dashed through the back door and into the kitchen, flipping open the phone. Cade's voice answered my "Hello."

"Ned, I don't want to alarm you but you should know that Verm and Moe Decker have escaped from the county jail."

My breath caught in my throat. "What? How did that happen? I thought they were locked securely away."

"Yeah, well, they were, but one of their pals, that neighbor, I suspect who gave them the alibi for Javin's murder, slipped them a knife. When Gerald took them their supper trays, they grabbed him."

"Gerald? Did they hurt him? Is he all right?" I leaned against the door for support as visions of Pat's son lying dead in a pool of blood gripped me.

"He's fine, Ned. But we are worried about you. Those men have every reason to hate you, so be on the lookout. Stay inside your house. We'll get them, but be careful."

Returning the cell phone to my pocket, I dropped into a kitchen chair. How many more surprises could a slightly-past-middle-aged woman take? In the last three weeks, my nerves had undergone so many severe jolts they must look as frazzled as a frayed electrical cord.

Giving myself a mental shake, I gazed at that black tin box on my table. Gerald was not hurt. I was warned to be careful, and Cade was on the job. Besides, I firmly believed in the Lord's angels of protection. I couldn't do anything about two escaped felons but maybe I could open this enigmatic black box.

Picking locks was not my strong point, but I was willing to learn. Going to the junk drawer in the kitchen and rummaging through, I found a tiny screwdriver. The tip looked to be the size of a toothpick. Surely, this would work. Holding the metal box up to the window so I could see the lock, I pushed the screwdriver into the opening and turned. Nothing happened. Could the lid be rusted shut instead of being locked? Gently wiggling the top part of the box, I felt the lid move. No, it wasn't rusted, just firmly locked.

Glancing at the coffee pot, I noticed the On light was still shining, so I poured another cup of hot caffeine. Perhaps I needed to just sit down and think about how to get into this firmly locked little container.

Putting the box on the table in front of me, I cradled the cup in my hands, and stared at it, willing it to open. The niggling voice of my accusing conscience whispered that this box might not be mine. If it happened to be what my night visitor was searching for, perhaps it was hers. Should I take it to Martha and ask her about it?

Certainly not, my practical side answered. The box was on my property. Anne, if that's who she was, trespassed by entering the carriage house, and besides, I was in possession.

Silencing my pesky inner voice, I sipped the hot coffee and thought about all these events swirling around me. As a child, I had never known Granger Mansion or Uncle Javin to be particularly mysterious. If secrets existed in my uncle's life or in any of the neatly kept houses in town, I knew nothing of them. In my childish innocence, I didn't consider that Ednalee might be home to some pretty bad people but, since my return, I was discovering that all was certainly not as it seemed on the surface. Like a still, deep pool, deceptively reflecting the blue sky, my hometown seemed quiet and innocent. I was learning that it was neither of those things.

Who had hidden this box? Certainly not my uncle. If it had been important to him, he would have kept it locked away in his bank security vault, just as he did that lovely and costly locket nestled on a velvet pad.

As I was considering trying to find an axe to break open the box, the door knocker rattled. Maybe this visitor, whoever it was, wouldn't stay long. I wanted to see what was in that box! Scooting away from the table, I ran to the front door, and pulled it open. Martha Decker stood on the porch, my clean pie plate in her hands.

This was not a good time for a visit, but telling my next door neighbor to go away was not an option. Groaning inwardly, I smiled and said, "Why, Martha, how nice. Come in."

"I brought back your plate, Nettie," she said. "It was mighty good pie." She snuffled and swiped at her nose.

"Martha! Are you crying? What's wrong?" This short, plump woman who bustled into rooms abounding with confidence, slumped, gazing down at the floor, the picture of dejection.

"Oh, I don't want to bother you with my problems, Nettie," she said. "It's just Mother. Sometimes, I get so tired . . ."

"Come in and have a cup of coffee," I said, helping her out of her coat. "Maybe I can help."

Shaking her head, she waddled into the kitchen and plopped down in a chair.

