

The Death of Amelia Marsh

A Sally Nimitz Mystery

(Book 1)

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This book is dedicated to my grandson, Malachi,
who likes to read, and to write, just as I do.

My gratitude to my husband, Bill,
without whose computer expertise this book would never have happened!
Also, I so much appreciate his encouragement.
And, also, thanks to my sister and my friends,
who enjoyed this story from the beginning.
A special thanks to Vangie,
because she believed my efforts were worth publishing.

Chapter One

Mrs. Marsh didn't answer the doorbell. I knew she was there; she had, in fact, asked me to come by. It was two o'clock in the afternoon. I rang again and waited a full minute. Her arthritis might keep her from getting to the door in a timely manner. As I walked slowly back to my own apartment I wondered if I should be worried about her. She was eighty, after all. But she might have forgotten about our appointment. She might very well have fallen asleep and did not hear the doorbell. Mrs. Marsh was not extremely deaf but her hearing was no longer sharp, either.

In the end I decided to wait an hour. If she had dozed off that would give her time to wake up and call me first. An hour was a good amount of time to get my bathrooms cleaned. Putting in three straight twelve-hour shifts had seriously interfered with my domestic schedule. It was a puzzle how living alone most of the time I could still manage to make a mess of both of my bathrooms. I hate dirty bathrooms. But, a full hour set them right with some time left over for the kitchen. With a feeling of accomplishment I went to the telephone and rang Mrs. Marsh's number.

She didn't answer the phone and my uneasiness grew. I let the ringing go on for a while, wondering what my next move should be. This elderly neighbor and I had been casually friendly for about six months. It began when one of her towels escaped from her clothesline and landed in my patio. I returned the towel and stayed for a cup of tea. She fascinated me, not only because of her old fashioned hairdo and handmade sweaters, and not only because of her English accent and manners, but also because of her lifestyle which was an intriguing mix of the modern and the past. She hung most of her laundry outside, no matter how cold it was, and hung the rest to dry on a large wooden rack in her spare bedroom. She had her groceries delivered from the one grocer in town who offered the service, but she drove herself to the hairdresser and to church every week. The added expense of grocery delivery did not bother her at all, but she refused to indulge in such frivolities as an

answering machine or new shoes. I was glad about the shoes. Her '40s and '50s style footwear on her tiny feet was another fascination. And, since there was no answering machine, it was now a certainty Mrs. Marsh was not at home or could not get to her phone.

I opted for caution over embarrassment. The lady had been perfectly fine when she waved her handkerchief at me the day before, but a heart attack or a stroke was certainly possible. I called the manager of the condo complex.

Barry found managing the buildings a suitable job while working on a night degree in computer science. He had that admirable quality of being able to study while being interrupted frequently. His voice was cheer itself as he listened to my concern.

"No problem, Mrs. Nimitz," he boomed. With his clear, resonant voice, I thought again he was wasted on his chosen profession and should have been a radio announcer or a high school teacher instead. "I'll grab the extra key and go over there to make sure everything's okay. You want to meet me there?"

I did meet him at her front door. Everything was not okay. The front door was not locked. We found Mrs. Marsh dead on the kitchen floor. It was obvious to both of us she had not had a massive stroke or a heart attack, at least not initially. The side of her head was bashed in.

Two hours later the whole thing began to sink in. After saying, "my god, my god," about a dozen times Barry had the presence of mind to call the police. He was also contained enough to tell them there was no question of needing an ambulance, at least for transport to the hospital, and I had myself together enough to draw from my nurse's training and contribute to his explanation to the dispatcher on the line. The body was quite cold, and there certainly was no pulse. The unpleasant odor of old body elimination could not be ignored. Many people don't realize to what extent the body relaxes when it gives up the ghost. When I looked back it surprised me we had not impulsively fled the kitchen, but neither one of us did. Of course Mrs. Marsh's only phone was in the kitchen, but Barry did not know that, and I certainly was not thinking about it. With the murder mysteries everyone watches nowadays, you would think we would have fled the scene immediately. Perhaps we were in shock.

In mutual, unspoken, agreement, we did go into the living room to wait for the police. Barry ran his hands restlessly through his receding blond hair and repeated "my god" numerous more times, as he paced the room and watched the street out of the front window. I sat down numbly on an old loveseat, the back of it covered in one of Mrs. Marsh's crocheted creations. My mind was fixated on the body of that elderly lady lying on the kitchen floor in front of the sink. She was wearing black slacks, I thought stupidly, and a blue knitted sweater over her white blouse. Her white hair pulled up on her head looked as neat as ever, except for the bright red mass of blood on the side. Her face had been turned away from me as I knelt down on the floor, and I couldn't get up the courage to look at it. Perhaps I wanted to remember her face as it was alive, not frozen into whatever mask her death had placed it.

"I suppose I should call the home office," Barry speculated miserably. "They'll be wild something like this happened here. Nothing like this has ever happened here before." He added as an after thought, "The poor old lady."

"Yes," I agreed inadequately. "Uh, why don't you wait? The phone call to the home office, I mean. You can tell them more after the police have looked at things."

He nodded and continued his pacing, his eyes glued toward the front window, willing the police to hurry. It took them about eight minutes; eight long minutes for both of us. The entire time I had this uncanny sensation of something just not being right. It seemed absurd. How could anything be right about someone being murdered? And how would I know? This was the first time I had ever seen a body at the scene of a crime. The experience did not give me any inclination to join the local police force or an ambulance crew, either.

Two policemen arrived initially, soon followed by two more, and two more after that. I noticed one of them was a woman. Over all they were polite and professional. I had only dealt with law enforcement on a very limited basis over my lifetime. None of it had soured me on the police.

They asked a hundred questions, some of which we could answer, and some we could not. I gave them a detailed account of my afternoon, beginning with my arrival on the deceased's doorstep and ending with Barry's 911 call. We assured them we had—or I had—only touched her arm and wrist to confirm no sign of life. I was able to provide them with the name of Mrs. Marsh's local parish and the name of another neighbor

who I knew she was friendly with, another elderly lady. As it turned out, Miss Carey was standing outside trying to get through the barricade already set up. The cruisers had drawn a small crowd and Miss Carey was wailing in her reedy little voice.

“Let me through! That’s my friend, Amelia, in there! Let me through!”

After I identified her they did. Then I had to stay put to give Miss Carey some temporary emotional support. Eventually the police got all the information they wanted, Barry went to call the owners of the buildings, and Miss Carey was placed from my care into the capable hands of the Reverend Southby and his wife, who arrived surprisingly soon after they were called by the officer in charge. I couldn’t remember his name.

That left me free to go home. It was almost six o’clock. Perhaps I was still in shock.

“What is wrong with you, Sally?” I hollered out loud into the air in my quiet abode. Now I was the one doing the pacing. It came to me that I wanted to talk to someone. It didn’t take me long to know who.

George answered on the first ring. That meant he was sitting by his computer.

“Hello, Sally,” he greeted me heartily. “How long you been back?”

“About three days.”

“Joel doing okay?”

“Joel’s fine.” Joel was my three-year old grandson, the light of my life.

“Are you all right?” George is perceptive. If I do not go on at length about Joel when given the opportunity I am obviously not myself.

“Well, not exactly. That is, I’m all right, but Amelia Marsh isn’t. She’s an elderly woman I knew here in the condo unit and she died today.”

George expressed the appropriate condolence. The sentiment was of the “that’s too bad but these things eventually happen to all of us” variety, so I added, “She was killed. Someone bashed her on the head.”

“What!” Now George was fully awake. “I thought that place you live in was safe and respectable! What’s the story? Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m not sure, really,” I said slowly. “Do you have time? I think I need to talk to somebody.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Eaten? No. That’s been the last thing on my mind.”

“Well you have to sometime. Why don’t you meet me at Cliff’s? It should be quiet there on a Wednesday night. You can tell me all about it. Are you up to driving, or should I come get you?”

“I am perfectly able to drive,” I said tartly, “this is upsetting, not debilitating.”

He replied in kind to my acid tongue, said he would meet me in thirty minutes, and hung up.

Cliff’s is a bar and grill with food good enough to draw the Sunday lunch crowd after church. The bar is closed then, of course. It was open now but only moderately busy, and separate enough from the dining room to make a quiet supper with conversation possible. I saw George’s truck as I pulled into the parking lot. He waited for me at a table in the corner. The dining room was less than half full, for which I was grateful. Having our conversation overheard did not seem like a good idea.

Dear George. He had already ordered my decaf coffee. No doubt a glass of wine or brandy would seem like the thing to most, but I drink very little and certainly not when I have to drive home. George knows that.

“Ah. Thank you.” I took a grateful swallow of the very good coffee. “No sailor back in port swallowing his first whiskey appreciates that drink more than I do this right now.”

“Yeah, you always did like your coffee,” George agreed with a grin, “especially after a stressful day. His grin disappeared, “And speaking of a stressful day”

I persuaded him to wait until after we ordered. My appetite had improved a little. I ordered a broccoli and cheese baked potato and kept my face passive when George ordered a double cheeseburger and fries.

“Not a word out of you,” he ordered. “I have been eating broiled chicken and all my vegetables all week. I need a break.”

George was fifty-three, with a broad chest, a small spare tire, and the height to carry it off. He had made certain concessions to age, cutting back on his smoking and his fried foods being two of them. Privately I was glad he had not become a guru about the whole thing.

George is, very simply, my friend. Only it is not so simple. We have never been intimate, nor will we be, although no doubt there are people who don’t believe that. The people who do matter know better. George grew

up with my late husband, Michael. He was the best man at our wedding. Michael made a career of the Navy and we moved five times in his twenty year hitch; not a bad record for being in the service. George went home after his four-year commitment and attended the local community college, where he met and married one of the instructors. Michael and George managed to stay in touch. After he was discharged, Michael and I moved our teenagers to within just sixty miles of where he had lived as a child, in part because there was a good job waiting for him there. It was a coincidence, really, that George and his family happened to live nearby. We socialized once in awhile, but George's wife, Jill, was not interested in a strong friendship. I never cared for her either, which dampened things. Michael and George went fishing or camping together at least once a year, sometimes taking their sons with them. They seemed to enjoy themselves more with these all male outings and I didn't blame them.

After twenty-four years of marriage, George's wife left him for a man eight years her junior. She was forty-eight. My own husband seemed able to comfort him and to say or not to say the right thing when no one else could.

Two years later my Michael was hit head on by a semi careening out of control on an icy road. After all of my family and friends had left to deal with their own grief and get on with their lives, George was just, somehow, there. The first time he called to make sure I remembered to change the oil in my car. Three weeks later he called again to ask if I needed anything at all. I gratefully ran some legal technicalities past his orderly mind, sparing me the need to bother Michael's elderly father or the lawyer I found difficult to deal with. And so it went. No pressure, no sense of a friend of my deceased husband wanting to be more, just a kind man wanting to be there for the wife of his best friend.

Eventually my grief eased and the months passed. But I felt no need to find another man, still don't. Getting to know George in a different way than I had before, it saddened me to realize how much he had loved his wife and how devastated he was when she walked out. Twice he dated someone for a short while, but now I sensed he had stopped trying to find a replacement. Knowing where we both stood made for a very comfortable relationship, sort of like having a brother, but not quite. I have two brothers so I know.

While waiting for our food we sipped coffee and I told George about my afternoon, or tried to. It still seemed unreal. Even as I backed my Cavalier out of my garage and into the street, the bright yellow tape blocking off Mrs. Marsh's condo and the lights of the police cars parked in front had seemed like a movie scene or a dream.

George vaguely remembered me mentioning Mrs. Marsh to him before.

"Handsome old lady I think you said. Terrible, a nice old woman shouldn't be safe from a robbery in her own place."

"That's it!" I exclaimed. "That's part of it, anyway. Part of what bothered me." I set my coffee mug down with a thump. "There was nothing touched in that place. Everything was in order. It looked like someone just marched in there, whacked her on the head, and marched out again."

George looked at me quizzically. "I don't suppose you know if your sweet little old lady had any enemies?"

I sighed. "You sure wouldn't think so. Her life was right out of Mayberry, so typical of a serene old lady. But about six visits over the last six months would not qualify me as a historian on her life." I picked the mug back up and toyed with it contemplatively. "But you know, George, she was vague about certain things."

"Such as?"

"I'm thinking about family. Her husband has been dead for about ten years. Nothing odd there. He just got old. As a matter of fact she said he was ten years older than she, so they both died at about the same age. Anyway, she spoke about him from time to time and she had a couple of photos in the living room of the two of them. But she didn't talk about anyone else very much. There were no recent photographs of anyone." I thought back. "There was one picture where they were with another couple she told me they were very friendly with for years while they lived out east. They all looked middle-aged in the picture, in their fifties or so."

"Did you ask her about any family?"

The server came with our order and I waited until she left before answering.

"Once I did. It just seemed a natural thing to do, it fit in with whatever we were discussing. I asked if she had any children. She said no, but there was a pause first that struck me a little at the time. I had forgotten that until now. It was the second or third time we visited. It left me feeling like she did not want to discuss relatives and I never brought it up again. If you had asked me then, my impression was that perhaps she had lost a child."

I took a break from my narrative to eat. The potato was tasty and George munched his burger with great satisfaction. Obviously my affection for Mrs. Marsh was not strong enough to take away my appetite for long. The sadness was there all right, but not the gut wrenching agony experienced with Michael. I lost twelve pounds after Michael's death.

"Any idea what she wanted to talk to you about?" George asked finally, finishing his last French fry.

"None at all. She gave me no hints. I was on my way to work and she caught me as I was leaving." I remembered her now, calling to me over the wooden fence as she waved her lacy handkerchief. "She never asked my advice on anything before, really, except on a pie she made for the church bazaar or the color she chose for crocheting a blanket. I got the definite impression this was a more serious matter."

A new thought hit. "George," I said slowly, "you don't suppose the police include me in their suspects?"

"Why? Did they tell you not to leave town?"

"Very funny. No, they didn't. But surely they noticed the same thing I did, about the place being all in order. There aren't very many suspicious deaths in this town but there are quite a few robberies. Don't you think they must wonder if she was in the kitchen talking to someone she knew?"

My companion leaned back in his chair and gave a contemplative sigh. "Seems like they would. Can people come and go without being seen?"

"Pretty much so. Her condo is set up almost like mine and you've been to my house. If anyone is standing right in front of the door you can't see them from either side. The unit across the street seems empty all day long. I don't think the people who live there get home until after five."

"And the back? Refresh my memory."

"Very private. About ten feet beyond our patios is a high fence, six feet I guess, judging from my own height. There's a walking path on the other side and beyond that the park, beyond that Harris Street."

We sat silent for a moment, each with our own thoughts. If someone had left the Marsh apartment through the kitchen door, crossed the patio and jumped the fence, they would have come out on a quiet residential street where someone might or might not notice. If they had gone back out the front the same was true. They could not be sure of not being seen.

"You might hear from the police again after they've done some of their investigating." George broke the silence. "After all, you're the one person she wanted to see today and you were a neighbor. But," he added quickly, no doubt because of the look on my face, "no offense, Sally, but a quick background check on you will eliminate you from the list of possible killers."

"That's okay. I am not ashamed of leading an essentially boring life, although it seems to me there have been plenty of murderers who were supposed to be nice, ordinary people so your theory doesn't completely wash."

George sighed contentedly, his plate totally empty except for the pickles. My own was not as clean as I have never learned to like the potato skins. I have been chided for that several times.

Our server returned to clear the table. "Anyone for dessert?" she asked cheerfully, "or something else to drink?"

"No more coffee for me," George said with finality, but he added wistfully, "care to share a piece of cheesecake, Sally?"

He grinned happily when I agreed to eat a few bites if he ordered it plain. We lingered comfortably over the dessert and moved on to familiar topics. George got the usual earful about the antics of my three-year-old grandson, whom I adore, and who seems to adore me back. It is a wonderful relationship. George always seems to enjoy hearing all about it, which only eggs me on. We went on to discuss whatever was happening with his son, Robin, and my own two children. No current crisis brewing with our kids at present—at least none we were yet aware of, as they all lived at least two hundred miles away—so we had peace for the moment there.

George groaned and laid his fork down for the final time.

"Are you finally full?"

"Yes indeed. I can be happy on what's in my cupboard for at least a week."

I smiled at him. "As long as the bakery on Hawthorne keeps you supplied with your sausage biscuit and fills your coffee mug every morning on your way to work."

"It would be hard to survive without that," George admitted, never one to lie. "You know," he went on, drawing me suddenly back to the scene of the crime, "maybe whoever was in that house did rob it, but took something no one noticed yet. What if they or he or she went after some jewelry or something else small?"

“You are living proof not only women can flit back and forth between subject matter,” I said reprovingly, “but you may have a point. If that’s so it must have been someone she knew and allowed to come in, because like I said there was no sign of a struggle.”

We threw George’s latest idea around for a few more minutes but suddenly I was too weary to think about it anymore. My suitcase had just been put away on Sunday when the hospital called begging me to work an extra shift. Instead of a night to relax after romping with Joel and the five-hour drive home, I gave in and went right to work. Now it was Wednesday. I had slept four hours after the last shift. My world had been haywire ever since.

“Time to throw in the towel, George, at least for now,” I said. “Tomorrow’s another day and the police may come up with something. Right now my bed sounds very attractive.”

As we got up to leave he asked if I was afraid to be alone next door to the scene of the crime and I honestly assured him I was not. Deep down in my gut I was sure whoever had ended Mrs. Marsh’s life was not on a rampage against our condo unit. I couldn’t say why, but my instincts told me whoever murdered my neighbor had been after her alone. But why?

It was dark outside as we left the building and in gallant old-fashioned courtesy George walked me to my car. “Money!” he shouted. “Maybe the old girl was secretly wealthy and kept her cash close by.”

“If so,” I said dryly, “I hope she did not leave me anything in her will. Then *I am* on the list of suspects.”

Chapter Two

Working nights I have no trouble sleeping during the day. At ten o’clock the phone ringing woke me. I let the answering machine pick it up but rolled out of bed.

In spite of the exhaustion seeping in, sleep eluded me when I got home from dining with George. My second wind had kicked in, so to speak, or maybe my third or fourth. Instead of going to bed I paid some bills, wrote e-mails to an old friend now living in Alaska and to my daughter (not mentioning the murder to either one of them), then worked out on my fast track for half an hour. A warm bath after that relaxed me enough to finally get some solid sleep. Before dozing off I’ll admit I did shed a tear or two for Amelia Marsh and whispered a prayer hoping she was at peace. But if I dreamt of murdered old ladies it did not come back to my mind in the morning.

For a while it looked as though the tragedy would soon become just a memory. The phone message was from my son, Everett, telling me my makeup case had been found in their bathroom closet. Had I missed it? Should they send it? I smiled. Joel had been “helping,” and put my makeup case away just like he did his mom’s. I wondered what had happened to it.

The sun was shining and the thermostat on the patio said it would be another mild September day. Good. I wanted a long walk and needed to work up the ground next to the patio for planting bulbs.

The mail person had already come by so I would have the mail to read over my breakfast, along with my Dorothy Sayers novel. It really is often the small things that bring a lot of pleasure.

The phone rang again. Now I was brushing my teeth. It was probably a credit card company offering me a ridiculous introductory interest rate. My present credit card suited me just fine.

But the cheerful female voice on the line introduced herself as a staff member on the Daily Sentinel and said she wanted to talk to me about the “unfortunate death of my neighbor, Mrs. Amelia Marsh.” Would I please return her call?

Ten minutes later as I was deciding what to wear, the answering machine recorded message number three, Detective White from the police department. I was to return his call as soon as possible. Sometimes I did not get three phone calls in an entire day, and now I realized I liked it that way.

The phone was ringing again as I headed out the door. Before facing all of these people coffee and breakfast was a must. Mail tucked under my arm, handbag dangling from my shoulder, I fled down the street to walk the half a mile to The Griddle. The sun was warm, the breeze cool, and it was a treat to be outdoors. I turned right from my front doorstep and I did not even glance to the left. Whatever was going on at poor Mrs. Marsh’s place this morning was not going to ruin my mood.

Although living alone suits me now, I usually like having my breakfast, whenever that is, out. The Griddle is one of my favorites, just a country style diner with good coffee, a homey atmosphere, and predictable people. I

could curl up in a booth by myself and hear the buzz of the conversation and the laughing of the regular customers in the background as I read and ate. The thought of the aroma of the fresh cinnamon rolls and coffee drew me down the street at a good pace.

I paid for a newspaper out of the machine that stood near the front door. Marla saw me coming and with a grin followed me to a booth with a glass of water and steaming mug of the brew in her hands.

“Woman, you are too good to me,” I told her sincerely as she set them down on the table, along with the menu she had tucked under her arm.

“That’s a fact,” she agreed amiably, “but we try to treat our regulars right.” She produced an order pad out of one of her many apron pockets. “Need a minute to decide?”

I did, so she wandered off for a moment. I am not so stuck in a rut as to order the same thing every time, although probably Marla could have narrowed down my order to within four choices. I decided on an order of rye toast, a poached egg, and half an order of crispy bacon. As Marla walked away I opened the newspaper.

Having a crime of magnitude was bound to make the front page and it had. There was a photo of the front of Mrs. Marsh’s condo unit. By the time the photographer had arrived, a hearse was parked in front and yellow tape blocked off the entire property. Miss Carey’s name was mentioned, as was Barry’s, but I was known only as “a neighbor.” Obviously that omission had already been taken care of, as the message on my answering machine indicated.

I moved on to read some other articles and was up to the comics when Marla returned with my food.

“Is that something or what?” She waved her hand at the front page dangling out of my left hand, my bacon flying precariously close to the edge of the plate. “A little old lady killed just down the street from here!”

I agreed, not insincerely, it was terrible. Marla obviously did not know I was “the neighbor,” and I was not about to enlighten her. But a grizzly old gentleman at the counter known as Pete chimed in.

“You live in one of those places over there, don’t you? I’ve seen you walking back and forth.”

He looked at me expectantly from behind his wire rims and bushy gray mustache. Marla had set my plate safely down but instead of pouring a refill on my coffee held the pot in midair and looked at me with her mouth partly open and her brown eyes wide.

“Sally! You do?”

No way out of this. “Yes, I do.”

Several more pairs of eyes looked my way with interest. I sighed. At least the lunch crowd had not started coming in yet. I am not usually shy, but this had me squirming. I wasn’t ready to talk about it again. I managed to say a few things to satisfy the basic curiosity. “The paper has it pretty right. There will be more in tomorrow’s edition. I don’t know much more, really. Yes, I knew her slightly. A nice lady. No, I’m not afraid. The police are patrolling all the time.”

The conversation between Pete and a few more late morning regulars stayed on the subject, and I caught a bit of reminiscing about a suspicious death of several years earlier. Marla had to move on with her coffee pot. Gratefully off the hook I buried myself in my mail and my toast, making a mental note to eat somewhere else tomorrow morning. Pete and Marla might not forgive me for not telling them I was the neighbor next door, one of the two people who had found the body. Better give this a few days to cool off.

Back at home there was no more putting off all the blinking lights on the answering machine. The only one I wanted to return was the one from my son, but first I called the number the police department left for call back. The detective was out but he left word with his subordinate. Would I come by the station sometime during the afternoon? It did not seem prudent to say no, I would much rather be digging in my back yard thank you very much, so I agreed to two o’clock, remembering my two p.m. appointment of the day before and hoping this one would be less eventful.

I caught Everett at home. He was on his lunch break. My older child gave up a college scholarship to spend a year in South America and then decided the unsophisticated life for was him. He never went back for formal education but spent two years in technical carpentry training. At twenty-seven he seemed content to have married young and become a father. The small ranch style house they called home was in a constant state of remodeling, as Ev worked on it in the evenings or on weekends. When his construction jobs called him too far away from home Judy packed up Joel and stayed with her grandmother, which meant the garden was tended on an irregular basis and the dog never got to the vet in a timely manner. The lapsed appointments for spaying the

dog resulted in three liters of puppies. Such lack of order was often amusing from where I sat but would have driven me insane if I lived too close. It seemed to agree with the three of them overall.

“Hey, Mom,” Ev greeted me in his familiar way.

We chatted amiably. I assured him I could buy another bottle of makeup to use until we saw each other again; for three days I had used a lighter color, found some other eye shadow stashed in the back of a drawer, and no one had looked at me oddly.

“I thought so,” he said, “but you never know with you women. Judy thought you might need to have this stuff. We would be glad to send it.”

“Judy would be the one who could not do without her make up case,” I countered dryly. “I can find this kind of Cover Girl anywhere.”

It was said without malice and he knew it. I loved my daughter-in-law. Anyone who could live with Everett had my respect, at the very least.

“Where is Judy, by the way?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Her English class ended at noon and she went to pick up the big guy after that. I fixed myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

Everett liked Judy to fix him lunch. Better to change the subject.

“There has been a bit of excitement around here since I got back.” I told him about the events of the past day. My reluctance to talk about the tragedy at the restaurant melted away.

“For real?” Ev is often a master of understatement.

“I did not make this up.” Of course he knew I hadn’t. “I have to go down to the police station in a little while.”

“You can handle it, Mom,” he said loyally, “you always did have a cool head,” and then added in contradiction, “are you okay?”

“Perfectly,” I replied crisply. No need to spoil his image. The truth was, sometimes I was feeling all right and at other times the whole thing had me queasy. “I called George last night and got the shock out of my system. He even bought my supper.”

“That’s good. I’m glad he lives close by, Mom. I like ole’ George.” A pause. “Have you told Nellie about this?”

“Your sister would have a cow if she heard you call her that,” I reminded him unnecessarily. I could almost see his grin across the phone wires. You would think when your two kids grew up they would stop trying to antagonize each other. “No, I haven’t. Not yet.”

“She’ll have a fit,” Everett remarked helpfully.

“A good reason not to tell her for awhile. I’m sure she won’t hear it in Boston and don’t you tell her, all right?”

“Not a problem. I doubt we’ll talk to her, anyway. Janelle makes her phone calls to us regular as clock work, about the first of every month, Christmas, Joel’s birthday, and Mother’s day. We never call her because she’s never home.”

“I noticed that,” I agreed. “Funny how you were always the one on the go as a kid and your sister was the one I could never get out of the house. Now the shoe is on the other foot.”

“I’ve got to get back to work, Mom. You’ll be back up here in a month or so, right?”

“Unless you come to see me.”

“You never know. We might. I’ll have Joel give you a call in a few days.”

I decided to ignore the message from the newspaper. They would find a way to get back to me if they wanted to badly enough. Two more messages had been added to the machine in my absence, one from the hospital and the other from Barbara Teal, a friend. Neither had said what they wanted but it was a sure thing what the hospital had in mind. By the time I returned all these calls, I thought, it would be time to leave for my appointment at the police department.

“No,” I said firmly to the staffing coordinator, “I have put in an extra day this pay period already.”

“But Sally,” she wailed, “I’ve tried everybody else, and since you work part time ...”

“I try to work part time,” I corrected her. “If I’m not careful I put in more hours than the full timers. Try the hospital pool.” I hung up firmly, determined not to feel guilty.

Barbara was not in so I left a message for her to try and call me again in the evening. Barbara ran a gift shop that she managed quite well on her own in the spring and fall, but that was a bit too much for her to handle alone during the summer when our town did a certain amount of tourist trade. Barb's store, downtown and directly across the street from a popular historical hotel and restaurant, often drew a respectable clientele. Her daughters helped her out a few hours a week and so did I. That was ending now, but I suspected she wanted a hand downsizing her inventory.

The gift shop was a nice change for me. It had been a revelation to realize I did not want to pursue a career in nursing administration after Everett and Janelle left the nest. Even before their father's death my focus had changed. I loved clinical obstetrics and still enjoyed my job, but I did not want to eat and breathe nursing twenty-four hours a day, quite the contrary. After becoming a widow my financial status left me able to cut my working hours at the hospital and spend my "spare" time pursuing non-medical interests, such as an adorable grandchild, flowerbeds, and "The Kozy Korner."

An hour left before meeting the police detective, whose name I could not recall. Some color, I thought. Time to take up in the kitchen where I had left off yesterday.

It was only a ten-minute drive to the police station. Once again I avoided looking in the direction of Mrs. Marsh's driveway. I had never been inside the law enforcement facility. The motor vehicle department next door was the closest I had ever gotten. The walk-in area was small and sparse but clean. Our town didn't have bars in front of the reception area. A uniformed officer sat behind a desk. He was young and heavy set, with a serious but not unfriendly demeanor. When I introduced myself he asked me to take a chair and picked up the telephone. There were four chairs and a small couch to choose from; I sat in the most comfortable looking chair and glanced around. The potted plant looked amazingly healthy but the leaves were dusty. There was an assortment of fairly current magazines on an old coffee table.

"Mrs. Nimitz? Follow me, please."

The beefy young man unlocked a door to his left and led the way. We stopped at the second door through the passage. The brief look I got down the corridor made it obvious most of the action went on in the back of the building. I caught a glimpse of a female dispatcher hard at work in front of a maze of computers and technical equipment, and a man in handcuffs being led through a door on the side of the building. The front entrance was for voluntary visitors. Beyond the dispatcher and several more desks the hall continued beyond iron bars.

My escort opened the door and the man behind the desk stood up as I entered. He greeted me politely, extending his hand.

"Sit down, Mrs. Nimitz. I'm David White. We met yesterday at your neighbor's house."

He nodded to his subordinate who withdrew, leaving the door open behind him. In the background I could hear the hum of the activities out in the main office of the station. David White's name badge clearly identified him as Detective White. How could I remember Reverend Southby's name and not remember his? He was clean cut and lean, about thirty-five or so, his uniform immaculate. He surprised me now by smiling broadly.

"We've met before although I couldn't place you yesterday. You were with my wife when our last baby was born."

I smiled back. "Was I?"

