



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.