"What a strange box," she said, eying the black metal container on the table. "It looks vaguely familiar. Is it yours?"

"Oh, it's nothing," I mumbled, picking up the box and setting it on the countertop. "You know how old houses have things that were stuck back for years."

I poured two cups of coffee, and sat down facing her.

"You mentioned your mother. Is she sick?"

Martha gulped some coffee, took off her glasses, and dabbed at her eyes with the napkin.

"I don't know. Usually, she's quiet and seems happy enough, but this morning . . . well, this morning, she was just wild, crying and moaning,

and saying that something is all her fault. I don't understand. After she took her medication, she was quieter, and I think she is sleeping now, but I don't know how long it will last."

Reaching across the table, I patted her hand. "Taking care of an invalid can make a person weary. Of course you get tired. It's only a normal reaction."

She blinked. "Is it? Normal, I mean? I've been stuck in the house with her for so long, I don't know what normal is. Just between you and me, Nettie, I haven't had any life. All I've done is take care of my mother. Sometimes I truly resent that."

"I'm sorry." I could think of nothing else to say. I wanted to ask her what had happened to her boyfriend, Gideon Wilcox. Would this be a good time to ask if she knew that her old beau was none other than Pastor Gabe Williams?

She sighed. "Oh, it's okay. After all, who would want an old woman like me? And, let's face it, there are not that many eligible bachelors around. For a while, after your uncle came back, I thought perhaps there was a chance that he might forget our age difference and want to marry me. Of course, he would have been marrying my mother too, in a way, because I'm always going to have to look after her."

This was the first time Martha had put into words what I suspected. She brought food to Uncle Javin with romance in mind. Evidently, her feelings were not reciprocated. This might be a good time to ask if Anne and Uncle Javin had renewed their friendship since his release, but I could not find the appropriate words for such a delicate question.

Sensing, however, that her resentment against her mother was real, an idea occurred to me: this was an ideal opportunity to find out whether my night visitor was actually Anne Decker!

"Taking care of an invalid is draining and I've been selfish not to offer my help before this," I said. "Would you like for me to come over and sit with her—Anne, I mean—while you go out for a while or perhaps take a nap?"

A smile lit her face. "Oh, Nettie! Would you do that?"

"Of course I would! I'll just grab my coat and purse."

Five minutes later, I followed Martha inside the Decker house, wondering once again why she kept her curtains drawn and her rooms dark. She was certainly frugal with electricity. Only a few lamps were on. Martha's kitchen was the brightest area but it too seemed dismal after the extravagant brightness of my own house. Not one Christmas decoration brightened this home, but that may have been because of her mother's illness. Perhaps Martha didn't feel like celebrating.

"I'll fix us a cup of tea," Martha said, going to the range and turning on a burner under her teakettle.

"I've had so much coffee that I'm swimming in caffeine," I protested. "Why don't I just go upstairs and sit with your mother? You had better get going while the good weather holds. We have more snow in the forecast."

"No, no, that's all right. I gave her a sedative before coming to your house and she's resting right now. We'll have time for tea and this is herbal, Nettie. It won't jangle your nerves, I promise."

She got two cups from the cabinet. Idly, I wondered how she kept everything so spotless. No ceramic roosters or cute little salt and pepper shakers, no flowers or Santas adorned her countertop; the stainless steel gleamed and the Formica top looked well scrubbed.

Half turning toward me, she said, "Is that someone on the porch? I can't imagine who it could be. Would you check for me, while I finish our tea?"

"Sure," I answered.

No one was on Martha's porch, but the rising wind blew a tree limb across the roof, making a scraping sound.

Coming back into the kitchen, I reported what I'd found.

"I've got to have someone cut those limbs," Martha murmured, bringing our cups of tea to the table. "They make a noise like a person walking around and gets my nerves all jittery."

I sat down facing her and hoped she would hurry and leave so I could check the identity of her mother. Martha smiled as she lifted her cup. "I guess we all need a calming cup of tea now and then, including me."