"Almost 3 years ago. It was a girl. You were great. My wife, Debbie, still remembers you."

I desperately searched my memory archives of labors and deliveries.

He let me off the hook. "Hard to believe it's been so long. You must have seen a hundred more babies born since then."

"Yes, but I think I do remember! Your wife is blond, you have two older boys, and your hair was longer then." I did not add I recalled Debbie being a colossal baby herself while in labor, and the boys little monsters who trashed the labor room until their grandmother finally took them home.

"You got it." The smile faded as he changed the subject. "I hope your memory is as sharp about your neighbor, Mrs. Nimitz. We need all the assistance you can give us."

"You can call me Sally, Detective White. It said Sally on my name tag, remember?" Neither of us mentioned his nametag did not say David, and in any case the situation did not seem appropriate for me to address him by his first name, even if I had done so while his wife was pushing.

"Sally, then." He proceeded to run through the papers in front of him, refreshing both of our memories about the information I gave at the scene of the crime. I clarified a few details, which he jotted down. "This is all

informal here,” he told me, “but I will bring someone else in to witness what you have to say if you are more comfortable with that. In a couple of days everything you’ve told us will be put into a formal statement and you will be asked to come back and sign it.”

I expressed my understanding and said no witness was necessary. He leaned back in his chair and looked at me speculatively.

“You say Mrs. Marsh did not give you any indication as to why she wanted to see you. Do you have any guesses?”

“I don’t. And believe me I’ve thought about it. There’s no way of knowing if what she wanted had anything to do with what happened to her. I can say my impression was she had something serious to discuss. My impression was not that she was fearful, but maybe a little anxious, if that’s worth anything. I wondered at the time why she picked me at all. She had closer friends.”

“Most of her friends were very elderly,” the detective suggested. “Maybe that’s why she asked you. Did you know anything about her personal life or her past?”

“Not much,” I admitted. “She was a charming lady but she did not encourage or initiate conversation about her personal background. She spoke about her husband sometimes and would refer to their life together out east. Once she was telling a story about her girlhood in England and mentioned a sister. I have no idea if that sister is alive anymore.”

“We are pulling out of the apartment today and allowing her power of attorney to start settling her affairs. So far we haven’t come across evidence of living relatives. And to be honest with you, Mrs., er, Sally, we have no suspects.”

I decided to be candid with the inspector. After all, what did I have to lose? I told him about my perplexity at the neatness of the apartment, wondering what could have been a motive other than robbery.

“Very perceptive of you.” He grinned. It could have been patronizing but I decided it was not. The grin disappeared. “There are still plenty of things to consider and we still have interviews to conduct. Anything else you remember, anything at all, please call me.”

He got up from his chair and I from mine. The interview was over for now. As he opened the door for me I said to him quietly, “I really hope you solve this.”

He nodded grimly.

Chapter Three

The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully. I keep a pair of walking shoes and a water bottle in my car so I drove right from the detective’s office to a quiet country road at the edge of town and took an hour for a power walk. The sky was clouding up for possible rain later but it was a beautiful sweater weather afternoon. The smell of fall was in the air and I inhaled it deeply as I puffed along. There are few things I enjoy more than a good hike on a nice day. One doesn’t see the detail out of doors from a car window or even on a bicycle like you do when you walk. The leaves were just beginning to turn and there was a touch of gold to the grass, plus an abundance of tiger lilies and black-eyed susans popping up in the ditches and marshes alongside of the pavement. An occasional vehicle drove by and some bovines eyed me as they munched behind a wire fence. Otherwise I had the landscape to myself and enjoyed it, definitely a bit of hermit in Sally Nimitz.

On the way home I stopped for a chocolate frozen yogurt, found a picnic table, and read a magazine article while eating it. My vehicle is my home away from home; there are always reading materials on the passenger seat.

As foretold by the police officer the former residence of Amelia Marsh stood silent and free of yellow tape and squad cars by sundown that night. I spent a quiet evening at home, working in my flower bed until dark, checking my e-mail, and eating a late supper in front of an old movie classic rented from the library. Barbara did not return my phone call, but George called briefly to make sure I was okay, and I assured him that was so. He had put in one of his dawn until dusk shifts doing whatever an indispensable long term employee of the phone company does and he was exhausted. I told him I appreciated his consideration, and urged him to go ahead with his shower and early to bed without worrying about me. I didn’t mention my interview with Detective White. That could wait.

A small town settles down early so I was amazed that when the phone rang again at nine o'clock it was not one of my immediate family or the night shift on the obstetrical floor with a last minute staffing crisis.

"Mrs. Nimitz? This is Shawna Simmons from the Morning Sentinel. I hope I'm not calling too late? I apologize for the hour, but you are an elusive lady to get up with!"

"I've been at home since before five," I pointed out to her.

"Have you? Wouldn't you know! I rang your doorbell about four, and tried to call you last right after lunch." Miss Simmons cheerful voice reminded me of the young woman who had tried to get me to change long distance carriers two weeks previously. She had almost succeeded. "Obviously my timing is completely off! Do you have a few minutes to talk to me now?"

I really did, and there was no point in being rude or putting this interview off any longer.

"Go ahead, Miss Simmons."

"Oh, call me Shawna, please. I understand you found your neighbor's body, Sally? Is it all right if I call you Sally? That must have been horrible for you!"

"The manager of the buildings, Mr. Ainsworth, was with me at the time and no, it was not pleasant."

Shawna had gotten a description of the body from wherever reporters get these things, and I confirmed it as correct. She also knew why Barry and I were concerned about Mrs. Marsh and had gone to check on her. Could it be the paper would run a correct account of the whole business?

"Is it true you are a registered nurse at Lincoln Memorial, Sally?"

Again I verified her information.

"Have you lived in The Hedges long?"

"Almost a year and a half."

"So you and Mrs. Marsh must have known each other quite well."

"We made each other's acquaintance about six months ago. We were casual friends." I proceeded carefully. "We were the chat over the back fence, come inside and have a cup of tea, type of neighbors. After living next door to each other for a year it just happened." I thought wryly that my neighbor to the right, the young couple who shared my bedroom wall, had been there as long as I had and I wasn't even sure of their last name. They were out of town a lot and had not appeared since the tragedy.

"Oh, that was nice," Miss Simmons said appreciatively, "I understand she had no family here so she must have enjoyed that."

"No family," I concurred, "but she led an active life and had several friends."

The newswoman switched gears. "You know Mrs. Nimitz, we want to get as accurate a story as we can here. We want our readers to be informed so they can be taking precautions. It is pretty frightening for people, especially people living alone, and the elderly, to think someone just walked into that poor woman's home and murdered her. Did you see anyone lurking about earlier that day? Have you seen any unusual activity in your neighborhood?"

I answered in the negative to both of the questions but held my tongue about the probability of Mrs. Marsh letting her killer in. No sense causing a panic that would keep every plumber and repairman from getting any work for the next month. Let Miss Simmons go back to the police reports or interview Inspector White for that sort of information. Instead I assured her the police had been patrolling frequently, there was no reason to suspect the people in our neighborhood were in any danger, but that we were all being cautious.

My interrogator hung up after thanking me profusely for my time. She left me with another clear thought. Mrs. Marsh had the usual elderly person's suspicion of letting anyone into the house. Her front door was always locked. She used her peephole religiously to identify her callers. The back door to the patio was only unlocked when she was out in the back yard. She had expounded on her security habits on the one occasion she was persuaded to join me in my kitchen for a cup of my hazelnut coffee instead of having me over to sip English tea in hers.

Her body had been quite cool when Barry and I found her. David White stated during my interview the time of death was about noon. But the front door had been unlocked when Barry and I got there. I knew it was highly unlikely any smooth talking stranger could have conned his way into her home posing as a salesman or tradesman. If she didn't know her visitor they didn't get in, identification or not. I smiled sadly, remembering her relating to me the incident of the new grocery boy who had to wait while she confirmed who he was by calling back to the market.

At three o'clock the day before when the door was not locked I had assumed Mrs. Marsh had left the door open because she was expecting me, but that was a stupid assumption, totally out of character. She had opened her door to the person who had killed her, which meant she knew that person or was completely comfortable letting him or her in.

We are allowed to have pets in our buildings, even if renting. I own my condominium but have not yet felt the need for canine or feline companionship. My deceased neighbor had no pets either, but Miss Carey had, and it was her little terrier I heard yipping as my front doorbell rang. Miss Carey stood on the doorstep in cotton twill pants and a bright yellow rain parka, her hand firmly on the leash that kept Yippy in tow.

"Have I called at a bad time, dear? I'm so sorry." She looked anxiously at my bathrobe and uncombed hair.

"You have not," I assured her with a smile. "I keep strange hours, Miss Carey, but I have been up for a little while. I'm the one who's sorry about the way I look. Won't you come in?"

Miss Carey, bless her, is not one of those people who thinks everyone else should feel the same way about her dog that she does. She wrapped the leash securely around the wrought iron railing giving Yippy about five feet of moving room, admonished him to behave, and followed me into the house.

"Let me leave my raincoat right here. It was still coming down when I left the house and it will drip over everything."

I deftly produced a wire hanger out of the front closet and hung her coat from the front door, where it could drip harmlessly on the tile in the entryway.

"How nice this is! It is so much fun to see how differently these rooms can be fixed up by the occupants. Including my own, I have been in four of these units, and you would hardly know they were almost the same when built. I'm afraid my home is rather cluttered. I hate to throw anything away and there are several pieces of furniture from my mother when she died squeezed in, too. You like open space don't you? And yet this is so attractive and comfortable looking." Miss Carey chattered on as I led her into the kitchen and set her down at the small dinette set overlooking the patio.

"Thank you. You don't mind if we visit in here do you? How about a cup of coffee, and can I interest you in a croissant or a bagel?"

Miss Carey admitted her walk had made her a little hungry and thirsty, if it was not too much trouble, a bagel would be nice. Really, she was ashamed of herself, dropping in without calling first.

"I know you must have something on your mind, Miss Carey," I said candidly, "and I'm glad you came by. We haven't had a chance to talk since Wednesday."

I had two whole-wheat bagels left from the stash I used for middle of the night lunches at work, and popped one into the toaster. "Have you been all right? Have you had someone staying with you?"

"Wednesday night I did. My sister insisted her grandson, Lance, he's eighteen, and a rugged boy, come for the night." Miss Carey grinned. "He slept on the couch with a baseball bat next to him. I must admit I felt very safe." The grin faded, "But I didn't sleep very well all the same, and only a little better last night. Lance would have come again but I really didn't see the need. Why should someone who killed Amelia in broad daylight sneak into my house after dark? Besides, I kept some mace under my pillow and Yippy slept by the door. He would let me know if anyone was in the house."

"Good point," I conceded. "So, that's not why you didn't rest too well?"

"Oh, no, dear, and my joints weren't aching too badly either, not even with this rain." A deep sigh ensued from Miss Carey. She changed gears. "The coroner is releasing Amelia's body to the funeral home later tomorrow. Sally, would you mind very much helping the Southbys and me tend to Amelia's things on Sunday afternoon, after the funeral? The funeral is at two, it will be in today's paper. The lawyers have contacted the pastor, asking him to go through her things. He called me last night, and I thought about you."

I was flabbergasted. The bagel popped up out of the toaster, and with my mouth slightly open I placed it on a plate. "Miss Carey," I said slowly, reaching for the cream cheese out of the refrigerator, a knife out of the drawer, and a napkin from another drawer, "why would you want me to be there?"

She thanked me for the bagel, and waited as I drew the cups out of the cupboard for our coffee, and placed both milk and sugar on the table. Only when I sat down to face her, the coffee poured, did she answer me.

"I've been Amelia's friend for almost five years. We met at the hospital. She started volunteering there right after she moved here and we worked at the gift shop together."

I had not known the ladies had been hospital volunteers and said so.

“Well,” Miss Carey admitted, “we didn’t last long. The head of the program was a tyrant! We didn’t enjoy it, either one of us, and both resigned after about three months. But I invited Amelia to go with me to church, and she liked it. One thing has led to another over the years. We both applied to move in here three years ago when these buildings were built, and with having all that in common we see,” she gulped, “or rather we saw, each other every week.”

I sipped my coffee and looked at her expectantly as she took a bite of her bagel. This was not answering my question.

“Almost everyone liked Amelia. You did, too, didn’t you?”

“Why, yes, I did,” I replied, rather surprised by her inquiry. I looked more closely at my guest. Her blue eyes were keen in her weathered face. One could be fooled by Miss Carey’s thin little voice and the old-fashioned pin curl hairdo she still wore into dismissing her as a foolish old maid. That would have been a mistake. I knew Anne Carey was retired from a distinguished career as a school superintendent. She was nowhere near her dotage yet. “Why do you ask?”

“She liked you too. She said you reminded her of June Fisk.”

I wracked my brain to think of who June Fisk could be. Miss Carey saw I could not place her.

“You never knew June. She died late last year but she was an old friend of Amelia’s. They went back to Britain together. I believe they met during the war. It was because of June she moved out here in the first place. There was no one left for her in New Jersey, you see, and June urged her to come. Amelia said you were a lot like June and you brought back good memories.”

“I never knew that,” I said slowly, “she never mentioned it.”

“Sally, it seems to me, the more I think about it, there were a lot of things she never talked about. She was so good at getting people to talk about themselves or engaging them in conversation about just routine things, like flowers or recipes. But you know most of us old people get to reminiscing sometimes. When Amelia did that, she would tell an interesting story but never really share about her life. Do you know what I mean?”

“I didn’t notice before,” I confessed, “because our relationship was not as close as yours. But yes, I do know what you’re saying. This still does not tell me why you want me to go through Mrs. Marsh’s things with you and the Southbys,” I added.

“Because,” she replied slowly, deliberately, “I think you would have a good eye and because Amelia would not mind. The police are going through all of her personal effects but we will be looking at everything in a different way.”

We sipped coffee and gazed idly out onto the patio, where a bird out of sight sang in a clear warble. Miss Carey did not seem to require a quick answer.

“It is possible you know,” I spoke, “we may find out some things we don’t want to know. Most of us have things in our lives we regret.”

“I am fully prepared for that,” my visitor said briskly. “But I have never shirked from the unpleasantness that comes as a part of life.”

I smiled at her broadly. “Miss Carey, I don’t doubt that for a minute. If you want me to be there after the funeral on Sunday you can count on me. It is an honor to be asked.”

“If there is anything at all that we can do or anything we can discover to help the police find Amelia’s killer, we must do so,” Miss Carey summed up briskly, and I pretended not to notice the tears welling up behind her glasses.

After Miss Carey left I considered ringing Detective David White to tell him about the conclusion I had come to the night before. Perhaps he already knew it and I would be bothering him unnecessarily. After some more deliberation, a load of laundry thrown into the washer, and getting dressed, I decided to make the call. Expecting at least one middleman and a message machine, it was a surprise to find him not only in his office but almost immediately on line. I told him how sure I was Mrs. Marsh had willingly opened the door to her murderer and what that meant. I also told him about being asked to help go through her personal effects.

“You did say you wanted to know anything I came up with ...” I finished lamely.

“I did and still do,” he reassured me, “don’t feel foolish. We suspected what you told me but you add more authenticity to it.” He paused, and then added, “Sally, did you know your neighbor had borne at least one child?”

“I wondered, but she never talked about it.”

“That’s what I’m getting from everyone. She never spoke about children.”

“My impression was, detective, and this was just that, because she never said so directly, was perhaps long ago she and her husband lost their child.”

He mulled over that for a moment, told me again to call him anytime, and rang off.

Chapter Four

Barbara Teal finally connected with me. Friday evening after she closed her shop we shared a pizza and spent a few hours doing inventory. Barbara hates computers. She had lists of items as they were ordered and arrived, and had another list for every gift as it was sold. Her husband entered the information into a bookkeeping program for her. He had printouts we now followed to locate the items still be in stock. Most of it was there. Shoplifting had been a minor problem this year. We separated the inventory into what was to be kept for next season and what was not. The dispensable items would be put on sale at forty percent off for the rest of the season.

“Two more weekends,” my friend announced. “That’s it for this year.”

“What will you do with the leftovers?”

“There shouldn’t be much. The locals always come by when I have these end of season sales. All the confections will go for sure.” Barb popped a small white chocolate shaped like a daisy into her mouth for her dessert, assuring one less goodie to worry about. “But,” she added, after swallowing a second time, “a couple who holds garage sales every week in Springfield has offered to take the rest off of my hands for a bulk rate. That’s after I donate a couple of the nicer things to the school bazaar. And Sally, if you see anything you want, it’s fifty percent off for you before the sale, or you can pick something after.”

“Thanks, Barb.” I hid a smile. I did not help my friend for the money. She paid me a small commission on what I sold over and above minimum wage and allowed me generous discounts whenever I bought gifts in her shop, which was quite often. She carried a variety of unique items.

“Do you think you’d be interested in helping me again next year?”

“I think so, the way things are now. Ask me again in April.”

Barbara beamed happily.

“Did you do well this year?” I ventured to ask.

“Very,” she admitted. “The best year yet, and this is my fourth. If you come back I’ll give you a raise.”

“Sounds promising. I put away my proceeds from this year for a vacation. It all adds up.”

“When are you going to take a vacation? You haven’t had one since Michael died, have you?” She got up off her stool and pushed a box of carefully packed music boxes into the storage room as she asked. Attractive displays were set up for the large windows in the front of the store for the off season, with a large, handsome sign done in calligraphy announcing the first day of the shop opening again in May. The shelves behind us were being carefully cleared as we counted. Barbara believed this would discourage vandalism as well as cut down on the dust.

I admitted I had not. Until now my treks every few weeks to visit my son and his family were enough. For the first six months of my widowhood getting out of bed in the morning had often seemed like a twelve mile hike. Only lately was the idea of a real holiday holding some appeal.

“You should think about it,” she encouraged, meaning well. “Gary and I are headed out to south Texas again this year, right after Christmas. Three great weeks away from the cold and slush. We loved it last year; well, I guess you know that,” she laughed. “I’ve talked about it enough.”

There was no argument there. Without commenting I moved on to the stationary and calendars. After one trip to the beaches of South Padre Island, Gary and Barbara were dreaming about retirement. A few days after they got back, sunburned and enthusiastic, they bent my ear when we saw each other at the super market. Privately, I am not a great sun or sand worshiper. One afternoon out on the bare beaches Barbara showed me in some of her photographs would have been enough for me.

“If you don’t like the ocean or want less humidity,” Barb called back from the storeroom, as if reading my thoughts, “why not go visit your family in Arizona? That is supposed to be nice in the winter, too. Before we make a final decision, you know, about the retirement thing, we think we’ll visit Arizona.”

“I have been to Arizona,” I called back, “and if you recall I spent almost three years in the Philippines while Michael was in the service. I love the ocean but not the heat.”

“But it’s not that hot after September, is it?” Barbara queried as she joined me again, a heavy empty box in tow. I knew she was referring to Arizona, and not the Philippines. “We won’t pack any of the paper items away, Sally. Of course the calendars go, 60 percent off for those.”

“No,” I admitted, “and some parts of Arizona aren’t as hot because of higher elevations. But I don’t think my first vacation in over two years will be to the southwest. I’ll see my mother and sister at the family reunion next summer.” I loved them both, but loved them most at a distance. Once a year or so of actual contact was enough. They had come back for Michael’s funeral and again the following June.

We worked together companionably for a while, our conversation limited to the project at hand. At nine, most of the work finished, my friend and part time employer called it a night.

“I can do the rest tomorrow,” she announced, and said sincerely, “thanks, Sally. Do you want the last two pieces of pizza to take home?”

“You’re very welcome. And no, I don’t. Take it home to Gary.”

“No wonder you stay slim. I wish I had your will power.”

Barbara was always trying to lose thirty pounds, but not too seriously. Her husband liked her to eat with him.

As an after thought she added, “Does it make you nervous going home alone after dark? If it does I’ll follow you in my car. It’s not too far out of the way.”

She had never offered to do this before so I knew she was thinking of the murder. This was the first time all evening the subject had come up.

“I’m not,” I said honestly. “Thanks for asking, though.”

“I thought maybe you would rather not talk about it, or if you did, you would mention it first.” Barb gave me a sideways glance as she collected the paperwork strewn about the counter.

“That was very sensitive of you, Barb,” I said. “It was nice to have four hours without hardly thinking about it at all.”

“It gave me a turn, I can tell you, when Gary showed me the paper this morning. You not only living next door, but finding the body! That just doesn’t happen to someone you know! She came in here once, you know, that lady. I recognized her picture.” The paper had run a good photograph of Amelia Marsh in the Friday edition.

Barbara continued, “She had a face you would remember, so sweet, and all that white hair piled up on her head. She was with two other ladies, and they browsed the way people do.” Barbara chuckled, “If I remember right they were pretty tight with their money. I don’t think they bought much, but they were very polite and I loved hearing them talk, you know, with those English accents.”

“It was charming, wasn’t it? I shall miss our occasional tea parties in her kitchen.”

“Are you going to the funeral?”

I said I was, but did not volunteer I was also to be included in the group which would be sorting through her personal effects. Then it hit me.

“Did you say ‘them’, Barb? More than one of those ladies had an English accent?”

“The two elderly ladies both did. I don’t remember much about the other, gosh, it must be last season they came in. I think she was heavier, taller. It was probably because of the accent I remember them at all.”

“Think hard. Can you recall anything else? What about the other lady, you mentioned three.”

Barb pondered. “Well, she was younger. That sticks with me. My age, or so. Why?”

I smiled and shrugged. “Just wondering, I guess.”

I grabbed my purse and jacket, said goodbye again, and headed out the door, my mind racing. The other lady must have been June Fisk. Who could the third one have been and how could I find her? The street outside was quiet and peaceful. A police cruiser went by as I unlocked my car door and a few customers left the restaurant across the street. I sat behind the wheel for a moment, idly watching the patterns of the streetlights on the water puddles still remaining from the heavy rain the night before. The funeral, I decided. Surely the other woman would be at the funeral. And if she wasn’t Anne Carey might know who she was.

Saturday's newspaper moved Mrs. Marsh's murder to page two, along with the details of her funeral arrangements. The article stated she had no known living relatives, was a member of St. John's Episcopal Church, and funeral services would be held at two p.m. on Sunday afternoon at Sunset Chapel. It also stated she would be mourned by her friends from the church and the local chapters of the Soroptomist club and the Hanley garden club, where she had been an active member. A related article assured the public the police were actively pursuing every lead in the killing and listed a phone number any one with information could call twenty-four hours a day. It was not the same number Officer White had given me.

I toyed with the idea of asking George to join me for breakfast, but for no reason in particular decided not to. I drove ten miles out to the main highway to a family restaurant I knew, again for no special reason other than I enjoyed the drive, and perused my magazines while eating French toast. I had a new subscription to a publication specializing in crafts, gardening, and cooking. It was nice to dream and set ideals. I never get around to crafts, my garden needs a lot of improvement, cooking only happens when there are guests.

On the way home I stopped for some groceries. As I walked into my house, my hands full, the phone was ringing. It was tempting to let it ring but I answered before the answering machine would kick in, letting my bags drop onto the counter. It was Joel.

"Hey, Gram'ma, what you doing?" his cheerful little voice chirped.

My spirits soared. "Why, I am talking on the telephone to some little boy who just called me. I wonder who this could be?"

Giggles. "You hav'ta guess!"

"Oh, this could be hard. This isn't Winnie the Pooh, is it?"

More giggles. "Nah ... Winnie the Pooh is a bear, not a little boy!"

"So he is. I forgot. How about Christopher Robin? This must be Christopher Robin!"

"Wrong!"

I gave an exaggerated sigh. "Okay, I will guess one more time, and if I don't get it this time you have to tell me."

"Okay."

"The only other little boy I can think of who would call me on a Saturday morning is a little blond boy with big blue eyes who likes trucks and trains and has a dog named Crayon."

"That's the one," my grandson admitted proudly. "That's me, Joel."

"I am so glad you called me," I told him solemnly, "I am missing you already."

"Only I just don't like trucks and trains, now, Gram'ma," he reminded me, "I like Batman now, too."

"So you do," I acknowledged, "and the next time we see each other I will buy you a new Batman shirt."

"Okay! That would be good 'cause I got Batman underwear, now, you know."

"No! You couldn't have Batman underwear!"

"Yes I do. Didn't you notice it when you was here?"

"You mean those under shorts with that guy on it with that big black cape and those batwings?"

"Yup," my grandson said proudly, "and one pair has Robin on it, too. Do you know who Robin is?"

I confessed I did, and we talked happily for some moments about Joel's underwear and superheroes.

"Bye, Gramma." There was the sound of two loud kisses blown into the phone, then I heard the familiar little voice say, "your turn to talk now, Mom."

Judy laughed as she carried on the conversation. "Still a short attention span on the phone, Sally, but he asked to call you this time. You might have held on to him longer, but Colton is at the door." Colton was the little boy who lived down the road. He was almost five, I knew, but allowed to walk alone the short distance down the little traveled dirt road to his friend's house, where the two of them usually played amicably.

"The best five minutes of my day," I said honestly. "How is everything else going?"

Apparently everything was going well. Judy was not hard to read. I could usually tell if something was wrong after three or four sentences. My son was out on an errand and we chatted girl talk. She eventually came around to asking how I was, obviously referring to the traumatic events of the past week, and at the same time asked if the "man who did it" had been caught.

"It may not have been a man," I replied.

"Really," she sounded interested. "Do they think it might have been a woman, then?"

“As far as I know, ‘they’ don’t know who the killer is, and I don’t think they have any idea who did it.”

“That’s awful.” My daughter-in-law called out a reminder to the boys to stay in the front yard and continued, “It would bother me living next door to where a crime was committed, especially if you never find out what happened. Does it bother you?”

“I have not been nervous to be here, but it bothers me a lot that whoever killed Mrs. Marsh may get away with it.”

“What did you know about her?” I found it interesting Judy was so intrigued. But Joel was occupied, Judy seemed to have the time, and I found myself running past her everything I knew about my former neighbor and her death, including my talk with the detective.

“Wow. Somebody could make an Agatha Christie out of this,” was her comment when I had finished. “What if Mrs. Marsh had some dark secrets lurking in her past?”

“And someone from the past finally caught up with her and took their revenge?” I was amused. “Well, it could be possible. I never knew you read any Agatha Christie.”

“*The Murder on the Orient Express* was a masterpiece,” she said. “I liked a few of her others, too.”

Then we got onto the subject of favorite mystery writers and books, and eventually I told her I was asked to go back to the scene of the crime following the funeral to assist with going through my neighbor’s personal effects.

“Wow,” was her comment again, although Judy’s vocabulary is not usually so limited. She exacted a promise from me to call back early in the week to let her and Everett know any new developments. I could hear some evidence of disagreement among the peanuts in the background and Judy had to end our conversation.

Before I could escape to take a planned hike at the state park there were two more phone calls. I told George I would have a bite with him Sunday evening and catch him up on developments since our last meal together. I warned him not to expect too much.

The last call was from my brother Tom’s wife, Anna. They heard about the murder from Anna’s sister, a Hanley resident, and were calling for reassurance I was okay. The inference was that I had been through enough in the past two years, and should not be traumatized any further. I told her having to move again would be the biggest trauma. She seemed mollified and hung up after a few more pleasantries about family. I promised to come see them soon, rather guiltily since I had no intention of doing so until Christmas.

Since I was not scheduled to work until Monday, I got up in time to attend the late morning service at the Episcopalian church, Reverend James Southby, senior pastor, officiating. This was my first time to attend services here. The sanctuary was almost full. Prior to the taking of the offering, Mrs. Marsh’s funeral was announced. I looked about and saw a few people I knew, including Miss Carey, who was sitting several rows in front of me.

I enjoyed the service. The choir was impressive and the sermon thought provoking. The reverend had a mild voice but good deliverance. He also had a sense of humor. There is a good spirit present in this place, I thought. Perhaps I would come again. Michael and I had attended churches with a more informal worship, but I did enjoy the reciting of the creeds for a change.

Rather than wait for the funeral, it seemed to me this was a good time to ask Miss Carey what she might know about the identity of the third person present that day at the gift shop. I sought her out after the benediction, following her to the foyer where she was in conversation with another couple, both of them at least seventy. Politely waiting my turn for her attention, I smiled at the elderly gentleman who looked at me curiously, and heard enough of the earnest talk between the two ladies to know they were discussing preparations for the afternoon funeral.

“Amelia left very clear instructions, you know,” I heard Miss Carey explain to the other lady, who had some questions about the way things were going to be done, “but I don’t see a problem with the flower arrangement from the garden club ...”

My attention wandered. Mrs. Southby had her husband in what looked to be a serious discussion. She looked unhappy and he looked frustrated. There were some terse, quiet words between them before he looked up with a smile to greet a parishioner. How odd, I thought. Ministers and their wives were usually pros at keeping their private situations behind closed doors. Anyone else could have noticed what I did; I wondered if anyone had. The pastor’s wife gave the parishioner who had interrupted them a wane smile and walked off.

“Sally!” Miss Carey had finished at last. Her friends pointed me out waiting for her and she turned around in surprise. “How wonderful to see you here!” Her exuberance made me wonder what Miss Carey thought the state of my spiritual life was in.

“I have enjoyed the service,” I told her honestly, “but I have a question for you. It is about June Fisk.”

“Oh?” She ushered me into a small office to the left of the foyer, which appeared to be a room used for personal counseling. There was only room for the desk with its matching chair and the two chairs in front of it. We sat down together in front of the desk.

I told her what Barbara had related to me about the three ladies in the gift shop.

“That was probably June’s daughter, Elaine,” Miss Carey decided. “June moved out here herself after she became a widow, to be closer to Elaine. I’m quite sure Elaine was her only child.”

“Does she live here now? Do you think she’ll be at the funeral, or that the police have talked to her?”