I nodded, thinking about that box on my countertop and wondering how long it would be before I could get back to it. As it turned out, it was a long, long time.



## *Chapter 39*

“This tea is delicious, Martha,” I said, stifling a yawn, “but maybe I should have had something with caffeine in it after all. I’m sorry, but I am so sleepy.”

“You are probably just getting relaxed from being inside a warm house after the cold walk over here,” Martha said. “I wish I had some cookies to offer you, but I haven’t done much baking lately.”

“Tha’s okay,” I mumbled. “Couldn’t have held ’em anyway.”

Something in the distance buzzed and crackled. The noise seemed to be coming from upstairs.

“Wha’s that?” I asked. “Some sort of strange sound.”

“Don’t worry about it, Nettie dear. That’s just my police scanner. I have one in my room, have had it for years. It really pays to know what’s going on in one’s home town, you know. That’s how I found out about my dear uncles’ escape. And, since they are out and about now, it seemed the perfect time to carry out the rest of my plan. Verm and Moe will get the blame—not me.”

My vision was becoming so blurry that Martha’s face looked like two faces and her table seemed to be tilting at a dangerous angle. I heard her words, but they made no sense to me. Something about a police scanner and a plan. What plan? Blame for what?

"Honestly, I don't know what's wrong with me," I said. "Maybe I'm coming down with something. I'm really going to have to go home."

"I'll help you with your coat," Martha said as she scooted away from the table. "You'll get even sleepier, Nettie, and I don't want you to be found here. That's not in my plans."

My eyelids were so heavy, they felt as if they had bricks on them. Although I heard Martha speaking, her voice seemed to come from far away. Something, however, wasn't right. Martha was smiling. Didn't she realize that I might keel over at any moment?

"Wha' d'ya mean, plans, found here? Wha's going on?"

She poked my arms into my coat and pulled me to my feet.

"My plans for you, little Nettie. This is all your fault, you know. I really liked you, but you are ruining everything. Javin might have married me, just for company, but here you came, all the way from Georgia, so he didn't need me anymore! And, he was getting wise to me. He was asking too many questions, just like you are. Pretty soon, you would have figured it all out. I can't risk that."

Her words ceased to make sense to me, besides, I no longer had the strength to answer her. She half-dragged me down her porch and I felt a cold wind with snow in it on my face. Evidently, she expected me to walk, but moving my feet took almost more energy than I had left. At last, the wind stopped and I realized we were inside a building. Struggling against sleep, I tried to stay on my feet, but I felt myself falling as oblivion overtook me.

I awoke to total darkness. Lying in a cramped position, consciousness returned in small increments. Where was I and how had I gotten here? Why was something heavy across my head, making it hard to breathe? Trying to move, I found that my hands and feet were bound. I couldn't even open my mouth because a tight, sticky band stretched from ear to ear.

How had I gotten here? And why? Where was I? Slowly, a bit at a time, memory returned. I had been drinking tea with Martha and began to get sleepy. She said something about plans for me and helped me into my coat. I remembered walking but it seemed to be in slow

motion, as if I were wading through a deep stream. My head throbbed, but my most pressing need was for air. Moving as much as I could, I squirmed and wriggled, trying to find a hole in whatever was covering me. I tossed my head back and forth, fighting against the thick covering that threatened to suffocate me. Twisting and shrugging, desperate to get the heavy shroud off me, I finally felt it slide. Gasping and near panic, at last I felt cold air on my forehead. Another head shake, and the material slid off my face and I could breathe!

Drawing in deep lungfuls of the blessed, cold air, I gazed at my surroundings. Where was I? An old quilt which had covered my head lay bunched around me. Darkness surrounded me, but it was not a complete darkness. A dim, flickering light came from somewhere. Bracing my feet on the floor, I scooted backward until my head made contact with a wall. Using the wall to brace myself, I scooted against the boards until I reached a half-sitting position.

The light, I saw, came from a candle atop something, a table, maybe, or chair? Something that was elevated. By its feeble glow, I saw that I was in a room, a cold, drafty room. Little by little, objects in the room became visible. Near me sat a wood case full of empty pop bottles. Nearby, a dilapidated chair. A number of books lay strewn on the floor, and the candle, I could see now, was not on a table at all, but on the third step of a stairway. Horror shook me and my scalp tightened. My prison became familiar. I lay in Uncle Javin's carriage house!

Newspapers were scattered over the floor, around me, on the steps, and under the candle. Then I knew what a diabolical trap had been set. The candle had burned down to a stub, but before it sputtered out, it would ignite the crumpled sheets of newsprint that lay on the stairs. In a matter of minutes, the flame would touch the paper. When it did, fire would race through the carriage house, igniting papers, books, and everything in the building, including me.

Blood pounded in my ears and the skin on my face seemed to draw tightly against every bone. My stomach clenched and I felt as if I might throw up.

Had Martha put me here? It must have been she. She must have stirred something into my tea, but when? Then I recalled that she had asked me to check out a noise on her front porch. Maybe it was then that she slipped something, some poison or sedative into my cup.

Martha had mentioned a police scanner and plans for me. What were those plans? Did she mean to kill me? Why? Scalding tears ran down my cheeks. Why did she hate me enough to kill me? What had I done to her? I thought she was my friend.

A wind eddied through the building, flicking the newspapers and lifting the pages close to the candle. I had to get out of here, but how? I couldn't reach the tape to peel it off my mouth and scream for help. My hands were tied behind me and the rope knotted around my ankles felt as if it cut into my flesh. At any moment, the wind could blow a paper against the flame and the whole building would be ablaze.

Every prayer and Bible verse I had ever learned fled my memory. Only one phrase churned in my brain, "Lord, help me."

Through the turmoil in my mind, an idea surfaced. It was a chance, a very slim one, but I would take it. Maybe I could roll my way to safety. How I would roll with my arms stretched tightly behind me, I had no idea, but I would try.

Sliding away from the wall, I pushed with my heels and tried to roll. It was impossible. Pain in my arms prevented me from doing anything but rocking back and forth in a futile exercise.

Since that didn't work, I dug the heels of my boots into the floor and pushed, scooting, on my back, one slow inch at a time toward the door. The strewn papers hampered me, sliding under my feet and preventing traction. I pushed, grunted, shoved, and floundered toward that dilapidated door.

The light inside the carriage house flared. Paper crackled and smoke burned my eyes. Turning my head toward the stairs, I saw that the candle's flame had caught one of the newspapers on fire. Like a live thing, the blaze ate through the papers, coming nearer and nearer to me. Tongues of fire licked hungrily at the ancient, dried timbers of the carriage house.

I knew I'd never make it out of this inferno, but the instinct to survive is strong. Struggling and pushing with my boots, I bumped frantically toward the door. Smoke clogged my nostrils and stung my eyes. The roar of the fire grew stronger.

A gust of wind fanned my face, and, as silent as a shadow, a figure knelt beside me, a slight woman whose white hair fanned around her face like a halo.

"Be still, Nettie," she said in my ear. "I'll get you out of here but you're going to have to stop struggling."

Trying to close my ears to the awful noise of the blazing building, I lay still while my rescuer grabbed a piece of paper, twisted it into a tight taper, and lit it from the flames which encircled us.

"I'm going to burn these ropes off your feet," she said. "I'll keep it from catching your pants, but it may hurt a little."

I nodded and lay as still as I could, knowing that with each second, the inferno edged ever closer.

"There!" she said. "Your feet are free. Stand up. We've got to get out of here!"

Not knowing whether I could stand or not, I leaned against this slight being who must surely be an angel. We staggered through the door just as a ceiling timber fell with a horrible cracking sound.

Lurching toward the porch of Granger Mansion, we made it halfway there before we tottered and sank to the ground. My hands still bound, my mouth still taped, I turned to my rescuer and saw the same frail little woman who had hunted for something in the carriage house.