“No to the first two questions, and I don’t know to the third,” Miss Carey continued. “Not long after June came, Elaine’s husband had this wonderful job opportunity, but they had to move to Texas. The way I remember Amelia telling about it, the couple decided it was too good to pass up, they had to go. That was one reason why June was so happy to have Amelia come. She did not want to go to Texas.”

“So, you think June’s daughter was visiting here when they were in the gift shop?”

“She came up regularly to visit,” the elderly lady agreed, “feeling a little guilty for bringing her mother out to Indiana and then moving away herself. Amelia said June and Elaine were close.”

“Then Elaine may know something more about Mrs. Marsh than we do,” I mused, “and it is very possible no one has asked her about it.”

Miss Carey agreed that was so, and we mutually agreed to try to find out how to get up with Elaine. Perhaps there would be an address among Mrs. Marsh’s correspondence. At that moment Miss Carey could not remember Elaine’s married name, but she thought she would remember if she saw it.

“And if not,” she said firmly, “it cannot be that hard to find out. Elaine and her husband lived in this area for a number of years. They must have some family or friends who still do. There may be a church they attended that has a forwarding address.”

Judy, I thought, here you have your modern day Miss Marple.

Chapter Five

The funeral service was held in the chapel at the funeral home. It was a pleasant room, designed to be tasteful but not gloomy, with stained glass windows in mauve, light blues, and lavender. The benches were light oak in color and padded for comfort, and the walls a creamy white. There was a cross behind the podium and drapes of a deep purple as background behind it. The room was small, but comfortably held the forty or fifty people who attended. Not a bad turnout, I thought, for an elderly lady who had lived in the community only a few years and had no known relatives.

Her casket was in a small alcove adjoining the chapel. It was closed, with a photograph on top next to an arrangement of daisies and marigolds, two of her favorite flowers. The photograph was recent and the way I would remember her, a small smile on her pleasant, lined face, her soft hair piled up in the pompadour style she usually wore, a pearl necklace the only adornment on a pink blouse. I wondered where the photograph had come from. I had never seen it before.

To my surprise, Barry attended, accompanied by a quiet brunette he introduced as his girlfriend, Theresa.

“I thought it was the right thing to do,” he explained rather shyly as we met at the front door and entered together. “Represent the housing unit, you know.” His usually loud clear voice was down a couple of decibels.

“Very thoughtful of you,” I said warmly. They invited me to sit with them and I accepted.

Most of the attendants were elderly, as expected, although not all. Miss Carey would tell me later most of the younger people were members of the church. One woman, a heavy blonde, had been Mrs. Marsh’s hairdresser. She would also mention, with deep disapproval, about five of those who came were there only because of morbid curiosity. They only knew about Amelia because of the publicity surrounding her death.

The service was about forty minutes. Reverend Southby presented the deceased as a woman who had made a positive impression upon all who had known her. He reminded everyone of the fragility of the flesh, and how all of us would cross life’s river one day.

“Amelia’s death was unexpected and terrible in that someone unknown took it from her. We must remember that God does know who that was, and He will not allow this act to go unpunished.”

Then the minister said something I had not been aware of.

“A few years ago, as most of you know, this dear lady began attending services at our church. She asked to see me a few weeks after she started coming. Amelia Marsh did not share with me any specific details of her past, but she did express deep regret for some things done as a young woman. She asked if there was indeed forgiveness for her and hope for her redemption. I had the privilege of being able to assure her of the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all who come to repentance, to Him, have that assurance.”

He paused and looked earnestly at the faces in front of him. “What a comfort to all of us, to know that Amelia’s life did not really end last Wednesday, but is only just beginning.”

There were many teary eyes in our little group. I heard a sob from the row in front of and across from me. It was the lady who had been speaking to Anne Carey after the morning church service. Her husband sat to her left, and a somber faced Miss Carey to the right.

After the pastor ended his eulogy a tall, thin, gentleman rose and sang “Blessed Assurance.” Later Miss Carey would again fill me in, explaining Mrs. Marsh had admired Mr. Polaski’s tenor voice when he sang solos in the choir. She had left instructions requesting him to sing for her memorial service and he had kindly obliged. He did have a nice voice.

When he was finished the tenor sat down again in his seat next to Mrs. Southby. The good pastor’s wife was not one of those wet eyed, I noticed, but I was not either. A lady I did not recognize stood up and announced there would be coffee and refreshments at the fellowship hall of the church for all of those who had come to show their last respects. She went on to introduce herself to those of us who did not know her. She was the president of the Hanley Soroptomist club, and she took a moment to describe the friend she had known and would miss.

Reverend Southby announced that following Mrs. Marsh’s wishes, her remains would be privately interred at her burial site. There would be no graveside service. He asked if anyone else cared to share before the service was ended.

Two individuals did. One elderly gentleman shared how “Miss Amelia” had come to visit his wife at home during her own last illness and been a comfort to both of them. Anne Carey rose and said she knew her friend would have been so pleased with the people who had come to say a final goodbye. She wanted to thank them all. Tears flowed down her pale cheeks and now they flowed down mine, too.

When we got up to leave I turned around and got a big surprise. Sitting in the very back of the room, in a gray sports jacket, was Detective David White.

Theresa and Barry said goodbye to me in the parking lot. They were not going for the refreshments. I thought about it for a moment as I turned the keys in my ignition, and decided not to go either. The last time I attended a funeral it was my husband Michaels. Over three hundred people had crowded the church that day. How vastly different that goodbye had been, and yet how much the same. It would be over an hour before the meeting at Mrs. Marsh’s house. I went back to my own home to wait.

For the church service and funeral I wore a beige pants suit with navy blue print blouse and navy blue pumps. Now I changed into jeans and a sweater, which seemed more appropriate for the task at hand. The weather was cooler today, with a brisk wind from the north. I opened my blinds to let the afternoon sun in. Its warmth felt good and I stood there in the sunshine.

Looking blandly out of the window, it was a couple of moments before I really noticed the Lincoln town car pulling into the drive in front of Mrs. Marsh’s garage. For the first time I remembered her car. She had driven a Buick Park Avenue. It was about twelve years old, and my guess was she had put less than twenty miles a week on it since moving to town. Just the sort of vehicle everyone looking for a used car hoped to find. Would a perspective buyer be put off if they knew the car belonged to a murder victim?

My mind was rambling, but my brain eventually processed the man in a suit who got out of the Lincoln and let himself into the Amelia’s house. Shortly after another late model sedan pulled up, and suited male number two walked purposefully up the steps and joined him. Both of them were carrying briefcases, and the first

arrival also brought a brown paper bag. I wondered if they would start without the rest of us. The idea annoyed me.

Puttering about my own home and eating a snack occupied the time until ten minutes to four. I locked my front door, slowly sauntered down my entryway, and turned left. Miss Carey was walking up to the front entrance from the opposite direction. Across the street a resident of the condominium directly opposite paused on his lawn to take notice of the number of people who were arriving.

Miss Carey waved to him politely and he waved back to both of us. He and his wife were new to the neighborhood. I had not met them, but I politely acknowledged his wave with a nod of my head and a smile.

As if on cue Miss Carey and I turned our back to the neighbor and walked up to the front door together. Also as if on cue, as we walked up the steps, the door opened. The greeter smiled pleasantly and gestured us in, holding out his hand as he closed the door behind us.

“Miss Anne Carey, and Mrs. Sally Nimitz?” he asked. It was obviously just a formality and he had been informed whom to expect, but his voice was pleasant. He was the younger of the two men, his heavy body looking even heavier in a dark suit that was too big for him. The other man was tall, thin, and stern looking, his lips compressed together in a thin line. But when we confirmed our identities they both smiled politely and the older of the two did not look so forbidding. They introduced themselves as Mr. Harmon and Mr. Bedeman, respectively, from the firm of Bedeman and Bedeman in Springfield.

“We have consulted with the home office of The Hedges and with Mr. Ainsworth, the manager,” Mr. Harmon informed us, “and they have given us permission to ‘takeover,’ as it were, for the afternoon, so that we can completely settle the affairs of Mrs. Amelia Marsh.” He gave an apologetic little smile and added, “We have taken the liberty of making some coffee, as we may be here for a little while. Would either of you ladies like some before we get started? We still have a couple more people to wait for.”

Miss Carey declined but I accepted the offer. The apartment was quite cool. Mr. Harmon offered to get it for me, but I made my way into the kitchen as the rest of our party sat down in the living room. The lawyers had brought all the fixings, including paper cups, and the coffee looked pretty good. The coffee makers used the pot sitting on the counter top, which Mrs. Marsh herself had used only occasionally, but they refrained from going into the cupboard for cups. There was also a tin of sugar cookies.

I looked about as I poured, noticing the kitchen was spotless and peaceful. No spirit seemed to linger of the violence that had occurred here just a few days earlier.

Mr. Harmon, as the junior partner, seemed to be delegated to do all the footwork. As I returned to the living room and settled myself on the settee next to Miss Carey, he was opening the front door again. Pastor Southby stood on the step, and approaching right behind him was Detective White.

They were also offered coffee, which the detective accepted and the pastor declined. With their presence we were ready for business. Mr. Bedeman took over. He and his associate had arranged the seating so the six of us were all able to see each other. I did not recognize Mr. Harmon’s chair, and thought it must be from one of the bedrooms.

“Due to the unusual nature of this situation,” Mr. Bedeman said in a professional manner, “both Mr. Harmon and I have come here from Springfield to attend to this affair. However, as soon as a few fine points to Mrs. Marsh’s will have been clarified, I will excuse myself and leave the rest of you to attend to details. Mr. Harmon will see to it there are no misunderstandings.” He paused, and nodded toward the police officer. “Again, because of the cause of death, chief of police Chilinski contacted our office and asked that their detective on this case be allowed to attend this meeting. Of course we agreed.”

From Miss Carey’s explanation I had the impression my late afternoon would be spent going through my late neighbor’s photographs and dresser drawers. This was extraordinary. It seemed I was to be privy to the reading of the will, at the very least.

“Amelia Marsh always dealt with me concerning her legal affairs, and often consulted me about her financial affairs as well,” Mr. Bedeman went on, and there was a softening of his voice. I tried to remember if I had seen him at the funeral. “Although she was in very good health she had the wisdom to realize the importance of leaving clear instructions in the event of her demise.” He paused, then went on quietly, “We had a fine working relationship for about five years. Her will as it stands was made in January of this year.” Now he nodded toward Reverend Southby, who had been silent and poker faced since walking through the front door. “Reverend Southby and I have already conferred, as the church he pastors is the main beneficiary of Mrs. Marsh’s estate.”

No big surprise there. One could not help but wonder just how much there had been to leave.

“There are some small bequeaths and these individuals will be notified personally. What remains in the house, including her private vehicle, is to be sold at auction, and the proceeds, after fees, to be divided equally between three charities she designated.” He shifted a bit in his chair, and continued. “Our firm felt it appropriate to ask the Reverend Southby to select two or three individuals to go through her private effects and remove anything not appropriate for public auction. We ask that you give a list of these things to us, or rather to Mr. Harmon, so that we can verify the items are of a personal nature and again, Reverend Southby has agreed to take the responsibility of disposing of these things as he sees fit.”

Pastor Southby did not look too happy about these responsibilities. He confirmed my thoughts by clearing his throat and asking if he could have the floor. Counselor Bedeman nodded graciously.

“I have just spoken to Miss Carey,” he inclined his head toward that lady, “and she has agreed to be the major representative here today. I have only come to verify this, gentleman, as there was no time to make phone calls.”

Both of the lawyers looked deadpan. They must have learned to keep a straight face when surprised in the courtroom.

The good pastor continued apologetically, “My wife cannot be here this afternoon, and it does not seem right to me that a woman is not placed in charge of going through Mrs. Marsh’s belongings. Miss Carey is not blood related to the deceased but they were very close friends. I think her professional credentials also make her, and anyone else she deems worthy,” and here he smiled a bit in my direction, “far better qualified than I am for this task.”

Mr. Bedeman recovered nicely and agreed Mr. Southby had the right to place Miss Carey in place as his proxy. Having all of us as witnesses, Miss Carey was duly so placed. She said nothing, except a quiet “thank you.”

The ball being back in the lawyers’ court, we were told her more valuable pieces of jewelry had been in the safety deposit box with her will. We need not think they had been stolen. Not to worry, I thought, I wouldn’t have known the difference. I had never seen Mrs. Marsh wear any valuable jewelry, other than the pearls she was wearing in the photograph at the funeral, and her wedding rings. She favored costume jewelry to match her outfits. She usually wore earrings, clips because her ears weren’t pierced, and now I remembered there were no earrings when I knelt beside her body to check for signs of life. Perhaps she didn’t wear them that day because she had slacks on.

Finally it was Mr. Harmon’s turn to speak. He told us the nature of what would be considered very personal, and what was to be considered part of the estate for auction. He would list everything separately. I wondered how much Mrs. Marsh’s estate was paying these two to come out on a Sunday afternoon.

Detective White, still in sports coat and minus badge, now took his turn. He would only be an observer, he said, with the sole purpose of seeing if the police department had overlooked anything pertinent in the matter of the lady’s death.

“Mr. Bedeman,” he said courteously, “you informed me on Friday there were some papers of a personal nature in Mrs. Marsh’s safety deposit box. You felt I might want to look at these. This is the second reason I am here today.”

“There were, sir,” the older of the two lawyers replied, “and I am trusting everyone here to maintain the confidentiality of these documents. If you find anything that has a bearing on solving her murder, and that document is needed as evidence, it goes without saying a subpoena is in order.”

Officer White nodded his acknowledgment of the rules.

Mr. Southby stood up. If he were no longer needed he would take his leave. Miss Carey and myself said polite goodbyes and Mr. Bedeman walked him to the door. The two men exchanged words in voices too low to be overheard before the lawyer shut the door behind him and joined the rest of us, but during those moments Miss Carey whispered in my right ear, “Poor man. He’s off the hook now. His wife. I’ll explain more later.”

Just those few words explained a lot to me. The unfortunate pastor had been caught between a rock and a hard place, whatever the particulars.

After taking his seat again Mr. Bedeman nodded to Mr. Harmon, who produced a strong box from a dark plastic bag that had been sitting unobtrusively next to his chair. Mr. Harmon pulled a key out of his pocket and opened the box. It was done rather ritualistically. I found myself holding my breath.

The safety deposit box was large enough to hold standard sized paper without being folded. Mr. Bedeman reached into the box and removed three manila envelopes. They were all labeled but I was not close enough to read what they said. He put the first one aside but opened the second.

“The first envelope is another copy of her will,” he explained, “which we need not go through in any greater detail here. Officer White,” and he nodded in the law enforcement officer’s direction again, “has already seen the original. The third envelope contains copies of more important receipts and transactions, such as the purchase of her vehicle and proof of insurances.” He paused to pull the papers out of the envelope he had opened. “This one,” he continued, “has copies of her birth certificate, marriage certificate, and United States citizenship.” Again he paused, and this time he looked at Anne Carey. “Miss Carey,” he said, “as far as I knew Amelia Marsh had no living relatives. When I asked her point blank if there was anyone related to her she wanted named as power of attorney or executor, she said there was no one. Do you know any differently?”

Miss Carey replied that she did not. In their five-year association, Amelia had never indicated she had any living relatives. She always spoke of family in the past tense.

“The exception would be her late husband,” the elderly lady added. “Amelia spoke of him from time to time, as one would expect.”

“And she never referred to any relatives of her late husband?” the attorney pressed a little further.

“No, I don’t think she ever did.”

There was a momentary silence. Perhaps the others were thinking, as I was, there was an even greater sadness attached to this affair because there seemed to be no one from the past to carry on the legacy of Mrs. Marsh. All of us who had known her had liked her. We wanted a part of her to live on in someone else.

The attorney nodded gravely. “Pastor Southby said the same. We will now continue according to the instructions of the lady’s will, and in accordance with the law. There is no reason to do otherwise.”

While the counselors and the detective looked more closely at the contents of the second envelope, I wandered back to the kitchen for a refill on my coffee and this time Miss Carey followed me for some of the same.

“I usually prefer tea,” she said, as she allowed me to pour for her, “but I had two cups after the funeral and I am just a little chilled right now. Something else hot sounds good.”

“If the tea was not decaffeinated you may be up for awhile,” I warned her. “I think this is the real thing.”

“It was herbal,” she assured me as she took a sip and added some creamer. “The house looks as though she will come back through the door any moment, doesn’t it? The kitchen even has a faint scent of the cinnamon she favored.”

I totally agreed with her. Again I marveled there was no evidence by sight or smell of the violence that had happened here just a few days earlier. Barry’s cleaners had done wonders. Their main task would have been cleaning the floor, not only because of the body but also the number of individuals tromping through after she died.

A collection of charming teapots stood cheerfully in the hutch, and the crocheted place mats were on the table as they had always been. The potpourri in a delicate glass dish in the center of the table contained the cinnamon sticks emitting the pleasant odor. There was an unfinished grocery list held by a magnet in the shape of a geranium pot to the refrigerator, and I supposed there were still perishables in the refrigerator itself.

It was still light outside and the flowers and shrubs visible through the patio door were not yet showing any sign of neglect. I wondered what would happen to them.

We were quiet for some time before Miss Carey broke the silence. “I don’t suppose there is any reason to wait any longer, do you, dear? Why don’t we start right here in the kitchen? The bedroom will be the most difficult, I expect, so we should save that for the last.”

Her voice was steady and her eyes clear, and I understood her. By her years and experience, and by my own tragedies, we knew life went on.

She started in the kitchen drawers and I went to the hutch. Mr. Bedeman interrupted us briefly when he came into the kitchen to say good-bye. He thanked us both again for our assistance. Mr. Harmon and Mr. White continued in whatever they were doing in the sitting room, so we went steadily through the drawers.

The process did not take long. I gazed with pleasure at a few pieces of fine crystal ware displayed on the top shelf behind a glass door. There was one set of fine English bone china displayed on the top shelves also, but

nothing, which could be defined as too personal for auction. There were two sets of beautifully decorated tablecloths with matching napkins in the bottom drawer. I felt a pang to think of strangers using Mrs. Marsh's treasures. Later I would learn Mrs. Marsh had willed her pick of the teapots and a linen tableware setting to Miss Carey, and the china to her former hairdresser. That gave me a measure of comfort.

From the cabinet next to the refrigerator Miss Carey perused the cookbooks and a recipe box. "Nothing here for selling, I shouldn't think," she said.

"No," I agreed. "Perhaps you could share some of her favorites with your mutual friends. I wouldn't mind looking through them myself. She served some wonderful rum cake one day this spring."

My companion agreed. We put the cookbooks aside. I insisted on being the one to climb the sturdy mini ladder folded neatly between the refrigerator and the wall to check out the top most cupboards. Except for two unused mouse traps, a partial roll of shelf liner, and two small plant pots, they were bare. Everything was kept in the lower cupboards at arms length for the petite Amelia, who had been at least four inches shorter than my own five foot six. Miss Carey was just a hare taller than myself, and handily peered through spices, storage containers, canned goods, and the stoneware Mrs. Marsh had used on a daily basis. She allowed me to bend down and peer into the lower shelves used for storing pots, pans, and bake ware, sparing her seventy plus year old knees the trip. Her own examination of the rest of the storage space produced many interesting discoveries, but nothing out of the ordinary for an elderly woman living alone.

Setting the cookbooks on the table, we moved back into the living room. We had been absent for about forty minutes but we hadn't been missed very much. The lawyer and the policeman glanced up from their conversation. I told Mr. Harmon what our inventory had given us so far, and he readily agreed to let Miss Carey have the cookbooks and recipe box, writing them down efficiently.

The sitting room was more crowded than the kitchen had been, but in perfect order.

"Why don't you see about this room, Sally, then join me in the workroom?" Anne Carey suggested, as she noticed my eyes moving about.

Instead of resuming their conversation Mr. Harmon followed Miss Carey and Detective White hung back with me and looked around.

"It's a nice room," he commented.

"Yes," I agreed. "She had a gift for making things attractive."

The walls were beige but the room's color scheme was rose pink and light green, off set with navy blue. The settee, recliner, a charming straight back chair with a needlepoint cushion, and the two small tables, were adorned with handmade throws and doilies but it was not overdone. The end tables were covered with several issues of gardening and craft magazines. There were two beautiful garden prints on the walls, a footstool, and a sofa table behind the small couch. I was no expert, but I knew all of the furniture was good quality, the wood in the tables and couch probably oak. A tall umbrella plant in a bronze pot graced the far side of the front window. Conspicuous was the lack of a television set. There would be a small one on the dresser in the bedroom, but no cable and no VCR. A radio, fairly new, was in the workroom.

"Not much place for storage in here," the policeman observed unnecessarily. He explained the police investigating the death had gone through the coat closet thoroughly and examined the contents of all of the pockets.

"I bet you didn't find anything to help you," I told him.

"Police investigations are confidential but you would be right," he replied dryly.

With a different purpose in mind we opened the closet door and I surveyed the array of used coats, sweaters, hats and scarves.

"These have all been used and most of them are out of fashion," I decided. "They should go to a local clothing bank or charity. I'll tell Mr. Harmon."

We moved on to look at the photographs on the sofa table.

"You would have looked at these before," I said to him matter-of-factly.

"Of course," he agreed. He picked up the ornate heavy framed picture of the deceased and her spouse. I had seen it before but I looked at it again. It had been taken at least twenty years earlier. The man was handsome in a rugged way, with strong features. His salt and pepper hairline was receding, but there was still a heavy mane of hair. His eyes were dark and bold. The gray pin stripped suit he wore fit him well, but did not conceal the portliness a prosperous life and later years had brought him. There was just a hint of a smile on the face as it

dutifully faced the camera. I could never decide if Amelia's husband had a sense of humor or not. I never asked her. She was sitting in front of him, her hair fixed in the same style she wore until her death, and even then allowed to go white. The lines in her face were less defined. She wore a soft blue jersey dress with a white lace collar. Unlike Mr. Leonard Marsh, the years had taken the pounds off. At sixty or so she was plumper. Her expression in the photograph was serene and serious.

"Doesn't tell us much, does it?" I remarked to the detective.

"No, and neither do these," he replied, indicating the other two picture frames. He picked each one up in turn, both of them handsomely framed as well. One was of the Marshes in their middle-aged years. They were with another couple, all of them in casual attire, posing happily on the deck of a sailing vessel. It looked like a casual snapshot that had been enlarged. Here Amelia Marsh had dark brown hair and her husband was slimmer. I guessed now the couple was the Fisks, and told the detective about them. He looked rather interested until I added they weren't alive any more either. The last frame was a charming black and white print of a small child sitting on her mother's lap, taken in the style of the early twentieth century.

"This is Amelia Marsh and her mother," I said informatively. The woman had been handsome, and Amelia no less so as a rosy cheeked toddler. "She told me her father was a prosperous farmer in the English countryside and her mother was his second wife. I think she had this photograph restored."

"Very nice," he said dryly, "but not much help to me."

"No," I had to agree. "Mr. White," I added impulsively, "I know this sounds like a question right out of a television cop show, but no one has said anything about the murder weapon. Did you find one?"

"No," he answered me without hesitation, "we didn't. Whatever the killer used to strike with, he must have taken with him."

"It must have been bloody," I protested, and swallowed hard before I added, "among other things."

"No doubt. Our best theory is that the killer washed it off in the sink. He may have done so. If so he was thorough. Everything was washed down the drain. Our best guess is he dried it off and concealed it in his clothing before he left the scene. There was nothing we found here that fit the description the coroner gave for anything heavy enough or the right shape to hit her in the way she was struck.

"I have a question for you, Sally," he countered. "You know the residence to the left of this one is empty?"

I nodded. "It has been for months. The former residents left it a mess, I was told. Barry had repair work done and new carpeting put in. I think it's for sale. Why?"

"Have you noticed anyone over there? Did Mrs. Marsh mention anything about the place?"

I thought silently. "As to your first question," I said finally, "I haven't seen anyone in it since the renovations. I noticed the workers when driving my car by, but otherwise didn't pay much attention. That residence is not very visible from mine. As to the second, she made no mention of anything out of the ordinary. I remember her saying she was glad when they moved out and she hoped for better neighbors next time. That's all. If she noticed anything odd she didn't say so. I think if she had I would remember. Sorry, but that's it."

I looked at him hoping he would volunteer more. He didn't, and I added, "You might ask Miss Carey. Her front door across the street has a better angle of this building." I turned to go to the bedroom as he nodded. Miss Carey met me at the door.

"Sally," she said anxiously, "and maybe you too, officer. Come in here, won't you? Unless the police have it, Amelia's appointment book is missing."

It was. Detective White had been through the victim's pocketbook numerous times and put everything back. The pockets of the clothing she wore when killed contained only a handkerchief and a wrapped peppermint.

The four of us went through the room again. Mrs. Marsh used what was intended for the master bedroom as her workroom. It bore the unmistakable stamp of her neatness, but was crowded with needlework, the secretariat, a bookcase, and her clothes rack, with a few items long dry still hanging on it. We searched everywhere, including the pockets of sweaters and coats hanging in the wardrobe, in essence going back over where official hands had been at least once before. No one was surprised we did not find the appointment book. I took it upon myself to search the bathroom in the unlikely event Mrs. Marsh had absent mindedly left it there if her body had suddenly demanded her time. I knew the police had been there, too, but it assured all of us the item was gone.

“She always had it laid out, or in her purse,” Miss Carey said positively, although she did her part in the search. “Even young people need to write things down to keep track, and we older folk more so. You’ve been through the house; you can see how meticulous Amelia was. She was very organized, too. She made lists of what she wanted done, projects she wanted to tackle, and wrote every appointment down in her book.”

When the rest of us wanted to know what it looked like, Miss Carey described a standard yearly planner, sized to fit into a lady’s pocketbook. I carried one myself. Mrs. Marsh’s appointment book covered twelve months, each month’s days divided into large squares with room to scribble. The cover of it was laminated with a bright floral design of wildflowers.

“If Mrs. Marsh wrote her appointment with her killer down in that little book, he or she knew it,” Mr. Harmon was the first one to say so. We all looked at each other, then the other three of us looked at the detective.

“That would be the obvious conclusion,” he confirmed, and added with a little grin, “but I appreciate the outside opinion. How could all of us be wrong?”

It was nice of him to lighten the mood. He went on to point out we could hardly do anything else about it now, and might as well continue what we were there for.

“If you don’t mind,” he added, “I’ll just keep looking around in case the lady mislaid it somewhere we haven’t thought of. I think it’s gone alright, but I need to be sure.”

Miss Carey asked Officer White if Mrs. Marsh’s checkbook was in her purse, and he told her it was, all checks accounted for, as well as her other identification. She did not carry any credit cards, a fact confirmed by her bank and the paperwork on her desk.

Amelia’s friend nodded. “I knew that.”

“Since you knew her well, ma’am, maybe you would be kind enough to look through that purse again yourself,” suggested the officer politely. He added bashfully, “I should have asked you to do this before.”

Of course the elderly spinster obliged with enthusiasm, and I thought the detective had probably gotten to where he was at least in part by his way with the ladies, especially the older ones.

But as far as Miss Carey could tell there was nothing else missing. She again pointed out the planner had always been sitting on top of the desk, or by the phone. “She always picked it up and took it with her when she went out, but left it open to use when she was home,” Miss Carey said positively.

As the policeman did his fine tooth search—at one point I heard him lift the lid on the washing machine—the rest of us continued with our mission. Going through both the workroom and the bedroom took less than an hour more. We removed a photo album and personal clothing, the first for keeping and the second for disposal. There was another small box of personal cards, letters, and mementos on the shelf in her bedroom closet. Official hands had gone through the box ahead of us, removing the rubber bands and ribbons without making any attempt to put things back as they were found. One couldn’t blame them.

“Why don’t you ladies take the box and go through it later?” suggested Mr. Harmon.

“A good idea, don’t you think so, Sally?” Miss Carey said brightly. “One evening soon you can come to my home and we could do this together.”

I was more than willing and readily agreed. Mrs. Marsh was definitely under my skin and I wanted to know more about her, whether we found out who killed her or not.

Mr. Harmon produced another box for the current paperwork stored in the secretariat, the magazines lying about, and various other odds and ends. We left the produce in the kitchen, and all of the bathroom items, including cosmetics, neither one of us interested in using them. The lawyer told us he would allow the housekeeping service hired to clear these things out to have what they wanted and dispose of the rest.

One of the small cases in a top drawer in the bedroom held a collection of hairpins, hatpins and buttonhooks. I exclaimed in pleasure out loud when I saw them, and pulled the wooden case out of drawer for the others to see.

“Mr. Harmon,” I said, “you must let me know when this auction takes place. I want to be there to bid on some of these.” I recognized some of the hairpins, but none of the rest.

He smiled, and agreed. “Most of the books in that bookcase will not bring much in sale. I don’t think Mr. Bedeman will object if either of you takes what you want of those.” He added as an afterthought, “Of course, if you find anything rare, of possible great value, you are on your honor to inform the firm.”

I offered to take the books with me, as Miss Carey said she doubted she had any room for them. Mr. Harmon disappeared momentarily into the garage and returned with more boxes. Detective White followed him to check Mrs. Marsh's vehicle for the missing appointment book and brought in another box, but otherwise came up empty handed.

"There would have been hell to pay if that calendar was found in her car," he told me when he returned. "Two officers have been all over it already."

Both of the men gallantly carried boxes back and forth to my own garage, and to Miss Carey's house. She was now anxious to get home to feed her dog. Together we took one last look at the neat rows of clothing and shoes. We stood a moment in the front of her armoire, which was covered with her costume jewelry and where her reading glasses lay in their case. My companion picked them up and slipped them into her purse.

"These might as well go to the Lions' Club," she said. "I'll tell Mr. Harmon."

My own attention was drawn to the double bed. It, too, was unmistakably marked with Mrs. Marsh's taste and looked as though she would certainly return to sleep there. Fantastically, I had an urge to bury my face in the pillows.