"I'm so sorry for what Martha Rose did to you," she said. "She hasn't been right in the head for a long time. I hope someday you can forgive her. I don't have anything to cut your hands free, and if I pull that tape off your mouth, it's going to hurt. But, listen. Fire trucks and an ambulance are on the way. Somebody saw the fire. You're going to be all right now, little Nettie."



## *Chapter 40*

I spent the rest of the night in the hospital. Cade, Pat, and Jackie insisted on it. Anne Decker, too, went to be checked out and when the doctors learned that she had been under the influence of sedatives for many years, gave her a thorough physical. Even though the bed was hard, the hospital noisy, and death had nearly claimed me, I slept as soundly as if I rested on a featherbed. Answers to questions could wait. At the moment, all I cared about was being alive with a long nightmare finally behind me.

The next day, I sat at the wicker table in Uncle Javin's sunroom, like a queen surrounded by her ladies in waiting—and, of course, two gentlemen in waiting, Cade and Gerald.

My scorched ankles were wrapped in gauze, but they were not painful. If it hadn't been for Anne burning those ropes off, I would not have made it out of the carriage house alive.

"Have another slice of fruitcake, Ned," Jackie said, handing me the plate. "You won't get to come to my party tonight, I guess, so you need to dig into the goodies now."

I laughed. "I'm stuffed, Jackie, and no, I think I'll stay home and sleep for ten or twelve hours tonight."

"But please come to Rose Chapel's Christmas Eve service tomorrow, if you are up to it," Pat pleaded.

Gerald nodded. "It won't be right if you don't, Miss Nettie."

"Where is Martha?" I asked Cade. "And how about Anne? Is she going to be okay?"

"Anne is probably better than she's been for a long time," Cade answered, downing his cup of coffee. "Martha had been giving her sedatives for years to keep her quiet about something. Neither Martha nor Ann would say what that was. And Martha herself? Well, at the moment she's not too far from her uncles. We caught them shortly after I phoned you, Ned. Martha will be taking a trip to a hospital and have some testing done to determine whether she's able to stand trial. I've a suspicion that she'll be found incapable of knowing right from wrong."

"Has she told you anything?" Jackie asked. "Did she say why she tried to kill Ned? And is Martha the Rose that Mr. Granger mentioned?"

"Yes, evidently her family called her by her middle name," Gerald answered. "She blamed Miss Nettie for Mr. Granger not marrying her. She had her eye on Granger Mansion and she thought that he had money. She found his gun and, since she was kind of crazy anyway, she pointed that gun at the poor guy and threatened him if he didn't agree to marry her."

"You're kidding!" I said. "How could she think that? So, when Uncle Javin refused or, most likely, laughed at her, she shot him dead?"

Cade smoothed his mustache and leaned back in his chair. "That's what we gathered from talking to her. As Mr. Javin fell, he knocked the gun out of her hand; she heard you coming, and ran."

Shaking my head, I wondered how this woman could have fooled me with her neighborly gestures. "She pretended to be my friend," I whispered, "and all the time she hated me."

"She must have been afraid of you too," Pat said. "Afraid that you would find out she murdered your uncle."

"Was she the one who stole the ring?" I asked. "Was it her ring?"

"She was wearing it when we picked her up," Gerald answered. "She was in her kitchen, baking cookies and saying that Mr. Granger sure



liked her baking. She held up the ring for us to see on her finger and said this was her promise ring, that her boyfriend gave it to her."

"Hold on," Jackie ordered. "I'm going to refill this carafe. Don't anybody say another word 'til I get back."

Obediently, we sat quietly until she returned with more coffee. I had such a sense of unreality about the previous night and so many questions crowded my mind that it was hard to know what to ask first.

"Is Anne still over there in the Decker house?" I asked. "She saved my life, you know. I don't know how she knew where I was, but I'm sure glad she did."

"She told me that she did not always take those sleeping pills Martha was feeding her," Cade said. "She knew that Martha had something up her sleeve. So last night she watched Martha take you to the carriage house and, as soon as she could, she slipped out of the house and went to find you."