I put my arm around Miss Carey and she did not object. Together we walked back through the other rooms and said one more goodbye to Amelia Marsh.

Chapter Six

As soon as I got home I called George. He answered on the second ring but with an irritable tone to his voice that took me back.

"What is the matter with you? You told me to call you."

"Aw, sorry, Sally. I'm going through all this mail."

I remembered George had a bad habit of allowing his mail to pile up until the weekend.

"So what's the problem?"

"Do you know how much of a pain it is to have a name with two first names? I get mail addressed not only to George Thomas, but to Thomas George, and now there's something here addressed to George Thomason. How much of my mail are these guys getting?"

I laughed, and felt the despondency I had not even been aware of begin to lift. "Sorry, George. I did not realize you had this complication in your life. Do you still want to break away for a bite to eat?"

It was almost possible to see his face light up over the phone.

"Yes, Ma'am. I have been saving my appetite. How did things go for you over there?"

"Alright, I guess. As well as could be expected. I'll tell you about it."

This time George wanted to pick me up. He didn't come alone.

"What is this?" I climbed into the passenger seat to be immediately set upon by warm breath and panting enthusiastic enough to put any obscene phone caller to shame.

"Don't you remember Muffy?"

"Muffy! You have got to be kidding." I beat back the furry canine that was not at all offended by my protests. "Robin's dog?" George's son had bought a small pile of fluff and taken it with him when he moved out. In the semi darkness, this was a cross between a golden retriever and a shepherd.

"That's the one." George gave the friendly passenger a more serious cuff and she settled back in the extended cab. "The trouble is, the dog grew to twice the size Robin thought she would. His landlord doesn't like it so Robin brought her over yesterday and begged me to keep her until he finds a new place to live."

"Oh? And how long do you think that will be?" I was pretty knowledgeable on how your children could take advantage of you in such matters.

"I gave him a month, tops." George put the truck in reverse and backed out of my drive with the diesel engine in top form, a soft roar.

I had another thought as I buckled up. "How does your cat like this arrangement?"

"Don't know. She hasn't come out from under the bed since yesterday. I brought the dog along so she could come out and eat."

We agreed to go to the family restaurant on the highway where I had eaten breakfast the morning before. By the time we arrived it was after seven and I was hungry myself. I also had a mind full of thoughts and questions. It was easy to express them all to George; he was an eager listener. The whole saga of Amelia Marsh seemed to interest him immensely. I thought it might be because it was such a change from the routines of his usual life. Whatever his reasons he didn't want to wait until after dinner this time to hear my story. Between mouthfuls of food and sips of ice water and decaf, I related the events of the funeral and the settling of affairs at Mrs. Marsh's house. He listened with nods, grunts, and raised eyebrows, never missing a munch or swallow of his own.

"Does anything strike you as odd about all of this?" I asked him finally, nodding to the server as she came to offer a refill on the coffee.

George held out his own cup for a refill. "It's pretty odd for an elderly lady to get whacked on the head by someone who doesn't seem to have wanted anything but her appointment book," he said helpfully as the server walked away.

"You noticed that, too?"

He waved his fork at me, mockingly menacing in response to my sarcasm before taking a last bite of his noodles. "I was right, you know," he added smugly after swallowing, "Someone was after something. It just seems blasted odd nobody can find anything more important missing."

"Actually, I agree with you," I said. "But that's just part of what bothers me. You know, George, this lady has eighty years of living and memories, with no one to claim them. Yet her house basically looks as though she cleaned it out years ago. With the exception of some books, pictures, and a few old pieces of furniture, and well, okay, we'll add a set of china and glassware to that list, plus the boot hooks and hatpins. But still, even I have accumulated more than that. When she came to Hanley she must have left a huge amount of stuff behind."

"You sorted through everything and gave a lot away to your kids and Michael's niece when you sold the house," George reminded me helpfully.

"Exactly!" Now I waved my fork at him. "And that is just how that house looked, only more so."

"Is that so odd? You said she moved out here from the east just a few years back. Maybe she didn't want to move too much."

"Maybe," I allowed, "but it is still very unusual for an elderly lady to have so few treasures from the past at arms length. And there's another thing."

"What?" George leaned back in his chair contently. He never made lasagna for himself at home. It had been good.

"What did her husband do? It is like this guy was always middle aged or elderly, and always retired. Mrs. Marsh never said what he had done for a living. I just realized that today when I got to look in every room and never saw any pictures of them together when they were young."

My dinner partner contemplated this for a moment and I waited, finishing the last bites of my own dinner, a fairly good chicken cordon bleu.

"Okay, I'll play the devil's advocate here. You told me before the husband died ten years ago, at eighty, right? Well, he had been retired for a long time so the life they had together before that has been history for maybe, thirty years. The lady might have been the type who didn't live in the past, so to speak." He added after a few seconds, "Any chance they weren't married until they were middle aged?"

"Somehow I don't think so," I said slowly. "Don't ask me why, but I do think they were together for many years. Wait! She did say they met during the war, in England, but he was an American. So there were no photographs taken back then?"

"Maybe they're in the albums?"

"Yes. I'll get back with Miss Carey in a few days and see. By then I hope I've had a chance to go through some of those books."

George changed gears. "It doesn't sound like the police still have much to go on, and from what I'm hearing they've been thorough."

"If they have any leads they're not telling," I agreed, "but Detective David White is pretty closed mouthed. To tell you the truth, I am pretty impressed with him. He seems quite professional for a detective in a small potatoes place like this."

"And what, may I ask, do you have to compare with?" George asked rather snidely, I thought.

“Only an impression of professionalism when I see it,” I shot back, “plus years of reading fiction and non-fiction mysteries.” Before George could give me a suitable reply I added honestly, “But he does unsettle me sometimes. I’m not sure what he’s up to, but there’s something I can’t put my finger on.”

George sipped his beverage and contemplated the things he had been told.

“What he asked you about the place next door was interesting,” George offered after a while. “I wonder what his angle was there.”

“I wonder about a lot of things,” I countered. “I wonder, to go back to what you said, why someone would have enough time to kill her, to clean their weapon, and to look around enough to notice their name in an appointment book, yet they didn’t take any money out of her purse or search for other valuables. I also still wonder why anyone would benefit from her death. She didn’t leave a large sum of money to any one person, and I just can’t see the minister killing her for what she left the church!”

“Pretty crazy,” George agreed. “By the way, did you find out how well off she was?”

“Not really. My impression is she was comfortably set, but not wealthy.”

The waitress returned to offer dessert and we both declined. She wished us a good evening, left the check, and politely told us to wave if we wanted more coffee.

“So that’s why you’re interested in her past,” George continued, “because no one in the present benefits by her death, as far as you can tell, and her past is rather murky, shall we say.”

“I guess that’s it,” I admitted. “Look, I know there must be reasons for Mrs. Marsh’s lifestyle decisions and they’re probably logical ones. We may never know what happened, much as I hate to admit that. But the lady intrigues me as much now as she did when alive. However this comes out, I want to find out more about her, where she came from, what her life was like before she came here.”

I gave my companion a conspiring smile. “You are a great sounding board, George. I’d like to keep you in on this. But you won’t tell any of this to anyone else, will you?”

“Certainly not,” he tried to act offended, then gave it up. “I don’t see the harm in you and your old girlfriend there, what was her name, Miss Casey, looking through the books and pictures to see what you can find out. But keep me posted. A male mind can put a different slant on things. Besides,” and his face brightened with the inspiration, “you may find my expertise on the computer helpful.”

“You may be right. You know very well I only use the computer for e-mails and balancing my checkbook. If you are willing to do a name search, you are on.” George might be able to help us find June Fisk’s daughter, if we could discover her last name. I wasn’t offended by his comment on the male perspective, either.

We each paid our own bill. Back in the pickup I effectively kept Muffy from smothering me before George dropped me off at home. I stayed up late, as I had to work the following night, and as was my habit, intended to sleep in. It was no good for me going back to bed for a nap, so this was how I survived the night shift.

It was after one when I finally lay in bed. It had been a few months since I had reached out for Michael in the night. But tonight, I missed him terribly. Sleeping fitfully at first, I woke up calling his name. My pillow was wet, so I knew I had been crying.

My crusade was put on hold for a few days. Monday afternoon there were domestic duties to finish and a few errands to run. Exercise, shower, and it was time for work. I stopped at the store for fruit and munchies to get me through the night.

The night was wild, all twelve hours of it. I grabbed my snacks and hydration on the run, stopping only twice for a potty break. A new young graduate, barely out of orientation, missed the signs of her laboring patient going into transition and called the doctor too late to make the delivery. She and I delivered the baby together, with the assist of the patient’s nervous husband. The baby was fine, a vigorous boy, but the doctor was more than mildly irritated and the young nurse in tears before he finished grilling her. I did what I could to smooth things over, and moved on to take up the care of a sixteen-year-old girl just moved out of triage.

Her labor was not so easy. For hours she made steady but slow progress as I tried to keep her as comfortable as possible with intravenous pain meds, breathing techniques, and a long warm shower. Normally she would have been allowed an epidural for anesthetic as her labor intensified, but she was a heavy girl with mild scoliosis, and the anesthetist refused to take the risk of giving her one. Her mother and boyfriend grew more nervous, slipping out frequently on feeble excuses but in reality to go downstairs and smoke to ease their own

stress. For the last three hours of labor I ended up at her bedside continually to keep her focused and in control. The delivery went through the shift change and I didn't have the heart to leave her until it was over. By the time the paper work was finished it was an hour later than usual when I pulled out of the hospital parking lot. Exhausted, I sank into bed about nine a.m.

Since I forgot to shut my bedroom door, I heard the phone when it rang. Groaning I turned over to look at the clock; it was almost two in the afternoon. Time to get up if I wasn't going to be awake all night, and there was no need of that. I was not back on duty again until Friday. It was too much to move fast enough to answer before the answering machine, so I lay back to listen if the caller left a message.

He did. It was Detective White, telling me my statement at the police department was ready for my signature, and would I return his call to let him know when I could come down to the station. After a shower, hair wash, and afternoon breakfast at the Griddle, I called back and arranged with the dispatcher to come in the next morning at ten.

I didn't get to the books taken from Amelia Marsh's house that afternoon or evening, nor did I see Anne Carey. My time was peacefully filled with exercise, letters, a library run, and changing my closet in the master bedroom from summer to winter wardrobe.

Not until Wednesday did the mystery of Amelia Marsh come close again. The good detective was not in when I arrived to sign the statement. I was settled in the same chair in his office I had occupied a few days earlier, and the female officer who had been at the murder scene handed me the typed pages, with a hand written letter on the top from David White. His scrawl was quite legible. He apologized for not being there, asked me to read everything carefully, and only sign if it was completely as correct as I remembered. If there were any problems, discrepancies, could I come back at noon to see him personally? The officer, whose nametag said "Newman" sat down quietly in her superior officer's chair, obviously not going anywhere while I read.

I read it through twice and could find no fault with it. Everything was written as I had related.

"Is it alright to use my own pen?" I asked politely, fishing one out of my purse.

"As long as it's black ink," she allowed.

After signing I was escorted back through the visitor's entrance with polite finality and the assurance of being notified if there was anything else.

"That should be the end of it," I said out loud as I started my car, but not believing it really was.

It was another nice day weather wise so I took an hour hike before getting back into my garden. While trimming my rose bush I could hear activity on the other side of the fence. I stood up and looked over to see Mrs. Marsh's furniture being loaded into a large truck. Three men in navy coveralls were absorbed in their task, they didn't see me. Barry did, and waved slightly. I waved back and returned to my task. I wondered if Miss Carey was at home and had noticed. Tonight, I thought, I will start looking through the books.

Barry startled me when he called my name. I looked up to find his face peering over the top of the fence that divided Mrs. Marsh's patio from mine.

"Little complication here," he informed me. "We forgot all about that storage space in the garage. I just went up there and found all her Christmas decorations."

"Anything else?" I asked, straightening up. How stupid. How could we have all forgotten about the small attic above the garage? I had one just like it.

"Naw. I feel like a dope. Last year she asked me to help her get the stuff down, and I didn't even think about it. I don't know who she had helping her put it back after Christmas but it wasn't me. She told me that was all she kept up there because it was hard to get at, and I don't see anything else now."

"Well, I guess if I were you I'd call her lawyers just to make sure, but I think you can load those things up for the auction with everything else. They can sort it out with the auctioneers."

Barry agreed that was a sound idea. He had the number in the office.

I crouched down on my heels again, resisting the thought I would like to see those decorations. I had no right to them, and there could be nothing up there to aid the murder investigation. Could there? Surely the police hadn't been up there.

Sweat and soil required another shower, and I was drying off when my archenemy, the telephone, rang again. Some premonition had prompted me to bring the cordless into the bathroom, so I surrendered and answered promptly.

It was Everett and he was mildly reproachful because he and Judy had not been filled in on Sunday's activities.

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely, "time has gotten away from me somehow."

"We have been sitting on the edge of our chairs," he rubbed it in a little more.

"The suspense may be far more than the actual events," I warned him dryly. "Can you hang on for twenty more minutes while I get dressed?"

"Do we have a choice?"

"No. I'll call you back."

"Sounds simple to me," Everett announced when I finished my narrative. It was not clear how he and Judy had arranged who would talk to me and pass on all the information to the other. Maybe they tossed a coin, but my son stayed on the other end of the line to absorb what I said and in turn repeated it to Judy. She was keeping an eye on Joel who was taking a bath. From time to time I could hear him making loud sound effects that were supposed to be "sharks."

"Oh, really? Please continue."

"Not that I can identify who killed her," Ev admitted, backing down a bit, "but what I mean is, she not only knew who was coming to see her, but it had been arranged ahead of time. It sounds like the killer called, made an appointment, and after the deed is done he takes the one piece of evidence that will incriminate him. Excuse me, or her."

"But how could this person know that Mrs. Marsh had not told someone she was having this visitor?" I queried.

"But she didn't!" my son said triumphantly, "and for whatever reason she didn't, the killer knew she wouldn't."

There was a pregnant pause while I absorbed his reasoning. "Okay," I said slowly, "we have a murderer who knows Mrs. Marsh well enough, and has an interesting enough reason for seeing her, to be quite sure she won't tell anyone about it. This person also has to know her well enough to know she will have this prearranged appointment written down."

"Well, maybe finding the appointment book may have been just a fluke," Ev theorized. "You said she always kept it in plain sight while at home."

I had to admit this line of reasoning made sense. It brought me no closer to who the visitor had been, but lent more credence to my suspicions this person was from her past. And at this point, something else dawned on me. There was no way to prove this either, but somehow I knew.

"Everett, my boy," I told him, "when Mrs. Marsh wanted to see me, I think she wanted my advice. I think she either wanted to ask me if she should see this person, or if I would be there when she did. And you know what that means? Our appointment was for two in the afternoon. The caller came earlier than he was supposed to."

"But she let him in anyway," Everett said somberly. "I hope you are right about this person not being a current one in your neighbor's life, because I don't like to think that someone is still close by somewhere."

"Not a pleasant thought," I agreed, "but it isn't likely. There have been no other murders of elderly people living alone anywhere in the county or middle-aged ones, either, in the past several months, other than two that were clear-cut family related crimes. Unless this is the beginning of some pattern or scam, there is no precedence here, just as we've suspected all along." My friendly neighborhood detective had filled me in on these particulars on Sunday afternoon.

"You be careful, anyway," my son said firmly. He paused, and I heard Judy address him, but could not hear what she said. "There's one other thing we were worried about," he went on after she finished, "ah, was it okay you going over there? I mean, having to go through her effects." He paused again, apparently looking for words to say what he was driving at. "It hasn't been all that long since you had to do this before."

"Oh," I felt dense. Now it was clear what he was trying to say. "You mean, did it bring back painful memories from your Dad's death. No honey, not really." George had asked me the same thing before we had parted company on Sunday night. It was touching they all thought of it. "This is so different for me. Just as sad in its own way, of course, but I didn't live with Mrs. Marsh for twenty-seven years."

"So what are you going to do now?"

“Spend the evening looking at some of the books stacked in the garage. There are three boxes of them.”

Chapter Seven

I didn't tell the kids my other intention but after they hung up I placed a call in to David White, in the hopes his day had not yet ended. I had to leave a message and had no expectation of hearing from him until the next day, but while I was fixing myself an omelet he called back.

After the formalities and each of us apologizing for bothering the other, I asked him if the police had checked the local motels for interesting guests on the night before Mrs. Marsh's death. He was obviously stunned.

“Sally, what on earth are you getting at?”

“Look, I don't know what your investigation has uncovered, and certainly have no right to, but you have encouraged me to keep in touch with you and this is what I see, from what I know.” He got my hypothesis about Mrs. Marsh's visitor being someone she knew before she moved to Hanley. “And if that's true, did anyone with a British accent stay nearby the night before she died. Surely the local hotel clerks would remember the accent.”

There was a moment of contemplation on his part. “Rather than discuss this any further over the phone, why don't you stop by the station to see me personally?”

“Then you're still working on this case, aren't you?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Alright. I am free most of tomorrow. Will that do?”

It would. He would see me right after lunch. My search through the books from my neighbor's house might give me something more to present to the detective by then.

For over three hours I looked through the volumes Mrs. Marsh had brought with her from New Jersey. About an hour into it, Anne Carey called. Like myself she hadn't gotten into a closer look at Amelia's personal property until this day, preoccupied with other commitments. After reading a few personal letters she called me. We decided to meet at her house the following evening to compare notes. She invited me to come early enough to share a meal with her first and I accepted.

There was a lot to be learned from my Thursday interview with Detective White, and later from my visit with Anne Carey. It would be a little while before I realized just how much.

Showing up at the police station at twelve forty-five, and shown immediately into the same office I was now visiting for the third time, I sat back into the same chair and had the odd sensation of beginning to feel familiar with the place. Was this good or bad?

I accepted the cup of coffee I was offered. Of course it was in a paper cup, but it was surprisingly good.

“Times have changed,” grinned David White when I complimented him on it. “Nowadays everyone wants drinkable coffee. We even keep hot water and tea bags.”

I laughed, but we dispensed with further small talk and got to the issue.

“In answer to your question of last night,” the officer leaned forward over his desk, “the answer is yes. We did check the guest registers at all of the motels here in town and off the highway for anyone who might interest us in this investigation. So far that hasn't turned up anything.” I opened my mouth but before I could ask he added, “did we ask the night clerks if any of their check-ins for the Monday and Tuesday nights before the murder had British accents? No, we didn't.”

“But almost anyone around here, especially this time of year, would have remembered that,” I pointed out.

“I can't argue with that. And, I have put a man on it today. He will go back and re-interview those clerks.”

“Is there anything else?” he asked politely as I sipped my coffee.

“In fact there is. Last night I went through those boxes of books you and Mr. Harmon brought over. There was a Bible in one of the boxes, but it was hardly used.”

The officer looked at me without expression.

“So,” I went on, “Mrs. Marsh was an active member of her church. She attended services and Sunday school regularly. She must have had another Bible, one she used. Where is it?”

He leaned back in his chair and took a deep sigh, eyeing me as I did my children when they have asked me a question I can't answer, and wish they hadn't asked.

“Have you asked Miss Carey about that?”

“Not yet, but I intend to. She’s invited me over tonight for dinner.” I didn’t tell him what else we had planned for the evening.

“Well if she has the answer, and for sure if she doesn’t, please let me know.”

“Are these meetings going to be a weekly thing?” I asked him impishly. Sometimes one cannot help it. “If so, maybe I should bring the brownies.”

“Oh, feel free,” he said, a tad dryly, “as long as there is a murderer to be caught in the case of Amelia Marsh and you keep having these revelations, we’ll have conferences.”

“If Miss Carey has anything new maybe I should invite her, too,” I quipped again, but then relented. “Seriously, I do not want to take any of your time unless it seems important. I don’t mean to be trite. This is very important to me.”

“It is very important, period,” David White agreed, “and much as I hate to be shown up by an amateur, you have given me some things to think about. Ah, is there anything else?”

“Not yet.”

He gave me a look I could not decipher and personally saw me to the door.

I had never been in Miss Carey’s home before. She was right. It was cluttered. There was too much furniture, too many plants, and every bit of wall space was covered with photographs, pictures, two mirrors, and shelves of collectibles. I looked with interest at the Hummel figurines and miniature bears, sipping a cup of raspberry tea while my hostess finished her preparations for our dinner. When she called me to the table I carefully stepped around a large footstool and around Yippy, who had decided to be a friendly companion. She kept her furry little body within a couple of inches of my ankles at all times.

The little canine was scolded gently as we sat down. She moved back about six more inches and parked herself on the floor under the table, giving me room enough to cross my legs.

The dining room table, big enough to seat six, had been used for research before the meal. My hostess didn’t think it was necessary to remove all the paperwork so we could eat. She simply moved it all to one side, making room for our place settings and the food. Between us on a thick potholder sat a small, steamy casserole. The aroma drifting from it was delicious.

“Scallops and cheddar,” my hostess announced rather proudly, and then added in sudden revelation, “oh! I didn’t think to ask. You do like seafood? I should have asked you first. And some people have seafood allergies, too.”

“No, no,” I laughed and reassured her, “no allergies here, and I love scallops. It smells wonderful.”

She also had a fruit salad and rolls. It was a good thing I would be up for awhile to digest all of this.

“I don’t usually eat so much for the last meal of the day,” she added, as if able to read my mind, “but it is a pleasure to have someone to cook for tonight.”

While dishing up, Miss Carey asked me if I had become a celebrity at the hospital, living next door to a murder scene and discovering the body.

“Only a couple of people mentioned it,” I replied, buttering my roll. “We were so busy the one night I’ve been there since last Wednesday, there wasn’t much time to talk about it. And to tell you the truth, in spite of the publicity all last week, the chances are only a few people even know. Some of my co-workers don’t live around here, and for sure some of them don’t bother to read the newspaper.”

Miss Carey seems surprised by this. “But surely they listen to the radio,” she protested, “and it was on the local news on television, too.”

I shrugged. “It does not hurt my feelings. Working nights has many advantages as far as I am concerned.”

Shifting gears I asked her, “What was that business all about with the pastor of your church? When did he suddenly ask you to take his place settling Amelia’s personal effects?”

“Why, at the fellowship hall, of course, following the funeral. He apologized for the sudden request, but told me he had not remembered until Saturday, Marie, that’s Mrs. Southby, could not be there, and he did not feel comfortable with overseeing the affairs of a lady of the church without his wife involved. He said both he and Marie had decided it would be more appropriate for me to take charge. They both approached me but he did the talking.”

I happily dug into the delicious entrée and listened without making a comment. Miss Carey took a few bites of her own, and added without prompting, “On the chance of you thinking me an old gossip, Sally, I’ll tell you the truth. The Southbys have a daughter in college in Terre Haute. The girl was very upset they had a funeral on Sunday afternoon. She had arranged a special supper with her boyfriend and his family. Marie promised her they would both make it come hell—oops; excuse the choice of words—or high water. The Reverend thought he could make it in time for dessert and some socialization, but his girls weren’t having it. The man was desperate!”

We both laughed shamelessly. “Miss Carey, I will not ask you where you got your information, but I don’t doubt it for a minute. Why do you suppose he didn’t just tell you the truth?”

“You will never get my sources,” Miss Carey said righteously, suppressing a grin. “And he did tell the truth, in a way, because Marie would not put her precious girl off for settling an elderly parishioner’s affairs, so she would never have been there. It really is better the way it turned out, since I had you there to help me.”

“It worked out fine.” It also proved once again, I thought, that clergy were just as human as everyone else.

Miss Carey told me it was time I called her Anne. I enjoyed every morsel of her meal. We spent another half an hour eating and chatting about a variety of subjects. Having lived in the Hanley area most of her life, Anne Carey was a wealth of information about the town and its people. As with almost any modern community, this one had undergone many changes. It was her opinion Hanley had come through better than many, still remaining a small town, albeit one now flanked on two sides by larger ones. She had taught two generations of Hanleyites at the high school before going full time into administration, retiring after eight more years of service. Upon my query she said, yes, she had done some traveling. As it turned out we had both visited Hong Kong in the eighties. It was fun to compare notes.

While another pot of tea was brewing, we set up for business. Yippy watched curiously but successfully avoided our feet while we cleared away the dishes.

Anne pushed the papers back to the center of the table. I pulled my own notes out of my purse and faced her across the table, prepared to compare our research and conclusions.

“You first,” I urged. “What did you find useful and interesting in the photo album and that box of personal effects?”

“There were many things that were interesting that may not be particularly useful,” Miss Carey began, putting on a professional tone. She flipped open the cover to her own note pad to reveal numerical statements and questions, all arranged in orderly rows in a small neat script. My handwriting would place a poor second place.

“Since they have Amelia’s birth certificate and passport, we could have asked her lawyers where she was actually born,” Anne Carey began, “but that isn’t necessary now. I already knew her birthday, of course, which was the twentieth of March, but the personal effects told me she was born in Stafford, and her maiden name was Tucker.

“It seems to me,” she continued, “Amelia deliberately condensed her memories, photo wise, into this one album. She must have had many more pictures at one time.” She pulled the album out of the paper pile. It was large, black, and plain.

“It’s out of character for her, this album,” I remarked. “I would have expected a needlepoint cover or something else with a feminine touch.”

Anne agreed with me. Together we looked through the album. The first four had photos of her early years, and included one of Amelia as a pretty young woman posing for a portrait. We both thought she was about eighteen. I was fascinated by her beautiful dress, a creamy lacy affair at the height of the fashion of its day. It suited her small frame, as did the soft hairdo waving over her brow. Her large light colored eyes looked innocent but expectant.

On a fresh sheet of paper I copied information that could be important for our research. First, there was Mrs. Marsh’s birth into a well to do farming family in Staffordshire in 1915. She had at least one sibling, an older sister. At some point during the Second World War she had moved to London where she met Leonard Marsh. She married him in April 1946, and left England with him shortly after. My cohort had gleaned this information from labels on the back of some of the pictures, and from her search through the box of mementos. Oddly, there were no wedding photographs.

“I remember she told me her mother died when she was nineteen. She must have talked about her father once or twice, because I want to say he was fond of horses. Also, I want to say she had more siblings, but cannot put any specific names to them. Look at these two pictures.” She pointed to the photos on the second page. One was of two tall, rugged looking adolescent boys in riding attire, facing the camera, their handsome steeds loosely held on reins at their sides. The other picture was more of a family shot taken out on the lawn. There were nine individuals in this one, ranging from one very elderly lady to two young girls, four male and five female in all.

“These two could be Amelia’s parents,” Anne’s long thin finger pointed out a handsome, sober, woman, perhaps in her thirties, sitting primly in front of an imposing gentleman some years older, his hand on her shoulder. “The two young men over here could be these same two with the horses, don’t you think? That picture was taken earlier. I suppose the others are various relatives, and the youngest girl certainly looks to be Amelia.”

I scrutinized both photos and could agree with Miss Carey’s guesses, but like her was not positive of her conclusions. “Have you compared this group picture with the one Mrs. Marsh had in her sitting room?” I asked helpfully. “If this is her mother, she should not look too different a few years later. I’m inclined to think this is her.”

“I didn’t pick it up off of the table,” my companion admitted regretfully, “but I am hoping Mr. Harmon took it with him. I intend to find out.” We turned the pages and she went on, “There is a big gap of time between this portrait style picture taken in the late twenties and the casual snapshots taken during the war.”

I gazed at the pictures. The one at the top of the page was of four young people. Amelia and Leonard with June Fisk and her husband, Anne said. There was Amelia, as attractive as ever and even more so here because she was in love. The way she and Leonard looked at each other left no doubt as to the nature of affection between them. June was tall for a girl, especially of the forties, and full figured. She had been more handsome than pretty, with a heavy mane of dark hair. Her companion was in uniform. Leonard was wearing a suit.

“I see what you mean. There is a time span missing here of, say, twelve years or so.” I paused and perused the photos silently. “You don’t think Mr. Marsh was active duty in the military?”

“One has to wonder. In those days the young men wore their uniforms most of the time. But there were civilian Americans in London during the war in other capacities. I don’t remember her saying what he did professionally. Odd, really, when you think about it. What I do remember is where they met. She said they met in a pub. She was with a group of girls, and he asked her to dance.”

I drummed my fingers on her table. “We seem to be coming up with more questions than answers here. What else do you have?”

She consulted her notes. “Let’s stay in London for a moment. Amelia kept two letters from another young woman named Meg. They were roommates at one time, and workmates, too. They are lengthy, and eliminating the personal gossip, refer to a decision Amelia made. The decision is never spelled out, but there are also a few letters Leonard wrote to her when he was away from London, and three times he also mentions this decision without referring to it specifically.”

Abruptly my hostess got up and fetched the teapot from the stove. She put the teabags into the pot of boiling water to steep, placed the pot and cups on the table by rearranging the paperwork again, and continued. “Isn’t it odd no one ever says what it is Amelia has to decide? It must have been extremely important, and very delicate. You must understand in those days people were not so blunt about things as they are now.” She smiled, “Even the love letters from Leonard are more discreet than what you can hear now on television.”

“What you can hear on modern television isn’t very discreet at all,” I commented, “but I get your point. From everything you’ve read and looked at, do you have any idea what this big secret was?”

“Well, one always has ideas,” she admitted, putting a dab of cream in her teacup.

I sat back in the dining room chair and waited for her to come clean. Anne methodically removed the tea bags from the pot and remarked how Mrs. Marsh had taught her to make a much better cup of tea. She poured us both a cup and gave me a small smile.

“Amelia grew up in a very traditional proper English household. During the middle of the war, in her late twenties, she came to London to work. I don’t think her family approved, and I don’t think they approved of Leonard Marsh, either. My guess is, she chose marrying him over the wishes of her family.”