"Thank the Lord," I whispered.

"I wonder if Martha is the one who poisoned my pastor?" Pat murmured. "And, why would she do that?"

"According to an old newspaper account, Martha and the young Gideon Wilcox may have been sweethearts," I told her.

Stunned faces looked my way. "She poisoned her old boyfriend because she didn't like him anymore?" Gerald asked.

"I think it was more than that," I said. "She was afraid of what he might tell, but I have no idea what that was."

"How did she slip those knock-out pills to you?" Cade asked. "Did she have them in her pocket and come over here for coffee?"

Looking into Cade's clear, blue eyes, warm with concern for me, I wondered how I could ever have thought they looked cold. I shook my head. "No, I went to her house. She came here crying and saying how stressed she was from taking care of her mother and I went to help out. Just before she knocked on the door, I was about to open . . ." I whacked the table as I remembered what Martha had interrupted.

"Sorry to scare you," I said sheepishly, as four pairs of startled eyes stared at me. "I just remembered what I was going to do."

Pushing away from the table, I stood up and hobbled toward the kitchen. "I'll be right back," I called over my shoulder.

The black metal box was on the counter top where I left it. Picking it up, I limped back to the dining room and set it on the table.

"Where did you get that?" Jackie asked.

I told them about finding it on a rafter in the carriage house, about the ghostly figure which had turned out to be Anne Decker, and that I believed Anne had been searching for it.

"Do you mean, it wasn't a ghost after all?" Gerald asked, frowning.

Smiling, I said, "Sorry, Gerald. Maybe there's a real ghost lurking around somewhere. We still don't know what happened to Constance Reilly."

"Mrs. Decker may have put gold in that box!" Gerald said, hopefully. "Or maybe it has a treasure map, or . . ."

"Ned, for goodness sake, open it!" Pat ordered.

"It needs a key," I said.

Jackie picked it up and looked it over. "It might contain a diary," she said. "I've seen boxes like this in antique stores."

I nodded. "It has something in it that slides when I shake it but I don't think it's a diary. I don't know how to open it without just getting an axe and smashing it or using something sharp to pry up the lid."

"That would be a shame," Pat said.

Cade picked it up and turned it over, pushing on corners. "Checking for a spring lock," he muttered.

The door knocker rattled. I gasped and glanced at my friends. "Who?"

Gerald jumped to his feet. "Sit still, Miss Nettie," he said. "I'll go."

A minute later, he was back with my rescuer on his arm. Feeling as startled as my friends looked, I struggled to my feet and motioned toward a chair.

"Miss Anne," I said, "How wonderful of you to drop in. I haven't had a chance to tell you how grateful I am. You saved my life! Just a thank you is inadequate. You were so brave and I owe you so much. Please, sit down with us and have some coffee."



## *Chapter 41*

Anne Decker sank into a chair, keeping her coat on. Her face lit up when she saw the black metal box on my table.

“You found it!” she exclaimed. “I was afraid it had burned in the carriage house. Well, maybe I was afraid it hadn’t. The past is the past and can’t be changed now. Nevertheless, I guess it’s best to make a clean breast of things.”

Cade was the first to recover. “Let me take your coat, Mrs. Decker,” he said.

She smiled at him, her dark eyes crinkling at the corners. I could certainly see why Uncle Javin may have been smitten with this woman forty years ago.

“No, thank you, young man. When a lady reaches a certain age, she feels chilly when no one else does.”

She picked up the box and ran her hand over the lid.

“It’s old,” she said, “I hid it somewhere in the carriage house about two years after Javin went to prison. I am assuming you found it, Nettie, but where?”

“It was on a rafter upstairs, Miss Anne,” I said.