After a long pause and a few sips of tea I replied, “That seems far fetched to me, because I know so many English girls did marry Americans during the war. But I would not understand the thinking of the kind of family she may have come from. Would that explain why there’s no indication there was any more contact with her

family after she married?" I thought again and added, "But it still doesn't seem right. Breaking from her family may have been hard, but what was so 'delicate' about it, as you say. And usually people get over their hurts after a while and make up."

Miss Carey admitted she did not know the answer to that. But there was something else odd about Mrs. Marsh's life. The twenty years following her marriage were also sparsely documented. A few pages of photographs and a few letters from the Fisks and others, revealed Leonard and Amelia had traveled extensively and lived abroad. They had spent time in France, Germany, India, and Hong Kong, at the very least, before settling on the eastern seaboard of the United States.

My own digging supported this. There were cookbooks, atlases, and travel logs among the books from all of those countries among the books I looked through. Although neither one of us had been aware of it, from the notes and grease spots in the pages of some of the cookbooks, Mrs. Marsh had enjoyed Chinese cooking at one time in her life.

"But no Chinese artwork or furnishings," I mused, puzzled. "How could someone spend that much time living abroad and not accumulate more to show for it?"

"The hutch had some linens that came from Hong Kong," Anne mused, "and a few of the teapots were from the east, too, although of course they can be purchased in the United States as well, or in England."

"My friend George thinks Mrs. Marsh just got tired of having so many material things. That would be the simplest explanation why she left so much behind when she left New Jersey," I shared with my friend. "I can relate to that, to a point. Six months after my husband died, I woke up one morning and decided I had to start life over, for myself. I put the house we had lived in together on the market. It sold quickly. When I left and moved here I never looked back. I chose a few things that had special memories for me, and what furniture I needed to furnish my new home. The rest I gave away or sold. But if I disappeared tomorrow, any stranger going through the closets would find three times as much evidence to show what my life was like than what we have found out about Mrs. Marsh, and she had thirty plus more years of living than I do. It seems so odd. And for crying out loud, what did her husband do for a living? It's like a huge secret!"

"One is tempted to think he was in some kind of secret service or something," Miss Carey said seriously, but with the humorous glint in her eye I was coming to recognize.

"If you were Jane Marple and I was your nephew, Raymond, he would be," I quipped back. Miss Carey chortled to that.

"But somebody had to do those clandestine things," I added, "and it is possible. There must be a way for us to find out."

"I have got one piece to our puzzle I can put into place," Anne said brightly, "and this piece may lead to others." She paused briefly for dramatic effect, and I looked at her with the expectation she wanted.

"I found out the married name of June and Eric Fisk's daughter, Elaine!" After I clapped and gave a "bravo," she added, "It is Barclay. And how do you think I got it?"

"With you," I said with a grin, "the field is wide open."

"From Betty, the hairdresser!" she said triumphantly. "I remembered that when Elaine visited the summer before last, she had her hair cut at Amelia's hair dresser. I thought perhaps Betty kept a card on it, you know they usually do, and sure enough."

"Brilliant! Did Betty happen to have anything to add?"

"Well, she wanted to know why I was asking, that was obvious. A nice young woman, Betty, and always so good to Amelia, but was always very curious. Amelia used to find it amusing and didn't mind. I told her we wanted to inform Elaine of Amelia's death, and she found that natural enough. She even volunteered the name of the town in Texas she thought she still lived in. Wasn't that nice of her?"

"Very," I said devoutly, "that would save us a lot of time."

Anne peered down at her notes to assure herself she remembered correctly. "Athens. Betty remembered because she has a sister who lives in Athens, New York. How very sad."

"Sad? Why?" I did not follow.

"It would be nice if Athens was remembered because of Greece, don't you think?"

It was hard not to smile. "You have a point. Now I wish Betty knew the name of Elaine's husband. I wonder how many Barclays there are in Athens, Texas."

“I don’t mind calling telephone information tomorrow and find out,” my hostess said generously. She lifted her teacup to her lips and added in a more pensive mode, “This would not be necessary if we had Amelia’s appointment book. She had her addresses in the back.”

I lifted my own teacup and looked directly into Miss Carey’s eyes over the top of it and said casually, “That reminds me. You wouldn’t know what became of Mrs. Marsh’s Bible, would you?”

Chapter Eight

Two hours after returning home I pulled out my own notepad again. During my workout and a steamy bath, my mind had been churning over all the information Anne Carey and I had compiled. Now I sat at my desk and jotted down a few more questions and ideas. I wondered if the law firm had any record of Leonard Marsh’s birth and birthplace. They hadn’t mentioned if his birth certificate or passport was among the papers in the safety deposit box, but it was likely. They were not with the personal papers Miss Carey had. Nowhere had there been any photographs taken of Mr. Marsh as a child, or any references to his adolescent or childhood years. I promised myself a phone call to Mr. Harmon after the weekend.

Anne Carey had lost her train of thought when I asked about the Bible.

“Sally,” she gasped, “Sally! I should have thought! It wasn’t there, either! I should have noticed!”

I was tempted to ask if she kept anything stronger than tea in the house, she had been so flustered.

“You were the one who missed the appointment book,” I soothed. “It was only because of the other Bible in the bookcase that the idea came to me there must be another.”

“There certainly was. It had large print and gold binding.”

“Is it possible she left it somewhere? She could have left it in church, perhaps.”

Miss Carey knitted her brow for a moment in thought and then shook her head decisively. “Not likely. Someone would have turned it over by now. Her name was in it, I know. If she had left it on a chair or bench, someone would have found it. Besides,” she moved quickly in her excitement, almost knocking over the now empty tea cup, “it was Wednesday when she died. She would have noticed it missing long before that. Our ladies study group was meeting on Friday and she would have been using to do her lesson.”

Miss Carey would call the church secretary to be sure. She also insisted again she would be the one to try to track down Elaine Barclay. I didn’t argue. I had to work the following night, and we were running into the weekend. We agreed I would call her Sunday evening about six to share what she had discovered.

After we finished our discussion about the missing Bible, I looked at the rest of the photographs in the album. There were half a dozen pages of snapshots taken during their years together in New Jersey after Leonard retired, and two featured a young woman Anne thought was Elaine Barclay. They were not labeled. One of them was taken with her groom on their wedding day. The very last page featured Amelia during her life in Hanley. With the president of the garden club at her side she beamed at the camera, holding a blue ribbon for her chrysanthemums, which were spread in profusion in front of them both. She had won the award only weeks before she died. The ribbon was in the mementos’ box.

Miss Carey offered me a look into that box of letters and personal effects, and I eagerly accepted. She had looked at everything and earmarked a few of the letters and souvenirs that puzzled her. I perused them again and made a few guesses but had no concrete answers. Leonard Marsh had written gallant love letters as a suitor, but none as a husband, unless his wife had discarded them all. An opera program from Munich in 1950, and a delicate Christmas card in faded lace dated four years later, were just two treasures that spoke of special evenings, special days. We both noticed most of the treasures were from their earlier years together. Had their marriage been as happy later on? The fragility of temporal life, so fleeting a thing, was so real to me as I touched Mrs. Marsh’s memories that I could not try to express it to Miss Carey. No one else could ever know the life she had known. Not even Michael’s death moved me to such an awareness, perhaps because a part of him was still alive in our children and myself.

Before I put my notepad away for the night I added in large type: *What did Leonard Marsh do for a living?* I also decided to have my hair cut at Betty’s.

My shift Friday night started out well. For several hours the labor hall was empty. I kept myself busy with much needed stocking and straightening up, and had time for a leisurely coffee break with Emma. Emma and I

are two of the few holdovers on night shift. The rest of the veterans have gone on to days. Those of us choosing to be left behind have to bear with the new graduates and new hires, which can be a test of patience at times, as I found out again on the previous Monday. That nurse had begged for some shifts on the post partum floor, to give her time to recover from her stressful night. She expressed her appreciation for my help and I assured her she would do fine. We would inevitably work together again. She was learning.

Emma has been a nurse for over thirty years, most of them at Hanley Memorial. She prefers the nursery and usually gets it. Everyone likes to have Emma in the nursery. Her expertise makes us all feel more secure. Her companion tonight was a heavy black woman with a ready smile and infectious laugh. She was only four years into the nursing profession, although she was over forty. Our facility required at least a year of general nursing experience before transferring to a specialty area, and this lady had finally managed a transfer onto the perinatal unit after paying her dues upstairs on the medical floor. She had a few weeks behind her, and felt secure to handle the handful of babies under her supervision while Emma spent half an hour with me in the lounge.

We had not worked together in awhile and played catch up, which meant a bit of gossip about our co-workers and the general workings of the maternity floor. Emma's life was her profession and her grandchildren. She had been divorced for years. I could not imagine what she would do without either, nor could I imagine the maternity floor without Emma.

We chatted and chewed for over twenty minutes before she eyed me speculatively and said, "So, you haven't said anything about your little excitement last week. You're not usually so closed mouthed."

I shrugged. "You're the first person to really ask. A couple of people commented on it Sunday while we were running around and I just said I was doing okay, which I am."

"So, this finding a body on the floor thing did not freak you out? This is part of the daily routine for you, finding dead people?"

"Emma! Of course not. It was awful, really. She and I were friendly neighbors and she was a lovely lady. At the time it was like a bad dream, surreal. Of course I've seen bodies before. I've been a nurse almost as long as you have."

"The newspaper said she was shot in the head." My companion shivered. "That's why I was never interested in trauma nursing. That would have put me over the edge."

"She wasn't shot. She had been hit with a blunt object," I replied tersely.

"That made the body easier to look at?"

What came to my mind were the graphic movies Emma liked to watch. She had no problem with that, or with describing it to anyone who would listen. Instead of saying so I told her how the body had been when Barry and I found it, using general terms. She was interested and listened without interrupting.

"Aren't you nervous being alone at night? I wouldn't be able to sleep a wink. In your shoes, I would be looking for somewhere else to live. No one's going to forget an old lady was killed in that place."

Emma spoke emphatically her lips pursed in disapproval at the nerve of someone getting knocked off and ruining the neighborhood.

I shook my head, "It hasn't been like that. The police patrol religiously and I've spotted two new canines in our neighborhood since that Wednesday. But I don't feel threatened anyway. Whoever did this is long gone." I disagreed with her conclusion. Time heals memories.

"How do you know that?" Emma's eyes widened behind her thick lenses.

"It's hard to explain," I was feeling defensive, "but from what I know about how she died, and that no one ransacked her house, it doesn't make sense there's a serial killer on the loose."

"Huh!" My co-worker's snort told me what she thought about my deductions. "They should have caught him by now. The longer it takes to catch the killer the less chance there is of solving the crime; you know that, don't you? The cops are going to have to realize we don't live in some little hick area anymore and get with the program."

"Oh? What else do you think the police should be doing?" I asked innocently. I got up and poured myself another half cup of coffee.

"How would I know? That's not my line. But everybody knows crime is going up around here. Law enforcement better get a handle on it."

The hostility in her voice irritated me. I opened my mouth to defend Detective White and his cohorts, but the intercom interrupted me. A woman threatening pre-term labor was on her way in.

Murmuring a see you later to Emma, I thought snidely she had put too much red in her hair this time. I also thought we should limit our conversations to nursing and our families.

My new patient's contractions were not serious and easily stopped with medication and coaxing her to drink a quart of water. After three hours she went home on bed rest. Two hours later I was able to leave on time for my own bed.

Emma's attitude was still irritating me. It took awhile to push it to the back of my mind and go to sleep. When the alarm went off at one o'clock it came back to nag me. It seemed so unfair. Did other people in the community feel the same way? While brushing my teeth I made a mental note to ask Anne Carey if she had encountered any of the same attitudes. As I went to the refrigerator for orange juice, I decided to push the whole thing aside by getting on a completely different track. Curled up in my bathrobe, large juice in hand, I called my daughter.

Amazing. She was at home.

"Amazing. You're at home," I said when she answered on the second ring.

"Mom!" She actually sounded glad to hear from me. That was nice. Janelle has the maddening habit of sounding preoccupied, which makes me feel like I've always called at the wrong time.

"Thought it was time to check in with you, Hon, and see how things are going."

"Things are fine, Mom. I was going to call you this weekend."

Janelle always says that. You can wait three months to get in touch with her, but she'll still insist she was on her way to the phone when you finally ring her up. It did not seem wise to point that out, so I went on to ask her how was Boston, how was her job, et cetera. My daughter had been out east for almost three years, with a job as computer consultant she assured me some people would die for. She was a huge success at what she did but Janelle would be. It was in her nature to be the best at whatever she accomplished.

She answered my questions as I expected she would. I sipped my drink and enjoyed hearing her voice, hearing her chatter.

"There is one thing different here," her voice faltered.

"What?" I sat up straighter. This was going to be something major. For Janelle to admit there was a glitch in her well-ordered life was something of consequence.

"I've told you about Robert, haven't I? I must have. We've been seeing each other for months."

Warning signs went out all over me. The only Robert she had mentioned was one of her bosses. "This wouldn't be the guy who you just casually meet for lunch now and then? The one who was in the middle of a divorce?"

"That was months ago," she protested, "the divorce has been final for a long time."

By my hasty mental calculations it was two months at the most. "So, am I reading right that you and Robert have been dating? This is the man who has two children, was married for ten years, and is about ten years older than you are?" It was hard, but I was certain my voice was even and controlled.

There was a long pregnant pause before Janelle continued. "Okay, yes, that's him. You make it sound like he's an adulterous cradle robber or something, Mom, for Pete's sake. You don't even know him." It must run in the family, I thought. She was using the same measured tone of control in her voice that I was.

"I can't argue with that," I admitted. "But his credentials leave something to be desired upon presentation to the girlfriend's mother."

My girl answered that by emphatically stating how great a catch this guy was, that women were throwing themselves at him.

"How terrible for him," I replied unsympathetically. Another pause. At least she hadn't hung up. It was time to change tracks. "Honey I'm sorry, really. You just threw me. There was something you were going to tell me, and obviously Robert is a big part of it, and we got sidetracked here. What were you going to say?"

"Just that I am seeing him, seriously," her voice was cautious.

"For you to say that it must be." If Janelle had ever really cared for anyone before, it had escaped me. Her dating had always been casual, and over the years I had seen several boys back off in disappointment when they realized she did not want to become involved. A few weeks before his death Michael had remarked, only partially in jest, we might have an old maid on our hands. I had taken exception to the term, and pointed out Janelle would never be on our hands, as independent as she was. Besides, at the time she was only twenty-three.

Michael had laughed at my protests. She could come home in her middle age and take care of us, he added, ducking to escape the shoe I threw at him.

“He’s not like anyone else I’ve ever met, Mom,” she continued, unable to quite keep the eagerness out of her voice. Why is it people in love can never come up with anything original, even Janelle. It was an echo of my own voice so many years before. Admittedly, the first time had not been when I met my spouse to be. I was positive at sixteen Donald Sorenson was the only one for me. My daughter, as I have said, had never before described a male to me using these words. Of course she was a late bloomer.

I turned my full attention to what she was saying. Someone in love, or who thinks they are, needs their mother to listen up. I heard how patient, kind, sensitive, and mature Robert was. I listened to an explanation of how their relationship had gone from friends to “more than that, now.” She did not get any more specific on that point. She moved on to how much they had in common, which included jogging and a love for Mexican food. That part sounded lame to me. Why, oh why, did my daughter’s first real love interest have to be someone who was on the second cycle?

Janelle was finishing, “So I know you’ll have some reservations about this, but I really want you to know. I couldn’t keep anything this important from you.”

Lord, give me wisdom, I thought fervently. “We wouldn’t have much between us if we didn’t have honesty, would we?” I asked her softly.

“No,” she replied cautiously, “but I’m not sure I’m going to like where you’re trying to lead with that.”

“Maybe you won’t,” I allowed, “but I think you’re woman enough to take it. Can I have my say?”

There was an audible sigh into the receiver. “I can guess part of it, but go ahead.”

I plunged in. “You probably do have a good idea what I’m going to say and you should. But sometimes we need it verified from someone. Your Robert needs time to recover himself from what he’s just been through, or he should. That may include lunches with a sympathetic ear a la employee, casual friend, but I get red flags all over about a man who is getting serious about someone else already. Are you ready to take him baggage and all? What I hear you saying is, you are caring for this guy more than anyone else you ever dated. You have always given a hundred and fifty percent when you commit yourself. Are you ready for child support payments and giving up all your weekends for his children’s visits? I assume from what you say about him he wants to be involved in their lives, as he should be.” I desperately wanted to know what had broken Robert’s marriage up in the first place, but knew I would not get an unbiased response even if I asked. “That’s one of the major things that come to mind, honey. You’re a big girl, now. You’ll do what you want. But please don’t ignore warning signals. If this guy is the man you think he is, he’ll understand.”

There was another pause, but not uncomfortable. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

“I could go on,” I admitted, “but what would be the sense? Those things needed to be said. The rest is up to you.” Then I added very impulsively, “You are such a lovely girl, Janelle. I’m glad you haven’t fallen for every smooth line and handsome face that comes along. You always dig deeper. Please be careful. Don’t do anything here you’ll regret.”

My daughter responded lovingly, reassuringly, and I had to be content with that. It was not until after we said goodbye that I realized she had been too immersed in her own affairs to ask me anything about mine. The timing was good for that.

Chapter Nine

The rest of the weekend, the second since Amelia Marsh’s death, passed uneventfully. The hours spent puttering around my home, in my back yard, and hiking down country roads, could have bored someone else to tears. I was content. To top off my euphoria the telephone stayed completely silent until Anne Carey’s call on Sunday night. Six o’clock on the dot.

The lady was shameless, and I told her so. By using her age as an excuse for lapse of memory, she had gotten the directory assistance operator to go down the entire list of Barclays in the Athens, Texas area so she could “remember” the one she had forgotten. It had been her day. There was a listing for Ross and Elaine Barclay. When she called the number, bingo.

“I must confess I thought it would be more difficult,” she chirped happily. “You know, so many people have unlisted numbers these days.”

“I’m surprised, too,” I allowed. “I thought we might have to find some obscure files somewhere. This is great. Who did you talk to, and what did you say?”

Miss Carey started to tell me, but then on impulse it seemed more appropriate we have the conversation face to face, and I interrupted her with an invitation to come over. She immediately agreed. It was still light outdoors, after all.

We had both eaten but ten minutes later, over refreshments, my guest started again. Both Barclays had been at home for the afternoon. Ross answered the phone and put his wife on the line readily enough. Elaine had been astonished to learn who her caller was and the nature of her business.

“She was very pleasant,” Anne said fairly, “and very surprised to hear about Amelia’s death. I knew I might be the one breaking the news, of course, and that’s what happened. Without that missing appointment address book to refer to, how would anyone know to contact her?” How indeed? “She was so appreciative that someone took the trouble to let her know, and I must say, Sally, I felt a little guilty since my motive for calling was not entirely what she thought it was.”

I nodded sympathetically. “What did she have to say?” I pressed, human nature being what it is.

“Well not very much, at least not yet,” my cohort said cautiously. “We rather got side tracked after I broke the news. Her mother’s close friend dying was one thing, but hearing Amelia had been killed rattled her pretty badly.

“I can see where that might have thrown her,” I allowed.

Anne nodded. “She went around in circles a bit, finding it hard to believe. I apologized for having to tell her so long after the fact, and explained we had to do some hunting to find out where she lived. Ross must have been in close proximity because he asked what was upsetting her, so for a while we were holding a three-way conversation. It all took some time.”

“They were both fond of Mrs. Marsh,” I guessed. “I wonder how long it’s been since they heard from her.”

“They were definitely fond of her. They haven’t been in touch all summer, which Elaine regretted. She reminisced about her childhood in New Jersey and how Amelia and Leonard were like an aunt and uncle to her. She said, ‘Mely was so good to me. She’s gone now, too,’ and was crying a little, I think.” Miss Carey looked about ready to do the same. I urged her to take some tea, and a brownie.

Waiting a few discreet moments before continuing I said, “From what you’re saying, Elaine sounds like the person we need to fill in some of the blanks for us.”

“She probably is,” Miss Carey agreed, after a vigorous nose blowing and a few sips of the tea. “It did not seem like the time to ask too many questions. Now that I think about it, she and Ross were asking most of the questions. I told them everything I could,” and here she gave me a little smile, “but I did not tell them we are doing some investigating of our own.”

“That was probably wise. At least for now.” I leaned back on the couch—we were in my living room this time—and sipped my own tea contemplatively. “But somehow we have to talk to Elaine Barclay some more.”

“Oh, I think we can work that out,” my partner said optimistically, “I gave her my phone number and told her to call me when she was up to it. I think she will.”

I wasn’t so sure. But there was nothing to be done about it now. If the Barclays didn’t get in touch with Anne Carey, we would have to think of an excuse to call them again. And perhaps honesty would be the best policy. What would Elaine Barclay think if one of us just point blank asked her to tell us everything she remembered about Amelia Marsh?

When my guest was ready to leave it was getting dark so I escorted her and Yippy home. She protested at first since there was no one to walk me back to my own door, but I produced a whistle and hung it around my neck before we started out. And since the evening was mild, there were several people still out of doors savoring the last moments of the weekend.

Home again, I called George and asked him if it was possible to do an Internet search and find out if there were any Tuckers living in Staffordshire, England. He said he would try. I told him to take his time.

Two weeks went by. I finished a book by C.S. Lewis. It was a small volume I found among the books from Mrs. Marsh. There was no signature, no indication where she got it from or why it interested her. Another mystery. But my days did not keep me in a constant state of reminiscence about Amelia Marsh. Miss Carey

went to Milwaukee. One of her sisters was having surgery. I worked my hospital shifts uneventfully, spoke weekly to my grandson, enjoyed the brilliance of a colorful fall, and otherwise occupied myself in a manner that would not be of interest to anyone else.

The second Monday of October, all of that changed. I got a phone call from Mr. Bedeman. He had been trying to locate Miss Carey; I was his second choice. His question stunned me as much as his call had. Did I have any idea how to locate a Mrs. Ross Barclay?

"I don't have the phone number, but as a matter of fact I do," I replied, and told him where she resided.

"You have saved us a lot of trouble," he said courteously. "Mrs. Barclay is the person named as the recipient of most of Amelia Marsh's jewelry."

Here was another surprise. Not that Mrs. Marsh had willed her jewelry to Elaine, that seemed totally in character, but I was surprised the lawyer would volunteer that information to me.

"I'm glad I could help you out, Mr. Bedeman." I added, "Has a date been set for the estate sale?"

It had been set for the third Saturday in October. The lady's possessions would be part of a large sale, which included two other estates as well.

"We are in the final stages of settling Mrs. Marsh's affairs, Mrs. Nimitz," Mr. Bedeman continued. "Mrs. Barclay was the one individual we still needed to contact." He supplied me with the address in Springfield where the sale would be held; even giving me the time it would start. I scribbled them down.

"When Miss Carey returns I'll make sure she gets this information," I told him. "She may want to attend."

"I have left word with her sister in Hanley to have her get in touch with us when she returns," my caller replied, "but please do tell her."

As it happened, the following morning I was backing my car out of the drive when I spotted Anne Carey walking her dog.

"Just got back last night!" she chirped. "Janie's doing fine, can manage on her own now." She peered in at me through the car window.

I made polite inquiries into the nature of Janie's surgery. Knee replacement. Janie is far too heavy, the reedy Miss Carey stated reproachfully, and would probably need the other knee done in the spring. But, it was hard to change your habits at seventy-eight. As long as Janie has such a healthy appetite there was little chance she would lose any significant weight.

At this point I brought up my phone call from attorney Bedeman.

"How nice for Elaine!" Miss Carey beamed. "I'll call him back today."

"Do you think you might want to go to that estate sale?" I ventured.

"She paused. "Oh, I don't know, dear. I'm not sure it would be any fun to see other people buying Amelia's things."

"I wouldn't want you to go if it would be upsetting," I said sincerely.

"You want to see about those boot hooks, don't you?"

"Yes, I think I would. But you must remember I was not as close to her as you were. In your place, I doubt I would want to go."

"Let me think about it," she said.

Yippy gave a few yaps of impatience and we went our separate ways.

I enjoyed my breakfast that morning at a bagel nook downtown, and walked the few blocks from there to Shear Success for my haircut appointment with Betty. The shop was in an old neighborhood lined with oak and maple trees. The hair salon and a travel agency were the only business establishments on an otherwise residential street.

It had been necessary to schedule my haircut into October, because I didn't need one when I had the bright idea to talk to Betty. My fine hair does not grow quickly. I hoped my own regular stylist would forgive me for deserting her this one time. In blatant deceit, I let Betty think I needed her services because my own hairdresser was unavailable. If Betty didn't know how to cut fine hair I would be paying for this excuse to chat with her with more than just her fee. Amelia Marsh's hair always looked wonderful but she had more texture and natural curl to her locks than I did.

"Sally?" Betty greeted me with a bright professional smile as I entered the shop. Only one other stylist was in and she was completely occupied giving a middle-aged brunette a permanent. Betty was sitting in her chair

waiting for me. She wore a turquoise smock over her blue jeans, and turquoise socks to match in worn white sneakers. Her bleached blonde hair was tied back in a simple ponytail.

I smiled back, removed my light coat, and took her place in the chair. Betty offered to give me a shampoo first and I agreed. I had to prolong this as long as possible without getting anything drastic done.

Betty ran her fingers expertly through my short do. “We should be able to shape this up without too much trouble. Your hair is fine, isn’t it, but thick, which is good. You don’t mind the gray? It does blend in well with your shade of brown, and just lightens up the color. You’re smart not to tamper with it too much, yet.”

As she lowered my head back over the washbasin I thought I might as well start right in, keeping Betty’s reputation for curiosity in mind. It wasn’t that long since Anne Carey had contacted her wanting information related to Amelia. She might find it strange that two different individuals she didn’t know wanted information about her former client. Both of our reasons for bringing up Mrs. Marsh should be plausible.

“My neighbor, Amelia Marsh, always spoke highly of you, Betty. I saw you at her funeral, didn’t I?”

“Lord, yes!” gasped Betty, “that poor woman!” She peered down at me as she turned on the water and sprayed my hair, my neck stretched back as far as it would go. “Is the water temperature alright?”

It was a bit warm but I could stand it. I told her it was fine. She expertly worked the shampoo into my hair, her hands more gentle than my own regular stylist. Any client would enjoy that touch, including Amelia.

“I still can’t believe she’s gone! She came in here every Thursday for over four years. I always did her hair, and once in awhile her nails, too. She was so sweet. I thought you looked familiar when you walked through the door. I saw you at the funeral, didn’t I? But you didn’t come to the reception after.”

“It was wonderful of you to come,” I complimented truthfully. “No, I didn’t. The service was enough for me.”

“Oh, I just had to go,” Betty addressed the first part of my remarks first. “Caroline came with me, she’s off today but she’s usually here on Thursdays and she felt terrible about her dying like that, just like I did. We just had to go. I didn’t want to drag my husband along. He’s a good guy, he would have gone, but he didn’t know her, and he hates funerals.” She whipped a towel around my wet head in an easy swoop and set me up straight in my chair again. “How short do you want to go with this?”

We discussed that for a moment.

“The reception was nice,” Betty continued on the previous vein. “Someone made the most delicious chicken salad finger sandwiches you ever tasted, and the sweets! Mrs. Marsh’s old lady friends must have put themselves out in her memory. I was so glad to see how many people came to the funeral. Without family, I was afraid there would be just a few of us. I should have known Amelia would have plenty of people to pay their last respects. How did you know her?”

“Be careful in the front, on the right,” I instructed, “I have a cowlick there, and if you cut straight across my bangs will be shorter on that side. We were neighbors.”

“She was a good neighbor, I’ll bet,” Betty opined.

“She was,” I affirmed, “I’ll miss her, too. It’s hard to believe almost four weeks have gone by since she died.”

“I think about her every Thursday morning,” Betty said sadly, “it’s hard to let anyone else take that time slot. I know she was old, but she was so spry, yet, I thought she’d live to be ninety. She probably would have,” Betty added bitterly, “if someone hadn’t knocked her off. Can you believe that? It doesn’t make any sense at all, someone walking into her house and bopping her over the head. What did she do to deserve that, such a nice old lady. They might never find out who did it.”

I agreed to all of the expressed. “You knew her longer than I did. We were neighbors for about a year and a half but we only connected about six months ago. You know, I don’t recall that she ever mentioned what her husband did before he retired.”

“Kind of closed mouthed about herself wasn’t she?” the scissors snipped away, and I held my breath. Hair would grow and it was a small sacrifice in the search for information. “That’s unusual you know, because most people like to talk about themselves. But I really found her interesting, you know, being born in England and all. So I would ask her things and she didn’t seem to mind.” Betty laughed. “Now that I think about it, she had a way of changing the subject if she didn’t want to give me an answer. She was clever about it.”

“Very diplomatic,” I agreed again. “I noticed that, too.”

“But I do know what Mr. Marsh did,” Betty continued, bless her heart, “and it’s no wonder she was so good at talking to people. For a long time he was in some kind of government service, special forces type of thing. It all sounded very romantic to me but Mrs. Marsh said it could be tiresome. I’d give anything to travel around, see the world like they did, but I suppose all that moving could get to you. Plus he was gone sometimes for weeks leaving her alone and she wouldn’t know where he was. I wouldn’t go for that!”

Tread carefully here, Nimitz. “I’d be tempted to come home and visit my family if my husband was going to be away for a long time, wouldn’t you?”

“Oh, absolutely. She didn’t say she did that, though. I think she stayed put and made the best of things. Listening to Mrs. Marsh I realized no life is perfect or completely glamorous. But she and her husband did have a lot of good times, too.”

Betty went on to relate an amusing story passed on to her by her former client, one Amelia Marsh had shared with me also. When I heard the story I assumed the Marshes were on a holiday. Now I realized they had been living in Zurich at the time.