“Of course. I hunted and hunted because, after I put that paper inside and hid it, I just plumb forgot where I had put it. Maybe I wanted to forget; maybe it was that junk Martha Rose gave me that

did something to my memory. I tried to tell Javin, after he was released from prison. I just got to see him once and told him a little bit—I didn't have time to say much because Rose was out for only a short while. I ran a risk by coming here that day. All I told Javin was that something was hidden on his place that would prove he was innocent of murder." She shook her head. "Didn't even have time to tell him to search the carriage house. Rose wasn't gone long and she had threatened to put me in a nursing home if I didn't stay put and not talk to anybody." Anne Decker slowly shook her head. Her voice sank to a whisper. "And, you know what? I just didn't have the courage to say more; not when Javin was so glad to see me, not when he trusted me. I couldn't tell him that I didn't deserve his trust or even his friendship."

"Please, Miss Anne," Jackie said, reaching out to the old woman, "what is in it that is so important?"

"I don't have a key," I said. "I would have opened it already, if I could."

Drawing a deep breath, Anne Decker said, "I can fix that."

Reaching into the neck of her blouse, she drew out a small, gold key, inserted it into the lock on the box and turned. There was a tiny click, and she raised the lid.

Five necks craned toward that box while she lifted from it a single, lined notebook page and unfolded it.

Looking at each of us in turn, she said, "Prepare to be shocked. I'm going to read to you what I wrote so long ago.

"The date is January 10, 1976," Anne said. "The writer is me, Anne Decker. *'Last week, my whole world crumbled and fell. My daughter, Martha Rose, told me something that I can scarcely take in. I'm writing this because I can't hold it inside and there's nobody, absolutely nobody I can trust with this terrible secret. Two years ago, Javin Granger was sent to prison for murdering my husband, Eldon. Javin has been a dear friend for many years. He and Eldon got into a fight and Javin hit him, knocking his head against that old well on the Granger property, and killing Eldon. That's what Javin thought, anyway. Eldon was not a nice man and made life miserable for Rose and me. But, today, my daughter told me something that has turned my world upside down. She and her*

*beau, Gideon Wilcox, had been meeting in the Granger's carriage house because Eldon didn't approve and they felt safe there. They were in the carriage house the night Eldon picked a fight with Javin. They watched as Eldon punched Javin and Javin knocked him out cold. When Javin left Eldon, to come and tell me and also the sheriff what he had done, Rose and Gideon slipped up to Eldon to see whether he was dead or alive. Rose said she saw Eldon move and try to sit up. That's when she picked up a brick and hit him hard in the head and killed him. My daughter killed him! Javin thought he had done it, but he didn't! And an innocent man sits in prison for a crime he didn't commit."*

Covering my mouth with my hand, I tried to stifle my tears. Uncle Javin was innocent? What a travesty! How had this happened?

Pat reached across the table and grasped my arm, tears glistening in her eyes. Jackie caught her lip between her teeth and shook her head while Gerald stared at Anne, his eyes as round as saucers. Cade touched my face, his mouth a straight, grim line.

Anne continued reading. *"What do I do? If I tell the authorities, my own child will go to jail. Now that I've written this, I'm going to lock it up and hide it somewhere. I don't want it found while I still live but maybe, someday, the truth will be known, when Martha Rose is beyond the justice of the law. Oh! I'll never know another happy day!"*

By the time Anne reached the bottom of the page, sobs shook my body. Blindly, I staggered to the bathroom and leaned against the door. My poor, dear uncle had paid for a crime he didn't commit while Martha Rose Decker remained as free as a bird. All his suffering, our family's suffering, had been for nothing. Mom had been right. Uncle Javin had not killed Eldon Decker.

Cade rapped softly on the bathroom door. "Are you all right, Ned?" he asked.

Sniffing, I opened the door. "I just don't know how to deal with all this."

"We'll deal with it one day at a time," Cade said, walking with me back to the table.

"Gideon Wilcox left town after Eldon's murder," Jackie mused, gazing out of the window where soft hunks of snow were already

covering the charred remains of the old carriage house. "I wonder if he was afraid of Martha Rose, if she threatened him, or could be he felt he was an accomplice to Eldon's murder."

"I would have been afraid of her," Pat said. "That gal was crazy. Pardon me, Mrs. Decker."