“She seemed to have good memories from their years in New Jersey,” I continued to feed the conversation.

“Umm,” Betty had moved to the back of my scalp and was scrutinizing my hairline as she snipped. “She said she had a good hairdresser there, too. It took her a year to find me. She was unusual, having such long hair at her age, and still thick. Her husband liked it long and after he died she said it was too late to change her ways, she was so used to wearing it like that.”

“I always meant to ask her what her husband died of,” I added more fuel, “but somehow I never did. I just assumed it was old age.”

“That just goes to show you again how she was,” Betty waved her comb to make her point. I was the only one catching it. The other beautician and her client were also deep in conversation, and they had a radio playing soft rock close at hand. “She was my customer for a long time before I asked her. Most widows let you know in three or four visits what made them that way.”

I laughed. “So, what did happen to him?”

“Nothing unusual. He had a stroke one night, not too serious, but a few weeks later had another that was bad. He died in the hospital a few days after that. So, I guess you were right guessing it was old age.”

My haircut was almost complete. Betty had supplied a few facts. Miss Carey’s theory about Leonard Marsh’s occupation seemed plausible. It was odd Betty would know this, and a good friend of Amelia’s did not, but the hairdresser asked, and Anne Carey never did.

“She was as thoughtful dying as she was living, Mrs. Marsh was,” Betty said, as she snipped a stray hair here and there. “I got a call Friday from her lawyer and found out she wanted me to have a set of dishes she had. English bone china! You could have knocked me over with a feather.”

“She must have known you would appreciate it.” I smiled up at her round, pleasant face.

“Oh, I will. It isn’t gonna come out much, though, until my kids grow up. I would die if they broke anything!”

Finally Betty brushed off my neck, took my apron off, and whirled me around to fully inspect her handiwork. Not too bad, I had to concede with relief. With my permission she pulled out a hair dryer, brushing and fluffing as she dried, with a pleasing effect over all.

As I paid for the cut and added a tip, I thanked her for fitting me in.

“Mondays aren’t too full,” she replied cheerfully, “sometimes I take half the day off. It is nice to meet you, and to meet someone else who knew Amelia.” She then added that another lady, an elderly one, had called recently to ask her for some information about Mrs. Marsh. Wasn’t that funny? Anne Carey, of course, asking about the whereabouts of Elaine Fisk. Very, I agreed.

I left with a casual parting comment about how odd she would have felt if she had known that last Thursday hair appointment to be her last time to see Mrs. Marsh. Betty’s reply was not at all what I expected to hear, and further justified my visit to her shop.

“I sure would have. But that sticks out in my mind, anyway, because the last time I saw her wasn’t Thursday. She cancelled that day because of a doctor’s appointment. I couldn’t fit her in over the weekend so she came for the last time on Monday, just two days before she died. She wasn’t herself, either. She didn’t feel like talking at all and I didn’t push her. You know, I wondered if she had some bad news when she went to see that doctor.”

It was late afternoon when I spoke to detective White on the telephone. Before making that call I took one of my long country walks and did some hard thinking. There had been plenty of thinking and prayer walks lately, but many of them had been devoted to family matters, particularly Janelle. This day I was totally wrapped up in the life and death of Amelia Marsh.

"You are a puzzle, always willing to talk to me about this," I remarked to the detective before asking him if he knew about my neighbor's visit to a doctor. "It is obvious Amelia did not do away with herself in a fit of depression, but it seems significant. Did you talk to Betty, too?" I doubted it. She would have said so. Because of her keen curiosity Betty surprised me a little when she did not place me as the neighbor who discovered the body, but that didn't seem terribly important.

"We traced all of Mrs. Marsh's movements the days before she died. We did not talk to the hairdresser, but we did speak with the doctor. It's debatable if it's a breach of privacy at this point to tell you about that, and I'll take the chance, but don't broadcast it, alright?"

"My solemn word."

"Okay. It's not too interesting to me, but it may be for you in your profession. She was having some female problems. The doctor wanted her to have a, what do you call it, an operation to remove her womb."

"A hysterectomy?"

"That's it. I don't have the report in front of me. No cancer, or anything life threatening, but the term was ..." he paused in exasperation.

"Fibroids or perhaps prolapse?" I supplied helpfully.

"Prolapse. It was getting more uncomfortable. She needed the surgery and was thinking about it.

"Do you know off hand the name of the physician?"

"Yes. Dr. Blackwell."

I knew Dr. Blackwell, a competent gynecologist.

"It's possible Mrs. Marsh was in a somber mood at the hair dressers because she needed surgery," I allowed, "and that may be what she wanted to consult me about." I sighed glumly. "That answers those questions and still leaves the big one, who killed Mrs. Marsh, still wide open."

"I'm afraid I have some more dead end news for you," detective White said gently. "Going back to question all the local motel clerks on duty didn't give us anything, either. None of them remembered a guest with a British accent, nor were there any guests listed in their computers with English addresses."

Chapter Ten

George had not gotten back to me since I asked him to do a search on his computer for possible distant relatives under the deceased's maiden name. After getting all the discouraging news I aimlessly paced my floors for awhile before impulsively ringing George's number. If he didn't have anything for me yet a little mindless chatter could be therapeutic. It was only five thirty. If the phone rang four times I would hang up before the answering machine started and try again later.

He picked up right after the third ring. He sounded tired. After identifying myself I told him so.

"Deadlines and new cable," he explained wearily. "It's been like this for two weeks. I only got home at a decent time tonight because we ran into a snag that can't be fixed until tomorrow."

He had worked Saturday, too, and taken his one weekend day off to do a multitude of other things. It wasn't necessary for me to ask if he had gotten into a search for the Tuckers of Yorkshire. Obviously there had been no time.

"Aren't you getting a little old to keep up a pace like this?" I asked bluntly.

"Absolutely. Every bone and muscle in my body is reminding me of that fact right now."

"Sounds like you need a long, hot, relaxing shower."

"I hope I don't fall asleep and drown. Probably won't; it hasn't happened yet."

"I'm sorry, George," I said it sincerely but my giggle probably ruined the effect.

"I'm hungry, too," he groaned, "and I would ask you out to eat with me, but I just don't think I can make it any further than the microwave tonight."

"You are in bad shape." After pausing for thought I said, "Tell you what. Go on with that shower, and I'll scrape something together and come over to feed you. It won't be fancy, but it should beat a frozen dinner."

This was a very generous gesture on my part. In order to keep things in perspective and keep the neighbors from speculating, I didn't visit George very often. This old fashioned attitude would be considered archaic by most people. I couldn't care less.

His gratitude was touching. After the feeblest protest about putting me to all that trouble he signed off to clean up and told me to hurry.

Fifty minutes later put me on George's front porch. He has the most wonderful front porch, one that extends the entire width of the house, and about eight feet from the front door to the porch steps. Once more he keeps it orderly. He likes to sit out there on stormy nights and watch the lightening and thunder roll across the sky, which I envy him for. One night before Michael died we were fortunate enough to join him for that treat. For the hour we had before the storm drove us indoors, we sat together sipping our beverages and exclaiming over the panorama lighting the sky. I savored the memory as I rapped on the door, balancing our supper in the other hand.

The barking on the other side of the door, accompanying George's heavy feet, reminded me about the pooch in temporary residence. With instinctive preservation I lifted our meal to about the level of my head as George opened the door with one hand, hanging on to Muffy's collar with the other. He ordered the dog to behave with stern authority in his voice, and the animal was obviously torn between obedience and the tantalizing odors coming from my direction. It was a toss up as to whether I could stay on my feet if Muffy leaped. Not taking any chances, I eased into the hallway and leaned up against the wall for support.

"I said 'stay down,'" George thundered impressively, and the canine finally acquiesced. She stopped straining against the grip pulling on her collar, but looked at me expectantly, whining softly.

"She looks like you feed her well, even if she doesn't act like it," I commented, carefully handing over our dinner to George. "This is the main course. Dessert is in the car." I turned around to retrieve it, leaving George to make sure our food made it to the table.

There had been a generous portion of sweet and sour chicken in my freezer, complete with vegetables. While it thawed on the defrost option of my microwave I boiled up some long grain rice and threw the whole thing into a casserole dish. A stop at a convenience store on the way over for a quart of fudge ripple ice cream completed the menu.

I glanced around appreciatively as I reentered the house. George is not a stereotypical bachelor. In fact he is rather a neat nick, putting things away fastidiously when he is finished using them. Once a week he has a woman come in for the day to dust, vacuum, clean the bathroom he uses, and scrub the kitchen floor. In between he does his own laundry and keeps up the yard. The lawn was freshly mowed so George had fit that in on his Sunday off. While one of my brothers was a bachelor for three years I hated to visit his apartment and while there had tried not to have to use the bathroom. George's habits were a relief. Looking at the cream colored sofa in the living room as I walked past, it was apparent Muffy was not allowed on the furniture. Her dark brown fur would have been a dead giveaway.

George was in a clean pair of blue jeans and a tee shirt, his feet bare and his wet thinning hair slicked back. He gave me a boyish grin, but signs of weariness were apparent in his eyes and slouch of his shoulders.

"You cannot keep up a pace like this forever," I scolded with the liberty of a long time friendship, as I took another liberty and put the ice cream in the freezer myself.

"Another week, two at the most," he replied, putting a pot holder on the table, setting my casserole dish on top and deftly producing a serving spoon out of a kitchen drawer. He had opted for the small dinette set in the kitchen rather than the dining room table. Our places were already set. I put my handbag aside and sat down in the chair he indicated. Muffy had been banished to the garage and I could hear her whining. "What do you want to drink?"

"Just water, thanks."

Smoothly he produced a large glass of milk for himself and a glass of ice water for me, and slid with a contented sigh onto the remaining chair.

"Can't blame the dog for acting up," he commented. "This smells great."

"Dig in then," I encouraged, and he did, but serving me first. The poor guy acted starved.

"What have you been eating lately?" I continued my domestic tirade.

“Grabbing a bite here and there,” he admitted between mouthfuls. “I did throw a steak on the grill on Sunday.”

“No wonder you look like you lost weight.”

“Could be.” He grinned again. “That will just give me some leeway when I have time to eat again. But this is great, Sally, really nice of you.”

“You’re welcome.” We ate for a bit in comfortable silence, Muffy’s sniveling and the ordinary evening sounds of the neighborhood for background. I had to admit it was nice to have company for dinner. After I finished my meal and while George had seconds he asked about Everett and family, and about Janelle. I filled him in briefly. He raised an eyebrow when I told him about my daughter’s love interest but made no comment.

“It’s been a while since you’ve seen Joel, hasn’t it?” he asked instead.

“Yes, and it’s about time I went. He asked me when I was coming the last time we talked on the phone. Maybe this weekend.” I countered, “How’s Robin?”

Robin was fine, new job and new apartment seemed to be working out.

“He asked me to keep the dog for a couple more weeks,” George admitted, “since he can’t get away to collect her.”

“Oh? Is that a problem?”

“Not really,” George admitted. “The cat’s getting used to her, and so am I.”

“Aha! You’re going to miss that mutt when Robin comes to take her!”

“Maybe a little,” he allowed. “She stays amused in the back yard while I’m gone all day, watching the neighbors and sparring with the cat, so she’s not much trouble except for the amount of dog food she can put away, and the poop I have to clean up. She’s pretty good company when I’m home and she’s learned to behave in the computer room. I’m wondering how it will go when she goes back to Robin. She won’t have as much space there.”

“And she’ll be alone just as much,” I finished, getting his point.

“You never said why you called me,” he changed the subject, pushing his plate aside.

“I got sidetracked by your pitiful state of affairs,” I admitted. “How about if I clear the table while you make some coffee? Could we have coffee and ice cream on your porch? I called you with no definite agenda, but now that I’m here I do have something I want to talk you about.”

“You have lots of good ideas today,” George said happily.

It was getting dark and getting cooler. I made another trip to my vehicle for the flannel shirt I knew to be in the backseat. Putting it on, I settled comfortably in the large wicker chair opposite an identical one occupied by George. Our ice cream and mugs of steaming decaf sat on a low outdoor table, which put about three feet between us.

“Which one is mine?” I asked innocently indicating the ice cream bowls. George gave me a warning look. One had twice as much in it as the other, and we both knew it was not so one of us could share with the dog. Muffy had been let out, given a bone, and commanded to sit at her master’s feet. Seeming to realize she would be banished again if she didn’t, her first five minutes had been compliant ones.

I returned his glare with a grin and picked up the lesser amount, two scoops which was plenty for me, as George knew very well.

“You were going to tell me something,” my companion prompted me reprovingly. There was definite defiance in the way he shoved a large spoonful of the fudge ripple into his own mouth.

Slowly, meticulously, between bites and sips, I related my visit to Betty the hairdresser and my conversation with the detective.

“It looks like back to square one,” I finished glumly. “Some questions answered, more cropping up, but no closer to finding out who Amelia Marsh opened her door to that day, the person who killed her with a giant blow to the head.”

George was silent. I scraped the rest of my desert bowl clean and took both of the bowls back to the kitchen. I rinsed them in the sink and returned with the coffee pot to give us each a refill.

“Where do you go from here?” he asked finally as I resettled myself and picked up my cup. “Are you going to give it up?”

“I’ve considered doing that,” I admitted, “and I’ve wondered what Miss Carey would think about it. She doesn’t know about what I’ve told you, yet. Do you think I should, or to be precise, we should?”

He sighed deeply and took a sip of his own coffee, then pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. I waited patiently, feeling drowsy. Through swirling clouds the first star of the evening appeared. The warmth of my drink kept the breeze from giving me a chill. This porch was wonderful.

“Do you want to?” George finally countered. Men, I thought in exasperation, so often answering your question with a question.

“No, I don’t think so. If you had asked me that right after my conversation with Detective White my answer might have been yes. But now it seems to me there are a couple of things I can still do before giving up on this. If I don’t follow through on what I can, the regret will always be there.”

“I’ll play along,” my host obliged. “What?”

I was about to answer when he added an apology for not getting to the name search.

“It’s obvious you’ve had no time. But that is one of the leads, if you want to call it that, still open. You say your schedule will loosen up soon so you can get to it then. What I’m really thinking about is going to see Elaine Fisk Barclay.”

“You don’t say?” George looked at me in mild surprise. “Is she coming up to claim her inheritance?”

“I don’t know how that will be handled. But I thought I would call the lawyers and find out. It may not be kosher, but it occurred to me misters Harmon and Bedeman might allow me to be a courier.”

“Oh, you’re thinking of making a trip to Texas to deliver the goods.”

“What do you think about that? It would be an opportunity to have a long talk with the Barclays about their relationship with and memories of the Marshes.” I sighed. “If that doesn’t work out, I’ll have to think of a way to get them to open up to me on the telephone. That could be difficult. They don’t know me at all.”

“You might get an introduction from that Miss Carey,” suggested George. “From what you said before she hit it off with them pretty well.”

In fact I had considered asking Anne Carey to come with me if I did drive to Texas, and shared that with George too.

“But since she just got back from helping her sister get through surgery she might not want to go away again so soon.”

“Go for it,” George encouraged. “At least make that phone call to the lawyer. What have you got to lose? All they can do is say no.”

It was nice talking to someone who made things sound so simple.

“When I talk to them I’m going to ask for something else, George,” I set my coffee mug down and got up to stretch. It was about time for me to go home and for George to go to bed. He looked like it would be an effort for him to get out of that chair, and if he waited much longer the dog would have to climb up on his lap and keep him warm for the night. “I’m going to ask them for Leonard’s Marsh’s birth date. They must have a copy of the marriage certificate, at least. When you finally have time to get back to your computer would you also see if you can find anything on a former special service government employee who retired in about nineteen sixty-five?”

It was almost eight thirty when I got home, and the phone was ringing. Blast. Sure enough, the hospital. The post partum unit and a pretty young nurse named Heather Rasmussen in particular. Her sitter had called. Eight-month-old Egan Rasmussen was running a temperature of a hundred and two. Daddy Rasmussen could not get home until midnight, and Heather could not locate Grandma. Would I, could I, please, come in and relieve her for about four hours?

What was a grandmother to do? At any rate, four hours was not so long.

It was four and a half when all was said and done, but not a bad thing to play rescue squad and be so appreciated for it. I got to bed about two a.m. and slept well. By the time my head hit the pillow my resolve was completely back in place. It was not time to give up on Amelia Marsh and her demise just yet.

At ten a.m., still in my nightie, I called the offices of Bedeman and Bedeman. With the positive attitude born out of a rested mind I made an appointment. After introducing myself to the secretary who answered I told her my business concerned the estate of Amelia Marsh, and brought up the possibility of delivering Elaine Barclay’s inheritance myself. She agreed it would be advisable for me to see one of the estate lawyers

personally. Yes I was willing to drive to Springfield for a conference, the sooner the better. No, three the following afternoon was not a problem at all. She gave me directions.

Amazed my brain could function so well with only half a glass of orange juice on board, I then rang up Anne Carey. She was at home and answered on the second ring.

“Miss Carey, I have some things to tell you,” I said. “I worked half the night and just got out of bed. Would you be at all interested in joining me for my breakfast?”

Miss Carey was game. “What a wonderful idea,” she twittered. “I can’t seem to get myself into anything constructive this morning, and all I had for breakfast was a bowl of bran flakes.”

What I had seen of my elderly friend’s driving did not inspire any confidence. Fortunately she was easily persuaded to let me pick her up. An hour later we were comfortably seated across from each other at the Twin Oaks Café, a small and cozy spot known for the huge trees that stood as sentinels in front of the building, and for their homemade muffins. I asked Miss Carey if she would choose the restaurant and she chose well. The Twin Oaks was open only for breakfast and lunch and their patrons could get breakfast anytime. I chose one egg poached medium hard, and an order of crispy bacon to go with my banana nut muffin. Wonders never cease. Miss Carey ordered a full stack of blueberry pancakes. The server bustled off with our orders and the amiable spinster beamed at me over our steamy cups of fresh coffee.

“This is just delightful, a gorgeous fall day and company for breakfast. You know, Amelia and I usually went out for breakfast once a week. This was one of our spots.”

“You didn’t happen to eat together that Monday before she died, did you? She had a hair appointment that day, which was unusual, but it was because she had a doctor’s appointment the Thursday before that interfered with her regular hairdressing slot.”

“The police wanted to know when I had seen Amelia for the last time that week, so my recollection is still clear. The last time we saw each other was for the morning church service on Sunday. We didn’t get together for breakfast the day before she died.”

About to ask why, it was not necessary because she continued, “She said she wasn’t up to it. She called me about seven-thirty. I told the police, but they didn’t seem to place much significance in it. You can’t blame them. An old lady not feeling well isn’t too unusual.”

“Do you think she cancelled because she wasn’t feeling well? Did you know about her visit with Dr. Blackwell?”

“Why, yes I did.” Miss Carey looked at me in some surprise. “How do you know about her appointment with Dr. Blackwell?”

“Thanks to Betty and some inside information from my contact with the police department.”

Miss Carey chuckled. “Trust Betty to know. But I’m not sure that was the reason she cancelled. She didn’t specify, but that problem never stopped her social life before. I knew about it, as a matter of fact I gave her the name of that doctor.”

“Have you any opinion why she didn’t keep your breakfast date that day?”

The lady shook her head. “I’ve considered that question many times since she died, wondering if there’s a connection. I don’t know.”

Some acquaintances of my companion stopped by to greet her, and I mulled over this information while they exchanged pleasantries.

When she turned her attention back to me, I told Anne about my appointment with the lawyers for the following afternoon and why I made it. Her expression turned from inquisitive to approval.

“What a good idea.” As we got to know each other better I was discovering what a positive attitude my new friend had. Her face beamed. “I certainly hope they approve. It would be so much nicer for someone to give Elaine her inheritance from Amelia personally.”

“Is there any chance you would consider coming with me?”

She thought about it. As I expected she shook her head. “It would be lovely to meet the Barclays, but I don’t think so, Sally. I might change my mind so you can ask me again, but I’m still a little frazzled from taking care of my sister.” She added anxiously, “Will you mind making the trip alone? Maybe you have another friend who would like to go with you?”

I grinned. “I could probably find someone who would keep me company, but if this goes through I think I’ll go by myself. It will probably be a quick trip anyway, a business trip, if you will.”

Our food arrived. The stack of pancakes was amazing, but Anne was undaunted. We both ate contentedly and made small talk about other things. My muffin was warm and tasty and the bacon extra crispy, just the way I like it. Only the egg was disappointing, not cooked enough, and after a couple of bites I pushed it aside. One takes their chances ordering poached eggs.

Should her opinion be asked for, Miss Carey promised me a strong recommendation. After I dropped her off at her front door I filled my water bottle and headed out of town with a five-mile walk in mind. The early afternoon was warm and still. I left my flannel shirt in the car; sure my cotton blouse and jeans would be warm enough. They were. The time went by quickly as I again mentally categorized the information I had accumulated about Amelia Marsh. When I returned to my vehicle I retrieved my purse from the trunk and jotted down a question or two for Mr. Bedeman or Mr. Harmon.

There was a message on my answering machine when I got home. My obstetrical supervisor wanted to know if I could possibly cover for Heather Rasmussen again. She had to take the night off due to a still sick baby. My boss indicated another night off might be a possibility if I could do this.

The protocol mandated an answer to the staffing office rather than the unit where I worked. Putting on an assertive air I told Carol yes, I would come in tonight but only if I could have Friday night off instead. She protested but I was firm. Take it or leave it. They had gotten four extra hours out of me this week already. That gave Carol or someone else in the staffing office three days to cover my scheduled shift. It was already mid-afternoon and if I turned her down Carol's options were very limited. With some more wailing and gnashing of teeth, she finally agreed. I hung up the phone feeling smug and totally unremorseful. After a number of years of playing the staffing games I must be getting thicker skinned.

Naps for me are usually a waste of time. I just can't sleep. Instead I curled up on my couch and made tentative plans for the rest of the week. I would be tired by morning, but I could sleep until one and easily make my appointment at the law office. Thursday was my other night to work, and now my next two weekends were free, since my last two shifts of the present schedule were for a Tuesday and a Wednesday. I picked up the phone and called Everett and Judy.

Chapter Eleven

Because I did my colleagues a favor by covering again for Heather, they allowed me to give my report first and leave. I was in bed by eight and up again after four and a half hours. A little groggy at first, a shower and hair wash revived me. I sipped some juice while dressing and stopped for a coffee before pulling out onto the highway. A meal could wait until after my meeting.

Out on the road before the schools were dismissed, I easily made Springfield in an hour. Ten minutes spent finding the law offices and a parking place, and I was standing in front of the receptionist's desk five minutes prior to my appointment.

I was wearing a long dark brown skirt and a baggy sweater in fall tones of rust and yellow. My attire seemed to give the lady behind the desk a favorable impression. She was a picture of professional neatness in a navy blue suit accented with white gold jewelry. She complimented my sweater and pleasantly asked me to take a seat. Mr. Harmon would be with me momentarily.

Both the reception area and Mr. Harmon's office were what I would have expected to see, tasteful and expensive but not ostentatious. Mr. Harmon's suit was a light brown this time, but still too big for him. It was tempting to ask him if he had recently lost a lot of weight but the question seemed too personal on our short acquaintance and I refrained. He offered me something to drink and I accepted a glass of water.

Our interview was over in fifteen minutes, and to my amazement he refused to charge me for the consultation. He listened intently when I explained why I wanted to deliver Elaine Barclay's inheritance from Amelia Marsh. I offered references as to reliability and trustworthiness, and assured him I knew this request was probably unusual and I would certainly understand if his firm had to decline my offer.

He in turn agreed it was an unusual situation overall. He had been apprised of the nature of my visit and had already spoken with Mr. Bedeman. They decided to allow me to deliver the jewelry. It was insured and would be in a sealed container I was to hand over to Mrs. Barclay intact. She would be contacted by telephone as to when to expect me, and asked to get in touch with the law office as soon as possible after I made the delivery. When did I expect to make the trip?

I told him. We agreed we would be in touch early the following week to finalize arrangements for me to pick up the package. I accepted his card, we shook hands, and I almost left without asking my questions. There was no problem there, either. Mrs. Marsh's file was lying open on his desk. The information I asked for was in no way confidential.

It was all so pat I sat in my car after the meeting in a daze. Who would have thought it would go so smoothly? I had expected some questions, skepticism, something! My growling stomach brought me to reality. I found a waffle house and ate a leisurely meal before starting home.

Judy and I were both giggling like fools. Either we were in a giddy mood or Joel's behavior was funny, probably a combination of both. There were a dozen children in the petting zone, two to eight year olds browsing among the fawns, goats, piglets, sheep, and a large basket of plump puppies. The puppies were dachshunds, I thought, old enough to be away from their mother but still very appealing. There were five of them, an assortment of browns and black in color, boisterously cuffing and nipping at each other, spilling out of the basket, then climbing back in to get back into the fray. Many of the children and the adult onlookers loved watching the puppies, and one aggressive little boy was on his knees, desperately trying to keep a black male in his arms. So far he was unsuccessful because the little canine would vigorously lick his face for a few seconds, then wriggle away to rejoin his siblings. Two attendants in coveralls kept the floor clean and the clean sawdust coming. They also kept an eye on overeager baby animals and little humans.

Joel was the cause of our mirth, as I have said, although there was plenty of entertainment all around. He had scrutinized all of the specimens in turn, with his thoughtful little face changing expressions as he cruised the large interior of the pen. He had seen plenty of puppies before, which was probably why he did not give them more than a moment of his attention. From outside of the enclosure his mother and I would pace the large circle to keep our eyes on what he was doing. He was very interested in a little girl feeding a kid from a baby bottle, assisted by a third attendant, but declined the honor himself when offered. He knelt down next to another little girl, about four, and with her discussed the curly tails and the squeals of the baby pigs in front of them. When that paled he moved on, grinning at us as we called to him but showing no inclination to join us as yet. He held out a hand and patted the head of an eager fawn, and laughed when the fawn nuzzled his hand looking for food. The food had already gone to the goat and the fawn moved on. My attention was drawn away for a second by the cries of a toddler tripping over one of the sheep. He was quickly rescued and handed to his mother's arms. But next to me Judy's gasp brought my attention back to my own little man. His large blue eyes were round with amazement, his whole body brought to a screeching halt—no small feat in a three-year-old. Just in front of him stood the fat mama pig in process of nature's catharsis, her excrement departing her body from under one of those fascinating pink curly tails. The look of total amazement on Joel's face, followed after about six seconds by uncontrollable giggles, just about laid the two of us out. We were still wiping out eyes when he departed the pen at last.

"Did you see that pig go potty?" he asked us in a loud whisper. Apparently bathroom duty even for pigs is supposed to be discreet. I scooped him up and as we walked away began to explain that every living thing has to go potty, which presently reminded him he had to go, too.

Before leaving home I made a reservation for the four of us at a nice hotel in Terra Haute. Everett would meet us there at about five o'clock, which meant we still had an hour and a half. It would be at least another hour before going to supper, so we followed up Joel's bathroom break with a trip to the food court. Judy was balancing her four packages and I happily managed my grandson. It was a busy Saturday afternoon but we found an empty table. There was no way we could walk around with our purchases, drinks, pretzels, an ice cream, and a small boy. The little guy was good. He sat quietly eating his scoop of orange cream sickle. He preferred a cup and a spoon to a cone, and dipped small scoops into his mouth as he watched all the action around him. Her green eyes shining in pleasure, Judy reopened one of bags and pulled out a lime green nightgown, floor length with spaghetti straps.

"I wouldn't have dared spend the money on this," she gushed. "Thank you again, Sally."

"My pleasure," I replied sincerely, smiling back at her. "Sorry you won't get to try it out tonight. I reserved just one room for the four of us."

Amazing, I thought, young girls today still blush. Judy was red to the roots of her auburn hair. She lowered her head and smothered another smile. Her embarrassment may have been because of the comment coming from her mother-in-law, but I was happy to know the romance was alive in my son's marriage.

"Do you think we might possibly get Ev into a decent shirt tonight?" I tactfully changed the subject. "I would really like to take you out to eat somewhere a cut above Burger King."

"He packed his own overnight bag so there's no guarantee he has anything in it without holes," she answered with a sigh, "clean yes, decent, who knows."

Everett was finishing a patio he had been contracted to build in an upscale neighborhood on the outskirts of Terra Haute. He had been away from home all week, working twelve-hour days and sleeping at the home of an obliging cousin. He called home to his wife Thursday night to tell her he wouldn't be finished until Saturday, so between us we arranged this rendezvous, a nice weekend getaway, compliments of yours truly. My son protested a little at first, but I persuaded him it would give me great pleasure to do this, which was entirely true. Privately I thought Judy could use the change of pace. Everett was often so happy in his little rut he forgot not everyone else was the same way.

"When we finish our snacks," I told Judy now, "we're going to buy Ev a new shirt, just in case. We'll take our chances on the jeans."

"And you are supposed to buy me a batman shirt, Gram'ma, remember?" a little voice underneath an orange mustache reminded me.

Twenty-four hours later I was on my way home, my little car cruising nicely down the interstate. I was not thinking about the upcoming trip to Athens, Texas. I was still in a family frame of mind. Joel had put his arms around me just two hours earlier and said in parting, "I really wish you could stay with me, Gram'ma," his large eyes solemn, his lips quivering. It was a scene to melt the hardest heart. Everett had looked on, his arm around Judy's waist, both of them quietly allowing us our goodbyes.

I kissed his sweet little face again and assured him it wouldn't be too long before our next visit together. "Gram'ma has to go home to work," I explained, a lame excuse to a little person.

"I'll bring you and your mom to visit Gram'ma real soon, Bud," Everett added helpfully.

His voice was cheerful, but when I looked up from my kneeling position at Joel's eye level I saw the sadness in his eyes. We made eye contact for a few brief seconds, but we each knew what the other was thinking. It was at times like these we both ached for Everett's dad to be around so he could share in these special moments. For the nineteen months he had been one, Michael loved being a grandpa. It was hard accepting the fact Joel would never remember his paternal grandfather. He would have to learn about him second hand.

With a firm hold on the steering wheel I replayed our family get together through my mind once more. After checking into our lodging, I had taken my grandson for an hour swim in the pool while Ev had showered and changed, leaving Judy behind with him. They did not divulge exactly how they had spent that hour, as I happen to know a shower only takes Ev fifteen minutes tops. When we got back Judy was brushing her mane of beautiful hair and her spouse was good-naturedly tucking the new shirt into his fairly decent jeans. Very discreetly I did not look to see if the negligee was still tucked in the shopping bag. The exuberant little guy was dried and dressed while I did a quick shower and change of my own. The steak house recommended by the front desk was a good choice. Still hyped from all the excitement Joel kept me busy drawing trucks and tractors on whatever paper I could find in my handbag, but midway through the main course his active day and no nap caught up with him. He slept with his head on my lap while I ate my meal, careful not to spill any food or liquid on his cherubic little face.

It is rare that any event goes as well as one hopes it does, but this little family rendezvous had been almost perfect, a good memory to tuck away. Time would pass by soon enough, Joel would grow up, and who knew how long the attachment between us would last? I intended to savor every minute of it.

After our dinner I babysat. Everett needed only a little encouragement to take his wife to a late movie while I gently tucked Joel into one side of the queen size bed he would share with me that night. In the transfer from the steak house to the vehicle to the bed he never stirred. What a treat! The movie channel had *The African Queen!* I hadn't seen it in years. I climbed in next to my grandson to watch it.

The next morning we all watched Looney Tunes and took our sweet time getting dressed. We just made the hotel breakfast buffet at 10:30.

I ignored a teenager in a pickup who was trying to force me into the right lane.

"I'm going eight miles over the speed limit, fella," I muttered, holding my spot. He would have to wait until I cleared all the slower traffic on the right myself. Eventually that happened, I moved over, and he roared past. At least he hadn't given me an obscene gesture.

Over breakfast I told Judy and Everett about my trip to Texas on the following weekend. They thought it was very interesting and made me promise to report back to them when I got home. They laughed when I remarked their lives must be pretty boring for them to be so interested in my little caper.

"It's the way you tell it, Mom," Everett commented generously. "You ought to write a book."

"Maybe when and if there is any satisfactory ending to this puzzle," I had replied.

This time the message on my answering machine was from my daughter. Surprise, she was in Chicago, just wanted to let me know, and say hi. She gave me a phone number where she could be reached for the evening, and after unpacking the car I called it. No answer. It was a room at a swank hotel. I would try again later. Perhaps she was out to dinner. I could only hope she was staying in that room without Robert.

She was staying by herself. We connected about eight. I was finishing my low impact aerobics so I was able to answer the phone without being short of breath when she called again. Of course I asked her what she was doing in Chicago.

"Well as a matter of fact you might be interested in that," she answered vaguely.

"Of course I am. Any respectable mother is interested in why her daughter jaunts half way across the country, unless she's a flight attendant."

"Ha, ha, can you imagine me as a flight attendant?" Janelle chuckled. Would I have to drag information out of her? No, she started to open up.

"You remember when we talked the last time, and you recommended Robert and I take it easy in our relationship?"

I acknowledged that I did remember that.

"After you hung up I told him what you said. Well, he agreed with you."

"He did?" I was suspicious, but tried not to let it show.

"Yes. I can see the logic in it too, but I miss him."

"Are you telling me the reason you're in Chicago is because of our last phone conversation?" This was unbelievable. Who ever heard of a daughter's boyfriend taking the advice of a potential mother-in-law?

Janelle went on, warming up to her topic. "He said he could really see what you meant; he should have considered it himself. He doesn't want to rush into anything too soon again either, you know. But it wasn't easy. Then one of our software reps got sick and they desperately needed someone to take his place out here. A huge furniture company is implementing our accounting programs, and it will take about six weeks to get them trained." She paused.

"So you're in Chicago for six weeks?" I said helpfully.

"For five more. I've been here a week already. I meant to call sooner, but it's been crazy."

"Well, being so busy doesn't give you much time to be lonely," I offered, still full of good comments.

My daughter doesn't always appreciate it when I'm so agreeable, but maybe she was too tired to care, even if this was a Sunday. I asked her if she had worked all weekend, and in fact she had worked all day Saturday. On this day an executive of the company and his wife took her out for a late lunch. Afterward she went to a museum, and was taking a soak in the bathtub when I returned her call. A chef salad and a little television were her plans for the rest of the evening, she said, then on to bed.

"And," here I was treading carefully, "have you and Robert talked since you left for Chicago?"

"Just once," her tone was a teensy bit defensive. "We agreed, only one phone call a week. This is supposed to be a separation period."

"What do you think comes next?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "I can't say I'm ready for a permanent commitment, Mom. But I can honestly tell you I am not into the living together thing, so you can put your mind at rest about that. Let's just wait and see how things stand in five more weeks." She paused, "Mom?"

"I'm here."

“This sounds so juvenile, but I don’t know any other way to put this.” Another pause. “Will I really know if I’m in love? Will I be sure?”

“You had better be. Don’t do anything drastic until you know.”

She sighed deeply. “We’ve never talked a lot, have we?”

“No. But we’ve never fought a lot either. We’ve certainly had our problems, but I always thought there was an underlying understanding between us, and certainly deep affection, not only on my part but on yours. I guess I just assumed we understand each other. Janelle? Is that true?”

“Yes, mom.” I could hear the smile in her voice. “I always talked more to Dad, but you do know what I mean. I would ask him now if I could, how he knew you were the one for him. He’s gone, so I’m asking you.”

She waited while I groped for wisdom. It had always been as she had stated. She communicated better with Michael while growing up. He was also the only one she was openly affectionate with. There had been moments when I envied him the hugs and kisses, but I had Everett. He was my cuddle bun. But my son never asked for my in-put when he fell for Judy.

“Your friendship will turn,” I offered slowly. “I don’t know how to explain it, but it will. There must be passion, of course, but that isn’t enough. Passion can die and it never burns constantly. The friendship will become a deep bonding so suddenly everything he does seems like just the right thing. And more than that, no one can tell you, it’s too personal. It isn’t an obsession, which is all consuming, but won’t make you happy. Love makes you elated. You will know.”

How inadequate it seemed, trying to tell someone else, my own daughter no less, what real lasting love is, even if I had been one of those blessed individuals who had known it personally. Could it be the same for everyone? But Janelle deserved my best shot at it.

“Honey,” I spoke into the silence that followed my words. It was a comfortable silence. “your Dad and I prayed for you, and I still do. You have always been so independent and we had to let you go pretty early. We had to count on divine intervention to keep you straight.”

After a moment she said, “Do you still miss him a lot, Mom?”

”Yes, sometimes. Not as much as the first months, thankfully. No one can keep on hurting that much all the time. And you?”

“I was so angry when he died. It seemed so unfair. Then I was angry at you because you seemed to handle it so well, so I thought I should, too.”

“You did handle it well,” I replied, “so well it scared me. But everyone told me you would grieve in your own good time. Did you?”

“I think I’m still working it out. Robert has been so great to talk to, but I don’t want to be leaning on him because I don’t have Dad.”

I found that very perceptive of her and told her so. Our conversation went on for another half an hour, the most in depth talking we had done since I could remember. It frightened me a little. I didn’t want to let her down. My little girl was showing me how vulnerable she could still be. It seemed like a sacred trust.

Later when I laid my head on the pillow I allowed myself to remember it all. From the officials at the door in the pouring rain, to the funeral four days later, and all of the heart wrenching, grim details between. Everett had wept openly more than once. Janelle had stayed with us a week, her face pale and expressionless. She had not cried at all, at least not in front of anyone. She stood between her paternal grandparents at the gravesite, allowing them both to lean on her young strength. Funny how other people say a time of devastation in their lives becomes a blur. For me all of the faces of the family members and friends who clustered to give each other comfort, and all the events, were etched in my memory like permanent ink. It had been a long time since opening the pages of this book, but this night I did. It was not so bad.

Chapter Twelve

Monday I put my house in order, made a trip to the library, and tried unsuccessfully to get up with George. He had changed the message on his answering machine. From a curt, “You know what to do at the beep,” to a cheerful, “Hey, I’m not available right now. Tell ‘em to leave a message, Muff, will you?” followed by two enthusiastic barks by the dog. What had come over the guy?

Miss Carey called about seven-thirty. We exchanged pleasantries, she fussed a bit because I was driving alone, and reminded me the auction was Saturday, and obviously I would miss it.

"It can't be helped," I was resigned, "I'm committed as a courier now. You're probably right anyway. It would be depressing to go." But remembering those boot hooks did bring me a flash of regret.

Tuesday and Wednesday nights I worked my shifts and pushed the trip to Texas to the back of my mind. The first night Emma was on duty. We were pleasant to each other and kept our conversations along well-worn and comfortable paths. I said nothing about my plans for the weekend.

Thursday began routinely with my morning in bed, my afternoon breakfast out, and a walk, although a short one. I spent the rest of the day getting ready for the trip. I put gas in my car and had the tire pressure and oil checked. The purchase of an up to date atlas and half an hour gave me a concise picture of where I was going. I tried twice more to reach George and finally settled on leaving a message, which included Leonard Marsh's birth date.

It is torture for a night person to get up early in the morning. Six-thirty was the best I could do. Eight-thirty found me on the doorstep of the law office, where the same secretary who greeted me on my previous visit was waiting. Except for her the office was empty, not a lawyer in sight. On her desk was a small, sturdy box, wrapped as though it was being shipped instead of hand carried. I was not allowed to inspect or tamper with the goods. The label on it said only "Elaine Barclay," but I was given a separate envelope with the home address and phone number of my destination printed on it. This was also sealed.

Miss Private Secretary, whose name I forgotten and who had no name plaque on her desk, seemed to realize I was pressed for time. After a pleasant good morning we got down to business. There was a form ready for me to sign taking responsibility for the package and envelope entrusted to my care. She asked me for an estimated time of arrival, and when I told her said she would call the Barclays to give them some idea of when I would get there. I was amenable to that, and added my intention to call them when I got to Athens so they could give me explicit directions to their home. Good. She would tell them. After accepting perfunctory wishes for a safe trip I headed southwest.

If you have never taken a long motor trip by yourself, I recommend it. If the weather and traffic are cooperative it is very relaxing. I listened to music and an audio book at intervals, but sometimes just enjoyed the landscape. There was an abundance of fall color in southern Indiana, Kentucky, and Arkansas. I had no problem finding lodging by six o'clock Friday night near Little Rock. While swimming in the indoor pool a balding middle aged guy with a paunch offered to buy me a beer. My skills at gracefully getting out of an invitation like this were rusty, but I must have declined with a certain aplomb as he cheerfully wished me goodnight when I left. The next day I lingered over breakfast near Malvern, and took a long stroll in Texarkana, which put me in Texas by early afternoon.

It was no problem to find a telephone, and no surprise when Elaine Barclay answered on the first ring. In her shoes, who would not be waiting by the phone? Ten minutes later I was parking my car in front of the Barclay's home in an upscale middle class neighborhood.

Of course Ross was there, too. They were hospitable and courteous, and certainly taking my measure just as I was theirs. Elaine looked so much as her mother did in the photograph sitting on Amelia Marsh's table that I would have known who she was if she walked past me on the street in Hanley. I guessed her dark hair was still natural, and I thought how well she carried her height and her weight. She led the way into a spacious sitting room and urged me to make myself comfortable. Ross, following Elaine, was only an inch or so taller than she, but thin. His face was not extraordinary but it was a pleasant face and I found myself relieved. It would not be hard to talk to these people.

After exchanging a few social amenities and accepting a diet coke, I handed Elaine the package. She looked hard at it, looked up at her husband, then down at the box again.

"Go ahead," he urged quietly, "open it."

She did so. Ross and I looked on as she carefully removed four separate parcels and opened each one. The pearls were there, the strands Amelia Marsh had worn for her last photograph, along with a matching set of clip

earrings I had never seen. They were unfashionable but lovely, genuine rather than cultured. Elaine remembered her "Aunt Mely" wearing them and was obviously pleased to have them. The second package contained a cocktail ring with chipped diamonds and sapphires set in white gold. I found myself giving an exclamation of pleasure as Elaine held it out for us to see. Elaine's face openly showed her own pleasure.

"That is a pretty thing, Elaine," her husband said quietly, "we must have it sized for you."

"It is not so small," she said, slipping it up to the knuckle on her ring finger. "She lost weight after Leonard died, but for a number of her middle aged years Mely was full figured. I have never seen this, but mother told me about it. Leonard gave it to her on an anniversary, their twenty-fifth, I think."

The third parcel contained another ring, with a good quality jade stone set in heavy yellow gold, and again Elaine was able to provide history. This piece was older and had come from the orient, probably in the '50s. She remembered admiring it when she was a little girl.

"It would suit my daughter better now, I think," she said to me with a smile. "It is also a beautiful piece, but my tastes have changed."

And fourth came a necklace of high quality yellow gold, probably eighteen carat. I had seen such soft quality gold while living in the Philippines, and I had a bracelet of it myself. This one was designed with a rope like filigree and had an opal of respectable proportions dangling at its center. The stone shone as only a good quality opal can. Again all of us made admiring noises.

"She wore this at my wedding, Ross, do you remember?" Elaine exclaimed. "She had a turquoise dress on, we have a photograph of it in our album. That's the only time I remember seeing it, but I'm sure she wore it for that occasion."

Ross admitted he didn't remember much about the wedding at all, and certainly not the jewelry of the guests.

"Oh Ross, there's a letter here!" She had opened the envelope and pulled out two separate letter sized envelopes.

The first was predictably from the law office, listing and describing the contents of each separate package. The second contained a form asking her to sign to verify that she had received everything, which she was to then seal and mail directly back to the office address printed on it. My courier duties were over. Elaine looked disappointed. She had expected a personal note.

Ross conversed with me about Indiana while his wife lost no time but went ahead and filled out the receipt. She would make sure it went out in the post by Monday morning, she said.

They seemed in no hurry to get rid of me, perhaps appreciating the long distance I had come and too polite to hurry me out of the door. We moved on from chatting about their former home to their present one. I found out Ross was a chemist and a teacher. Like June and Eric Fisk the Barclays had one daughter, now in graduate school, although there was a photograph in the foyer of a small boy, and in time I would find out this was their first born, a son, who died of leukemia before school age. They inquired politely, albeit sincerely, about my own family, which steered our conversation very nicely back to Mrs. Marsh. It seemed to me the groundwork was now laid and I could get down to brass tacks.

During my driving hours there had been plenty of time to consider my approach. True to my nature, the direct one seemed the best.

"I asked Mrs. Marsh's lawyers if I could personally deliver your legacy," I was looking directly at Elaine, "because I want to ask you what you know about her past. No one in Hanley, including her closest friends, seems to know very much about her. As you heard, she was killed. Her friend, Miss Anne Carey, and I both wonder if her death has anything to do with her life before she moved to Hanley. You are the only person we know who may be able to tell us anything about that.

"Of course you don't know me and may not want to share anything," I added hastily, not at all sure from the looks on their faces how they were processing what I said. "I am a nurse, not a private detective or law enforcement officer. I was Amelia Marsh's closest neighbor, and our relationship was friendly enough that she felt comfortable to ask me to come and see her the day she died. All she told me was she wanted some advice. When I arrived to keep our appointment she was already gone. Now I suspect what or who she wanted to confide in me about may have been involved in her death. It isn't easy to explain, but I feel very impressed to learn more about her life before I knew her, and see if there might not be an answer from the past in why her life ended as it did. There is no other explanation that presents itself."

After looking at her husband for a long moment Elaine seemed to find the reassurance she wanted. She nodded and smiled slightly. "I see no reason why you shouldn't know what I do. That may not be a great deal, but lately she's been on my mind, of course, so the memories are fresher again. Have you had any lunch? Ross has to go out for awhile, but I think it's safe to leave us together, don't you dear?"

Ross thought it was. I am a very safe looking character and I usually give a great first impression. After he left, taking the mail for the attorneys with him to try to make the last post for the week, we moved into the kitchen. We spent the next two hours together. While we conversed we ate salads and chicken noodle soup, then we talked some more while I helped her clean up the dishes. I listened carefully and jotted down a few notes.

Elaine told me the Marshes had always been a part of her life, rather like any close family. She stayed with them overnight as a little girl for almost a week once when her mother was hospitalized and her paternal grandparents could not keep her. Leonard and Amelia had owned a house in New Jersey for several years before Leonard's retirement, using it when Leonard's business took them to New York or Washington D.C.. Amelia sold it when she moved to Indiana.

"I don't remember when they were not a part of my growing up years," she told me. "One takes things like that for granted as a child." I agreed. "They sent me gifts for my birthday and holidays when they were away, nice things. Mely flew in from Spain to be at my college graduation, and as I mentioned earlier, she attended our wedding." She amended, "They were both there."

"It was not until later, after I was married myself and came back with my own child to visit my parents, that I got rather curious about Len and Mely's past. I asked mother about it." Elaine paused here to offer me a piece of lemon cream pie, which I declined, but reluctantly. It looked good. She went on. "I knew Amelia and my Mum had been chums since their London days and how they both met their American husbands during the war while they had some secretarial jobs in the war department. Mely's cousin put her up when she first came to London, my mother said. When the cousin got a transfer to the continent Mely moved in with Mum and another girl."

The cousin must be the girl named Meg whose letters Miss Carey read, I thought.

Elaine went on to relate what she remembered of the war years from her parents' reminiscing. Everyone worked long, hard hours, and the bombing was terrible. But there was camaraderie, too, and good times. Elaine's parents met in a pub where American officers stationed in London hung out, and her father, Eric, introduced Amelia to Leonard early in 1944. I asked her what Leonard Marsh's job had been during the war.

She smiled. "Something rather hush-hush and intriguing," she said. "Intelligence and all that. Dad got out of the military in 1946, but Len stayed on in his capacity. For years, both during the war and after, he would disappear at the drop of a hat. Sometimes he would be gone for a few days, sometimes up to a month. I remember a bit of that from when I was a girl, hearing the grown-ups talk. Mely didn't complain too much about it. I guess she knew that's just the way it was. She married into it."

I asked her if her father had known more about his friend Leonard's profession, and she thought he had known during the war, and that he might have been associated with it. After his discharge, she didn't think so. Their friendship endured not only because of their wartime connection, but because of the friendship of their wives and their mutual enthusiasm for fly fishing and boating. Her impression was her father had not been privy to his old friend's professional life, and that suited him.

"What kind of a man was he, Leonard Marsh?"

She thought about it. "He was pleasant and very well mannered, charming when he wanted to be. I'm sure he was fond of me, although he wasn't demonstrative about it. As he got older he was more introverted, quieter. There was a presence about him so you noticed he was there even if he didn't say very much. Amelia was usually the perky, lively one, while he was content to let her do most of the talking. But you didn't overlook him." She paused to consult her memory again. "I only saw him two or three times the last years of his life. He was drinking a little more than I remembered, but I don't recall him drunk. I remember thinking once he was only partly with us—we were spending the evening together, the six of us—and the rest of his mind was far away. But he was never confused or senile. My mother said he was lucid even after his first stroke, although he had difficulty speaking after that."

I just had to ask. "Do you think the Marshes were still devoted to each other in their later years? I hope that doesn't offend you, the personal nature of that question."

Elaine shook her head. “Funny, you asking that. I didn’t notice myself. As an adult, as I said, I only saw them together again a few times. But mother said something once that struck me so I still remember it. She and Dad were like lovers, always. It was wonderful. My friends teased me about it, the girls who would come home from college with me. Dad died five years before Leonard and my mother had a terrible time for a while. She went back to England to visit her family there for over a month.” Here Elaine rambled for a bit describing how her mother coped with her grief. Eventually she got back to my question. “She came to stay with us for a while, too, but at first she wouldn’t consider moving. One evening over tea I mentioned Amelia and made a comment about how much of a comfort a friend like her must be. Mother looked very strangely at me. She said, ‘she understands, but not like you might think. Her marriage underwent a change some time ago, and it wasn’t the first time she’s gone through grief. But at least they have peace with one another.’ Those were almost her exact words. I was so surprised I don’t think I said anything else about it.”

I ingested that for a moment. “As far as you know, did Mrs. Marsh ever go back to England to see her own family?”

Without hesitation Elaine responded in the negative. “I never knew her to go. Somehow the understanding was there was nothing there for her. Honestly, I guess I thought she had no one. Did she?”

“Once she did. Miss Carey and I found photographs of parents, a sister, and probably two brothers.”

My hostess looked puzzled. “Did they die in the bombing, do you think?”

“I don’t know. But wouldn’t your mother have mentioned that?”

Elaine thought she would have. She also believed her mother knew a great deal about her friend she never talked about. I was frustrated but tried not to show it. There were still so many mysteries, so many unanswered questions. I tried to think of other avenues to pursue and asked Elaine if she was aware of any other friends of the Marshes that might still be alive.

“I can’t help you much there,” she replied regretfully. “We’ve been away for so long. Claire might still be living in Virginia if she hasn’t passed on. Didn’t the lawyers mention her?”

“Claire who?”

“Why Claire Marsh, Leonard’s sister-in-law.”

Elaine did not seem to realize she had dropped a bombshell. She was putting dishes up in the cupboard as she spoke and did not see my face. I was composed by the time she turned to look inquisitively at me, but there was no reason not to level with her.

“It is a safe bet no one in Hanley knows a thing about Claire Marsh’s existence,” I said, “and that includes the lawyers.”

“Well fancy that,” she looked wonderingly back at me. “Well fancy that.”

We considered the oddity of this new fact.

“I suppose you would like to know as much as I can recall about her,” my hostess offered.

“Absolutely.”

We moved back to the sitting room. My hostess remembered and related some family history pertaining to Amelia’s husband. I learned that Leonard Marsh and his brother, Arthur, were orphaned as children and raised by the state of New York. Arthur was the younger, although Elaine did not know by how many years. She never met him. He died at Pearl Harbor, a young warrant officer aboard one of the ships sunk by the Japanese attack. Claire had been left a young widow with a small child, and pregnant with another. She went home to her own family after Arthur’s death and eventually married again. Elaine did not know the particulars but it had ended in divorce and Claire’s last name was “Marsh” again by the time she paid a visit to her former brother-in-law and his wife for the first time. Her children had come with her. There had been a party and Elaine remembered her introduction to Leonard’s niece and nephew well, although she was only thirteen at the time.

“I thought Leonard’s nephew was the most handsome boy I had ever seen,” she laughed, “he was eighteen. My first crush!”

She recalled Claire’s other child, too, a girl, but could no longer remember their names. They had come with their mother to visit a few more times while Elaine was a girl, but as she grew up so did they. Busy with their own lives they faded from the picture. Claire came alone to see her husband’s family after that.

“To be honest,” she admitted, “I haven’t thought about any of them for years. No one mentioned her after Leonard’s death. I wasn’t able to go back east for his funeral, but I think Claire was there.” She had a sudden

thought. "I tell you what. Let me look through my old photographs. There should be a picture of her, at least one."

She invited me to follow her into a spare bedroom, where I looked on while she rummaged through an old bureau. I asked her if she had any memory of what Claire had been like.

"She was blonde, blue eyed, and petite. Both the son and daughter looked like her, I remember everyone remarked about it. I want to say she was very nice. Aha! Here it is." She pulled an old album out of the bottom drawer.

We sat side by side on the bed and I looked on as she paged through the album. Here were family photographs of the Fisks from the fifties and sixties.

"It is obvious I was a spoiled only child," Elaine remarked dryly, "Mother put these albums together years ago. I'm afraid I am not so faithful with my pictures, yet. Oh! Here!"

And sure enough, here was a photograph of five smiling females, all reclining in lawn chairs in a well-kept back yard; rose bushes in full bloom. From the clothes and hairstyles I guessed the year the picture was taken to be circa 1960. Elaine pointed herself out as the one to the far left. About thirteen she already filled out her bathing suit. Next to her was a young good looking blonde in a halter-top and shorts. The middle spot was taken by Amelia, modestly attired in a sundress, looking stylish as always, toasting the unseen photographer with the frosty glass in her hand. Next came June, who the camera had caught glancing at her companion on the other side, Claire Marsh herself. Next to the voluptuous June she looked very slim indeed, and even in the casual snapshot, an attractive forty something.

"The girl next to you is Claire's daughter?" I inquired.

Elaine nodded. "I wish I could remember more about her, about them. But it's been a long time, you see." She contemplated the past for a moment, and I gazed at the photograph, and took the liberty of looking at a few more. There were half a dozen of the Marshes at various occasions. There was one more of Claire, Leonard on one side of her, Amelia on the other, now dressed in winter clothes. I saw no photos of the nephew who had made Elaine's heart throb.

"Amelia must have had photographs," Elaine ventured. "They had boxes and albums of them. Leonard liked to take them, at least before he got old. As a little girl I loved looking at them all."

She was shocked when I told her how little we found among Mrs. Marsh's belongings. She remembered looking at pictures of the places Leonard and Amelia had traveled to, Amelia beautifully dressed for special occasions, poses in front of exotic places like the Taj Mahal, sometimes alone, sometimes with her husband or other companions.

We were both stymied by Amelia's behavior. Neither one of us had any idea why she got rid of most of her photographs. Elaine put the albums away. It crossed my mind to ask for the snapshot with Claire, but I decided not to. I did ask if she had any idea how I might get in touch with her. Elaine knew, although she wasn't sure how, that Claire left New York at some point and bought a home near Richmond, Virginia. She had done this before Elaine's father died, and possibly because Claire's daughter resided in Richmond. Elaine's memory bank was exhausted. She couldn't tell me any more.

We parted amicably. Elaine asked for my home phone number in case either she or Ross came up with any thing else that might be useful. I gave it to her gladly.

"It seems you have found more questions than answers," she commented astutely as she walked me to my car, and I had to agree.

Chapter Thirteen

With so much running through my mind, I was in no mood for driving very far for what was left of Saturday. I remembered driving past a promising bed and breakfast in southern Arkansas and took a chance they might have a bed for me. Since I was alone, they did. The proprietor was an elderly lady in an old fashioned purple dress and a print apron who looked like she would be happiest in the kitchen fixing biscuits or lemonade. The house was a large two story antebellum affair she could in no way run by herself and it was immaculate, but in my fourteen-hour stay I never saw anyone else. That is, I never saw any other staff. There were three other

couples and one family of four spending the night, all of whom introduced themselves at breakfast the next morning.

But Saturday night about six-thirty when Mrs. Chandler showed me to my room, a small corner one on the second floor with a standard double bed and a small private balcony, there was no one else around and that suited me fine.

I wasn't hungry because of my late lunch, but knew I would want something to nibble on before going to sleep. I offered to pay extra for a snack and my hostess agreed, although reluctantly. Not exactly a bundle of personality, Mrs. Chandler, even if she did look interesting.

It was dark outside but the weather was mild and there were lights on in the garden so I took a stroll. I enjoyed the scent of honey suckle, and the definitive odors of trees and garden plants going to sleep for the winter. Two friendly German Shepherds kept me company. They tried to follow me right into the house when my walk was finished but their mistress stopped them at the door, and obviously they had expected as much. They settled on the porch without any protest.

I collected my glass of lemonade and a small china plate with a generous amount of Colby cheese and crackers on it, thanked my hostess, and went up to my room for the night. There I took a prolonged bath, absently checked the seven channels provided on the television, and thumbed through an issue of Country magazine. The entire time one main question kept going through my mind. Why had Mrs. Marsh expelled Claire from her life after Leonard's death?

It was getting chilly outdoors but the balcony still looked inviting. I drew an extra blanket around me to serve as a bathrobe and went out to sit in the country night. Absently I heard the sound of a car on a nearby road and a dog barking at a neighboring house. The wind rustled. It was all so peaceful but my mind wasn't. Even if I found out the answer to that question what good would it do? Surely not keeping anything to remind you of your deceased husband's sister-in-law didn't mean she might want you dead. It was absurd, and maybe so was my preoccupation with the whole matter. What did I expect to accomplish? If the police department couldn't find out who killed Amelia Marsh what chance did I have? And if I was being honest with myself, that's what I was hoping to do.

Sitting out there feeling discouraged and for the second time seriously considering termination of the whole affair, deep inside I knew I wouldn't. Elaine had given me some more information and the trail wasn't a complete washout yet.

Going back inside I took out my notebook and scribbled while nibbling on the cheese and crackers. While my visit with Elaine and Ross Barclay was fresh in my mind, I added impressions and facts to the information taken down during my time spent with Elaine.

A sumptuous breakfast in the morning with the other guests was the high light of my Saturday. Mrs. Chandler did know how to make wonderful biscuits. After checking out I drove all day, eager to get home. I stopped only for essentials and to stretch my legs. Getting off my derriere and moving around was essential for me. By dark it was raining heavily and no treat to be on the road, but I was determined to make it home rather than stop again, and home it was about nine p.m..

Having done nothing strenuous in two days meant nothing. I was exhausted. I wanted to eat, put in a couple of miles on my walker, and call some people. It was too late to call anyone except perhaps Ev and Judy, and they wouldn't expect to hear from me until Monday. Nothing in the refrigerator looked appealing. As much as I wanted to the walking track looked overwhelming. I unpacked, considered starting a load of laundry, and thought everything could wait until morning.

Within two hours of hitting my pillow it was obvious what was wrong with me. I had an intestinal flu.

After about five trips to the bathroom I wondered if I had food poisoning, but the low-grade fever and the headache that went along with my gastro-intestinal upset indicated a virus was probably the culprit. I tried not to feel too sorry for myself. It had been months since even a head cold had gotten me down.