"So, why did he come back?" Gerald asked. "Why did Pastor Williams come back to Ednalee?"

"I believe that he was remorseful," Anne said. "He was really a good-hearted boy, but he was frightened and horrified by what my daughter did. And you're right. He was afraid of her, with good reason. He knew she killed Eldon and he may have suspected she killed Javin too."

I thought of Pastor Williams' phone call to me the morning he died. "Uncle Javin mentioned Pastor Williams and suggested I should talk to him. Maybe he was going to tell me the truth about what happened forty years ago."

"I'll bet that Martha didn't recognize Mr. Williams until Javin's funeral," Jackie said. "She knew she had to kill him before he could spill the beans."

"After Gideon died, I realized I had to stop Martha," Anne murmured, gazing at the folded confession. "And, I knew I had to find that box. She was afraid I might tell people what she had done, but she didn't know I had written her confession and hid it. That's why she kept me doped up all these years." She glanced slyly around the table. "But, I didn't always swallow those blamed pills."

"Did you talk to Uncle Javin only once after he got out of prison?" I asked her.

"I just had time to sneak out of the house once," Anne said. "I was going to tell him the whole story Rose had told me, but when I was facing him, I didn't have the courage. It would have hurt him again to know that I knew and hadn't said anything, that he had wasted his life because I was such a coward. I just told him there was something important on the grounds, something that would give him back his good name, and he had to find it."

"It is all so unfair," I said. "I wish Uncle Javin could know that, finally, his name has been cleared."

Pat smiled. "I believe he does know, Ned," she said. "Your uncle is free from the burden of guilt and, thanks to his niece, his name is cleared at last."



## *Chapter 42*

Tall, red tapers stood among boughs of cedar and pine lying on each windowsill of Rose chapel. The only lights in the church were from those tapers and the small, white candle each worshiper held. Gerald had read the Christmas story to the congregation, then everyone launched into all three verses of “Silent Night.” One candle lit the candle next to it until the whole sanctuary glowed with soft light.

Seeing Cade at this service brought me a great deal of joy. Perhaps he would, once again, become a regular church attender. With my shoulder brushing his arm, I felt a warm gladness that had been absent from my life for a long time. Pat stood beside me, followed by Jackie and Ron. My heart overflowed with gratitude to the Lord Jesus for each of these friends and for seeing me safely through the most amazing weeks of my life.

Before coming to Ednalee, I had no idea what lay ahead of me, or that I would nearly lose my life at the hands of a madwoman. I had come believing Uncle Javin was a murderer and discovered that he was the victim of a terrible lie. I wished that my parents could know that he was absolved of murder but, as Pat said about Uncle Javin, perhaps Dad and Mom did know.

My years in Atlanta seemed as remote as a dream. Here, in my hometown, I felt more alive than I had felt since Sloan’s death. What



would I do now? Uncle Javin's house was mine. Would Sherman Lloyd continue to hound me about buying it? Hopefully, he had gotten the message that I would follow Uncle Javin's wishes, and Granger Mansion's acres would not be divided into a housing development.

Anne told us she saw Vermouth Decker break off the door knocker that first night I glimpsed her by the carriage house. So, that small mystery was solved. She was able to slip away at night occasionally when Martha Rose was asleep. She confessed to being the white figure I had seen back in the woods, the day of Uncle Javin's funeral.

"I had to come and tell Javin goodbye," she said to us.

I regretted the loss of the carriage house, but maybe it was better this way. Pat's strong distaste for it might have had some justification. Anyway, it had burned to the ground. I, however, liked the idea of a carriage house and remembered Jackie's suggestion to upgrade it to a rental apartment. That might be fun.

"Sleep in heavenly peace," we sang. "Sleep in heavenly peace."

We extinguished our candles and Cade smiled down at me. "Come on, Ned," he said. "I'll drive you home."





## About the Author



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 crafter. 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*, *Grave Shift*, and *Best Left Buried*; books one, two, and three in the Darcy & Flora cozy mysteries.