Finally getting relief about five in the morning I slept until noon. After some tea and toast I started making the phone calls. Judy was home and Everett, predictably on a Monday afternoon, was not. I filled her in on the trip but didn't mention my physical condition. She listened with interest and promised to relay everything on to her husband. I begged off a long conversation telling her I had more calls to make and she understood. Joel was napping.

Those twenty minutes out of bed made me nauseated again. I went back to lie down and use the phone on my bedside table. Anne Carey was not at home and I left her a message to call me back. I knew George would be working so he got another message. I rang up the lawyers and chatted momentarily with their secretary, who nicely said she was glad I had a safe trip, and assured me she would tell Mr. Harmon I had successfully completed my courier service. I told her they could expect the mailed verification of safe delivery from Elaine Barclay in a day or two. I wondered if they had already contacted her but did not ask. Nor did I tell the secretary I had found a relative, albeit by marriage, of Mrs. Marsh. Perhaps if the person on the other end of the phone had been Mr. Harmon or Mr. Bedeman I would have.

As I was thinking about calling Detective White to tell him about Claire Marsh, I fell back to sleep. Miss Carey's phone call woke me in mid afternoon.

"Hello, dear," she chirped cheerfully, "so glad you're back safe and sound."

It crossed my mind to ask her to come over, but that was out, of course. Not only did I look terrible, but also it was out of the question to risk exposing an elderly lady to a contagious virus. So we had a lengthy phone conversation. She was very glad Ross and Elaine Barclay were so accommodating and loved hearing my details about the jewelry. Like myself she had never seen any of the pieces except the pearls. I took her step-by-step through my visit, and led her right into the news of a surprise sister-in-law. Surviving the murder of a friend was proof enough to me Anne Carey had a heart strong enough to take the shock.

The sharp intake of her breath was audible over the telephone. "Sally, you don't say," she gasped, "you don't say!"

"I do say, or rather Elaine did, and she had pictures to prove it." I described the photographs from Elaine's album. "What's more," I continued, "Leonard was a camera buff, and Elaine remembers many photo albums and many more pictures than we've seen. You don't recall the name of Claire Marsh ever coming up in all of the time you knew Amelia?"

"Why never," Anne Carey stated positively. "With the question of relatives coming up so often since she died I'm sure I would have remembered. This is very, very odd." She had a thought. "Is there any chance, now that you have seen what she looks like, that she is someone in the photographs we do have that we couldn't put a name to before?"

I doubted it and said so. Like Amelia herself, Claire's face was memorable.

After a pause Anne said, "For some reason we don't know, Amelia put her life before she moved out here completely behind her. The only exception to that was her friendship with June, and her affection for June's daughter. Otherwise she cut everyone off, and you know she had friends in New Jersey. Amelia didn't have it in her to be a hermit. But why?"

"And if we knew the answer to that question," I mused out loud, "would we then know the answer to her death? Or are the two completely separate? And what's more, is there anyone left alive who can tell us?"

Anne couldn't answer those questions any more than I could, but before we ended our conversation she said she was going back over the letters and the pictures we had taken from Amelia's house.

I climbed out of bed, took a much-needed shower, and pattered around my house, getting a few small things accomplished. That wore me out, letting me know this bug was going to be an inconvenience for a while longer. With another cup of hot tea, a glass of water, and some soda crackers, I curled up on the couch in the living room in front of the evening news. George called shortly after.

We exchanged the usual preliminary greetings but I could tell he had something he wanted to share.

"You sound like a man with a secret," I told him.

He was grieved. "How can you know that?" he demanded.

"Some people are meant to keep secrets and some are not. You are the 'are not' type. What's up?"

"Just for being such a smarty," he said smugly, "you can wait until tomorrow to find out. I need to spend a little more time on this anyway to give you the whole picture. I can do that tonight and tell you everything tomorrow night."

I thought about that for a moment. Tomorrow night was Tuesday and I was scheduled to work. But George needed to talk to me and I definitely needed to talk to him.

"George, do you know the last time I called in sick?"

"Probably not since Michael's funeral," he replied solemnly.

“That’s about it. But tomorrow night that’s what I’m going to do. This bug I came down with last night may be over by tomorrow but they won’t know that at the hospital. It is pay back time. What time can you come over?”

We agreed on six o’clock.

“Speaking of payback, I’ll bring something to eat.”

“No fried chicken, please,” was my only request.

His suppressed excitement was contagious. After hanging up the telephone I felt like a kid wondering what I was getting for my birthday the next day. Little did I know we were both getting a lot more of a surprise than we bargained for.

Many people I know, both professionally and informally, insist troubles come in threes. The next morning the heating element on my dryer went out. I spent half an hour on the phone arranging for the replacement of the part. My first load of clothes was already through the washer, and since the sun was shining I hung it on the line in my back yard. It is a small yard and it is a small clothesline, not intended for so many items. I had to hang my things out in shifts. Getting everything taken care of took most of the day. Almost two days of vomiting, diarrhea, and little food, had left me wobbly, so getting my chores done took twice as long as it normally would have.

About four-thirty I fixed my hair and got dressed, and it was a good thing. George was almost an hour early and he was not alone.

“Hi, Sally, “George said quietly when I opened the front door, “can we come in?”

Stunned, I opened the door wider and let the three of them pass through. After shutting the door I turned around to find them all standing in my living room looking at me. As my Maker is my judge, I almost said, George it looks like you brought two FBI agents with you. Instead I said, “I don’t know what this is all about, but why don’t you all sit down?”

Then George said, “Sally, these two people are from the FBI.”

They introduced themselves, first an attractive woman in her thirties wearing a navy blue pants suit, and a trim male agent I guessed to be close to fifty, attired in a gray pin stripe suit with a conservative tie, Agents Hinckley and Stoner. I was never a fan of the X Files, but later Everett would see some humor in the correlation. I never saw any humor in the situation at all, and especially not then.

The two federal agents approached George at his home office. For once he was there instead of out in the field. They had come right to the point: what was his interest in Leonard Marsh? Being a man of both integrity and at least average intelligence, he told them. His answers led them all to my house. I noticed they must have escorted George home first because he was not wearing his work clothes. I wondered if they had insisted on seeing the computer he used for his research.

Since I am not a complete fool, either, and would not tangle myself in a pack of lies even if I had something to hide, which I did not, I corroborated everything George already said. I made it clear my friend had only been doing his research as a favor to me.

Mr. Stoner did most of the talking. He didn’t seem too impressed by our explanations. I wasn’t even sure he believed us, although how or why we would make up such a story was awfully far fetched. I asked if they knew about the violent death of Leonard Marsh’s widow before their coming to Hanley. They had not.

“You can verify a lot of what we’ve told you with the local police department,” I said helpfully.

Ms. Hinckley said stiffly they intended to do so.

To try and ease the tension I asked if anyone would like something to drink, but nothing doing. George looked like he would like something very much but when his companions declined he shook his head.

The senior agent went on to explain the reason for their presence. When anyone tried to find out information about certain people or certain events pertaining to the U.S. government and national security, even if that information was no longer classified, if the search went far enough bells and whistles went off in the justice department. On Monday they had been directed by Washington to investigate this sudden interest in Leonard Marsh.

“I never knew him,” I pointed out the obvious, “and all of my interest stems from what happened to my neighbor, his wife.”

George and I were told politely but bluntly we should leave such things to the professionals.

“Mr. Stoner,” I asked, equally direct, “have we broken any laws?”

“Mr. Thomas’ query has gotten a little in depth,” the agent answered, looking at me calmly, “but he hasn’t broken any security codes.”

“Then what is this all about?”

George looked like he would like to be back on top of a telephone pole somewhere, but he didn’t try to shut me up.

I continued. “You have come quite a distance to ask what our interest in Leonard Marsh is, and we’ve told you. Your superiors may disapprove of George’s research, but that hardly seems like reason enough to send two of their people all the way out here to look him up. I haven’t heard about it yet, but is the information George has a threat to anyone?”

My guests were very good at asking questions but hesitant to give any answers. Mr. Stoner again said we should leave criminal matters to law enforcement. He strongly advised us both not to pursue any further investigation into Mr. Marsh’s professional life.

I decided to try one more question. “From what you know,” I pressed, “is it possible Leonard Marsh’s professional life had any bearing on his wife’s untimely death?”

“From what I know,” Mr. Stoner replied carefully, “it is unlikely. Leonard Marsh’s day was a long time ago, and he would never have shared his professional secrets with any unauthorized person, even his wife.”

So if Mr. Marsh was decades beyond being important anymore, I reasoned, their visit and our conversation seemed irrelevant. But how could they be certain his past was not a factor in his wife’s death? Hinckley and Stoner both listened without expression—I thought at the time “stone faced” was probably a nickname his subordinates used behind his back—as I went on to tell them about Amelia Marsh’s years in Hanley. I emphasized how she kept her past life almost completely separate from the one she made for herself after settling down as a retiree in a small mid-western town.

“She had friends,” I continued, “several of them, but no one knew much about her. Why not? Why isn’t it possible her death is connected somehow to her years married to your secret agent, or whatever he was? She was murdered.”

Their only response was to say they would drop in and see the officer in charge of the murder investigation before they went back to Chicago. They shook hands with both of us, apologized for any inconvenience, and for the third time advised us not to dabble in the files of dead government agents.

George came to his feet when Mr. Stoner and Ms. Hinckley got up to leave, but as we heard their vehicle pull out of my driveway he sank back onto the couch with an audible gasp of relief. I plopped myself down on the other end of the couch and let out a gasp of my own. The atmosphere was friendly again. We sat there and enjoyed it.

“I was too intimidated to mention the Freedom of Information Act,” I finally said weakly.

“Are you still offering liquid refreshment, because if you are, I could sure use something. You didn’t sound intimidated to me. I didn’t even remember that law.”

“When have you not been welcome to whatever is in my refrigerator?” We dragged ourselves into the kitchen. Without a word I opened the refrigerator door and removed a bottle of wine. George opened a cupboard door and took out two of my four wine glasses.

“You amaze me,” I said, “remembering where the glassware is kept.”

“The only place in this kitchen where I do know what’s what,” he answered solemnly, holding out each glass in turn for me to pour in a generous amount

“To freedom,” I toasted, tapping his glass with my own and taking a sip.

“Amen.” George took a generous swallow and followed me back into the sitting room.

We talked for a while, rehashing our strange visit with the FBI agents. Finally I mentioned finding something to eat. Wine on an empty stomach was making me light headed, which was a big improvement over nausea. The fact that I mentioned food before George did was more of an indication than anything else of how shaken he had been by his interrogation. There had been no opportunity for him to carry through on his promise to bring our dinner. There were a couple of beers at the back of my refrigerator and while George went to get one I ordered a large pizza. It seemed to me if I could drink the wine I could eat a couple of pieces of pepperoni pizza, and it sure sounded good.

It was almost seven when the delivery person arrived with our supper. George rehashed his afternoon ordeal with the government agents and told me some of the information he discovered with his computer-based investigation. He stopped once to call his supervisor and say he was not in custody so he could come in as usual in the morning for work. After I ate two pieces of pizza and George ate four, I told him about my visit to Texas.

George and I would go over everything at least twice that night, and at times he went into great detail to explain what pathways he had taken to find out what he knew. The whole process had taken him many hours over the previous weekend, and a couple more after we had spoken the night before. His journey had taken him into public records in English counties, and archives in Washington D.C.. I apologized a couple of times for all of the hours put into this project and all of the trauma he had endured on my account. As a true gentleman he assured me it was all right.

“The whole thing has been interesting,” he said positively, “even if it included a run in with the feds.”

He almost dropped his current piece of pizza on his lap as I gave a shriek. Before he could ask I explained.

“Miss Carey! How could I forget her? She should be here! What time is it?”

The time was fifteen minutes after eight. It was common for elderly people to retire early and eight was my usual cut off for calling anyone over sixty-five. But Anne had been wide-awake at nine, the night we had dinner together. It was worth a chance. I rang her number. She answered on the third ring. After an apology for the late call and a quick explanation, she responded with assurances and enthusiasm. Of course she would come over. I started to offer to come and walk with her, but offered George’s service instead.

He shook his head and started for the front door, the last of his supper now digesting. “Why not?” He pretended to grumble. “First a danger to the security of our nation, then an escort for sweet old ladies. That’s me.”

They were back in minutes and I had a cup of peppermint tea waiting for Anne and hazelnut decaf coffee for George and myself, if he wanted any. Yippy stayed home. Anne gave me a little hug, inquired as to my health, and clucked that I looked too thin. That done, she settled ladylike into my straight back chair with her tea on a table at her left elbow, and looked expectantly at both of us.

“I assume you have introduced yourselves to each other,” I said politely, getting comfortable myself.

They had and they were ready to get back down to business, which was listening to George repeat all the information he had given first to the federal agents and then to me. He didn’t seem to mind, in fact he got more enthusiastic with telling it all again. In all of the years I knew George he was usually reticent, allowing other people to do most of the talking. I could remember only one other occasion where he talked so long, describing the catch of prize trout. Actually, he was pretty good at it.

Anne Carey was a good listener, too. She sat demurely in her chair, both eyes focused on George in rapt attention. Often she would interject an exclamation such as, “you don’t say!” or, “my word!” which only kept our man fueled.

I was as fascinated as she was. How often do two ordinary women hear about a man married to a friend of theirs, who turns out to have led the kind of life Leonard Marsh did?

In early 1916, Leonard and his brother, Arthur were placed in a New York state orphanage when their parents died. The inference was the parents had died of influenza. The family had newly emigrated from Scotland and there were no relatives to place the boys with. Leonard was the older by five years. Apparently he had been bright, ambitious, and personable. Those qualities put him in the good graces of his teachers and the administrator of the home. They recommended him for scholarships to a New York City college, and he was accepted. By age twenty-one, with a lot of hard work and perhaps a little charm, he was accepted into an officer’s training program and two years later graduated with honors.

Leonard was not one to forget his brother. There was documentation they were close. With his older brother’s mentoring, Arthur too finished high school and went into military service. He chose the navy for his career.

The facts George gave us lined up with Elaine Barclay’s recollections. George’s research also verified another thing Elaine said about Arthur. He had perished at Pearl Harbor leaving a widow and a child.

Leonard did well for himself in the army and made the rank of captain by 1934, after a tour of duty in the Philippines. But two years later his military career seemed to mysteriously end. For the public record he had resigned his commission to become a private consultant for allied countries trying to learn updated weaponry.

In reality he had gone underground, into intelligence. Records released fifty years later revealed Leonard never officially left the military at all.

“My guess is, after his brother was able to take care of himself our man was asked to do some more clandestine work and he took the challenge,” George commented. “Evaluations and comments by his superiors suggest he liked taking risks, but they liked the fact he seemed to know when to draw back. Leonard Marsh seemed to have a gift for knowing how far to go.”

“This is all fascinating, just fascinating,” Miss Carey said fervently. “I can’t help but wonder how much Amelia knew.”

“Things were different by the time they met,” George went on. “After his brother died Leonard had no immediate family left. The reports change after Pearl Harbor. Now your Mr. Marsh was becoming a daredevil. He’s reprimanded for it a couple of times, but he got results so the slap on the wrist was only for show.”

I asked George if everything he was telling us was in the records or if he was filling in any blanks. He admitted he had drawn some conclusions, but defended them with all of the data he had seen to support it.

“Did your visitors take your documentation?”

“No,” he admitted, “but they asked to see it pretty forcefully and I was intimidated enough to let them. You won’t be surprised to hear they told me to destroy it. They drew the line at confiscating what I showed them.”

“What you showed them?” I repeated.

He grinned. “They saw my notes, but the disc I have wasn’t labeled. There was much more than they saw.”

Miss Carey wanted to get back to Leonard Marsh’s biography. “Do you know what he was doing when he and Amelia met in London?” she asked.

George grew serious. “There’s no record of how much she knew, but my guess is she knew very little, and you heard what Agent Stoner said, Sally. Marsh certainly had to know how to keep his mouth shut. He wouldn’t have lasted long if he hadn’t, and he was a veteran by then in covert operations. Sometime during the war he became a specialist. In the Navy we called them torpedoes.”

“Torpedoes?” Anne repeated, and my face asked the same question.

“He was a professional assassin.”

No reply seemed worthy of the information. There was a pause of considerable length after George’s announcement, and it would have been longer but he broke it with a continuation of his fact finding.

“Obviously the allies needed these kind of people, and Leonard managed to knock off a few spies and other undesirable members of the Axis. He got out of that when he got married, being the actual hit man, that is. He requested it and had earned the right.”

“Thank goodness,” my other guest said weakly.

“The war was over by then,” I pointed out.

That was so, our narrator concurred. But the cold war was on, and there were still plenty of problems and plenty of demand for a good undercover man who already knew the score. Leonard Marsh’s job description changed but he was very much in the game. He became a finger man, pointing out dangerous individuals who had animosity against America and her allies, making decisions as to who mattered, and training men to do the job he had bowed out of. His wife became an asset. A married man looked much less suspicious. Incredibly, in spite of his years of service and his physical appearance, he remained almost unknown in the murky world of espionage. From the end of the war until shortly before his retirement no serious attempts were made on his life.

That changed in 1966. His wife wasn’t with him. He was in Berlin when it happened, and he dodged the bullet on a fluke.”

“I would love to know all the details of that one!” George declared, “but the case isn’t spelled out in the files I could get to. But Leonard Marsh was now a marked man if he stayed in the field. He was transferred to a desk job in Washington and less than two years later he took his retirement.”

“He was no longer a young man by that time,” Anne pointed out. “Surely he was getting tired of that kind of lifestyle.”

“He certainly lasted a long time.” George stood up and excused himself to go to the bathroom.

I got up also and took our cups to the kitchen. Anne stayed in her chair, deep in thought. She was the first to speak when we were all in the sitting room again.

“Surely it is possible someone with a grudge or hatred for Leonard could have decided to take his revenge on Amelia instead.”

We all looked at each other.

“It can’t be ruled out,” I agreed. “You weren’t here, Miss Carey, or you would have heard me argue that point with the FBI. But looking at that possibility brings up so many more problems. With all of the information we’ve got now we have more and more questions. Instead of getting somewhere in this puzzle, I feel like we just find more pieces.”

“You have to admit the feds had a good point,” George spoke up. “The Marshes are old history now, and like they said, the missus probably knew very little about what her husband did. She may have never known he was a hit man. From what I’ve read and heard about this espionage business it wasn’t done, taking revenge on the family, unless you were a Nazi or within the Russian system, and then it would be to make a statement to someone else. There is no one else. Her husband is already gone.”

We discussed the possibilities for a while. None of them seemed too promising. We all agreed that if Amelia Marsh’s death was related to her husband’s profession it would take more time, effort, and research to investigate than amateurs such as ourselves could put into it, not to mention contacts. But George stuck to his opinion that no one out for revenge against Leonard Marsh from deeds done decades earlier would have tracked his wife to the mid-west to kill her. For the most part I agreed with him. What bothered me was Amelia’s almost complete break with the past when she moved to Indiana. If the past connection with covert intelligence was not the reason, what was it?

Miss Carey did not commit herself. She wanted to consider everything some more. “I will probably be awake for hours thinking about this,” she said ruefully. “Old ladies don’t usually sleep soundly all night anyway.” She beamed at both of us, “This will certainly be a change from the usual things on my mind.”

George escorted Miss Carey back to her front door and left shortly after himself. We all agreed we wanted to talk again later, but set no definite date or time, pending our own private conclusions plus the phone call I knew would eventually come from Detective David White.

I wandered aimlessly around my house and wondered if some crackpot had planted all those files about Leonard Marsh in the FBI archives. It all seemed incredible. But of course I knew we wouldn’t have tangled with agents Stoner and Hinckley because of a fabrication. They would not have been too happy to know their visit to Hanley only validated what George had discovered.

Chapter Fourteen

Detective White called me at ten a.m. the next morning. The FBI had left their calling card at nine a.m., sharp, and spent most of the next hour exchanging information with the people assigned to Amelia’s murder investigation. Officer White said it was very interesting, but his opinion was there was no connection between Leonard Marsh’s occupation and his widow’s death. With no evidence supporting such a theory his superiors agreed, making it unanimous among the law enforcement crowd. After the long conference with Anne Carey and George the night before, and thinking it all through again before going to sleep, my inclination still leaned in that direction also.

“At least,” I shared with him cautiously, “the connection would be a long shot.”

Before he could quiz me on that I went right on to tell him about Claire Marsh, and how I discovered her existence. He thought it was interesting but didn’t see any line in that direction to help him solve his murder either. He was rather droll about suggesting my friends and myself should be careful about which rocks we looked under, and hung up.

“I’m getting a little tired of people telling us Mrs. Marsh is none of our business,” I muttered out loud.

Feeling physically normal again, I went to the diner and ate enough to raise a comment from Marla. It was true I seldom ordered an omelet, and never before had I eaten the whole thing. I read an Agatha Christie mystery while eating and enjoyed it as much as I did my breakfast. Even with the cold water being dumped on us, and even if my police contact was not taking our discoveries with more than a grain of salt, that morning I wasn’t discouraged. Surprising, but one cannot always control emotional output.

It was almost noon by the time I finished loitering at the diner. There had been frost the night before, but now the sun was warm and I found my way to a solitary country road where I could hike and think. It was solitary enough for me to do some of my thinking out loud, always beneficial for me.

Later that day I called Everett and Judy back. It took awhile to catch them up on events. I spoke with Joel who reminded me we had forgotten to buy him a super hero shirt, an omission I begged his forgiveness for and promised to rectify. Judy told me Janelle had called them to chat the night before, and hinted she might stop in for a visit before she returned to Boston. We all knew better than to hold our breath. It was Ev's opinion there was something important in Amelia Marsh's past relationship with her sister-in-law, although he admitted it was impossible to know what on the information we had. He just had a feeling Claire Marsh could put some light on the pieces that were missing.

A co-worker called to ask how I was feeling. We chatted for a bit, also. She obligingly filled me in on events on the birthing unit. Since births were down for several days there was no crisis generated by my sick call. By the time she hung up my ear was tired and I was getting hungry again.

I was trying to decide what I was hungry for when the phone rang for the third time. I had a sinking feeling it was the evening supervisor at the hospital frantically looking for nurses to cover the tidal wave of laboring patients that were all showing up at the same time. The answering machine was a hair's breath away from beginning its message when I finally picked it up. My fears were groundless. Elaine Barclay was on the other end of the line.

She courteously asked about my trip home and how I was doing. I replied with the usual responses, and decided to omit the pouring rain of the end of my drive and my miserable thirty-six hours upon return.

"I'm glad you are all right," Elaine went on in her pleasant voice. "Ross and I both came down with a nasty bug Sunday night. We were hoping we didn't pass it on to you."

Fortunately she had something else on her mind, and went right on. "When Ross got home Saturday, I told him all about our conversation. We talked a long time about Mely and the past and there's something Ross remembered that may help you."

"Anything would be appreciated," I encouraged. "It is wonderful of you to take an interest and get back to me like this."

"It is only this: Claire Marsh and her daughter attended our wedding. I knew Claire had, but I didn't remember the daughter being there. Ross says he does, because he danced with her once at the reception. She was married and her husband was away on business. Now, Ross says the only reason this whole thing came back to him is because the husband went to college where he did, at Penn State, and not only that, they both majored in chemistry."

This was all very well, I thought, but hardly information that could get me anywhere in putting the pieces together of Amelia Marsh's life. But Elaine was just giving me the preliminaries.

"This is what I called to tell you," my informant went on. "Ross remembers Claire's daughter's name, too, because it is the same as his hometown. Not only was her husband a chemist and graduate of the same school, but also this woman's name was Rosamond. And married, her name was Rosamond Marsh Reed!" Elaine giggled. "When we started trying to remember things Ross came up with this. Do you remember me telling you I thought Claire might be in Richmond, Virginia because I had some recollection of her daughter living there?"

"If they do, the names you two have come up with will help me find them," I said positively. Rosamond Marsh Reed of Richmond? This whole thing was getting more incredible!

"Twenty-seven years is a long time," Elaine said unnecessarily, "but you never know. Sometimes people still do stay in the same place."

"Your husband wouldn't happen to remember Rosamond's husband's name would he?" I asked hopefully.

"I just knew you were going to ask me that," Elaine answered ruefully. "He's been agonizing over it, but he isn't sure. He thinks it was Frank or Franklin, for some reason, but that's really a guess."

"All guesses welcome," I replied cheerfully. It was tempting to tell her about the events of the week, but in the end I refrained from doing so. Without a specific reason not to, it seemed wise to keep all of the past history about Leonard Marsh within the parameters of the few people who were already involved. It was true I had extended beyond that to Everett and Judy, but my son and his wife arguably were already involved. How would Mrs. Barclay feel if she found out her surrogate uncle had been a hit man for the federal government? Perhaps it was better if she never knew. I would have to ponder that one some more.

Elaine thanked me again for personally delivering her legacy. I thanked her again for calling with more information, and invited her to do so again anytime. She was assured she would be informed if there was a break through on finding the murderer.

After she hung up I called telephone information for Richmond, Virginia, and asked if there was a listing for a Franklin or a Rosamond Reed. There wasn't.

Just before falling asleep that night I realized exactly six weeks had passed since my neighbor had met her demise. I picked up on that thought again moments after opening my eyes on Thursday morning. I lay back against my pillows and contemplated all the facts accumulated by my compadres and myself since that awful afternoon, going over bits and pieces as I had so many countless times before. One of my goals had been to learn more about Amelia Marsh and I had certainly done that.

"The only problem is," I said out loud to my silent, friendly bedroom, "the more I know, the more there seems to be to find out. It's rather like a bottomless pit."

The repair man for my dryer was due to show up any time between nine and eleven, so I pushed aside the mental files and went about the business of making myself reasonably presentable.

The dryer did need a new heating element. The service call and the part were not cheap, but I paid up gladly. Many modern conveniences do not impress me, but hanging clothes out on the line has never given me any satisfaction, even when the winter is not coming on.

The remaining part of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday passed by routinely. My mother called from Arizona to talk about the holidays. I planted all of my bulbs.

Saturday night, my first back on shift at the hospital since before my jaunt to Texas, was a busy one. It was also significant in that the nurse who floated up to the post partum unit from the surgical floor had an aunt and uncle who lived in my neighborhood. In fact, they lived directly across the street from Mrs. Marsh's residence. Well, former residence. At three in the morning during a lull in activity, she sought me out with the unsolved murder case on her mind and told me these things.

Marie was about forty, a heavy woman with long flaxen hair she wore unfashionably in braids wound around her head. Her light blue eyes were very inquisitive and her manner not especially tactful. Coming across as nosy rather than interested rather put me off, but I was nice and we struck up a conversation. It helped that all she wanted was my confirmation on facts she already knew, and my attention as she talked about the murder from her relatives' point of view. It was exciting to be so close to such a thing happening, but scary, too; didn't I think so? Nod from me. Auntie had a boxer, though a gentle dog if he wasn't startled, but good protection from intruders, so she and uncle were never too nervous. Agreement from me, protection was adequate. Plus, no one else in the neighborhood or in the county had been killed so it wasn't a serial killing type of crime, was it? Probably not, I agreed again. The police had been very courteous in their interview, uncle said. Did I think so? I did. They had come twice, always wanting to know if auntie or uncle had seen anyone hanging around Mrs. Marsh's house that day.

"Which they didn't," I filled in, tired of nodding. "Your relatives both work during the day, don't they?"

"Well, yes, they do," Marie did the agreeing this time, but I looked up sharply from the salad I had been stabbing with my fork. Was there a slight hesitation in her voice? She caught my look and smiled at me nervously. I looked back at her levelly and said nothing. An entire thirty seconds must have gone by.

"It isn't right not to tell everything you know," her voice faltered, "is it? My husband says it isn't. But I don't want to get anyone into trouble, and I don't want to get involved, either." Marie's expression turned defiant.

There were only ten minutes left to my break. I had to make it all count and get this woman to spill the beans. My heart was racing, but outwardly it was crucial to maintain serenity or Marie might scoot.

"If there is something you want to tell me," I said gently, "I will pass it on to the police without telling how I know. You must want to do that, or you wouldn't be talking to me about this." An idea cropped up. "Did you volunteer to float to ob tonight so you could talk to me?"

"Maybe," she allowed cautiously. "And how could you do that; tell the police something without telling them how you know...?" Marie was getting edgy. "Besides, they didn't know who he was."

At that moment my impatience with any and all of the worst qualities of the human race almost got the better of me. I wanted to reach over the table, grab her by the throat and yell, "How do you know that, you stupid

woman? How could you withhold information for six weeks while the authorities are expending all their energy and the tax payers' money to try and find a killer?"

If that technique would have worked or not, I will never know. It seemed doubtful at the time. Instead I drew on all of my reserve of self-control and reached across the table to lightly touch her hand.

"Marie, this must be bothering you terribly. Can you live with it? There must be a way to get the information to the police and keep you out of it. I have a pretty good rapport with the detective in charge of the case. He'll trust me."

Fat lie, I thought. Rightly so, David White does not trust me, but he would understand the deception.

More precious seconds went by. I was getting frantic, thinking the nurse keeping an eye on my patient would call me back before Marie eased her conscience. More than anything I wanted to know about what she and her relatives were withholding.

Finally she came out with it. Over the lunch hour on the day Amelia Marsh died Marie's uncle was supposed to be on a service call but he had stopped at home to take a little catnap. The man admitted to his niece he snuck home for a power nap whenever he had the chance. Just a thirty-minute snooze, Marie said, and when he got up to leave he casually took a look out of the front window. An elderly man was walking up to Mrs. Marsh's front door. The time had been about twelve-thirty.

Once she got started Marie was an open faucet. In the next four minutes I found out uncle and aunt told Marie their secret when she came on to them with the same curiosity she had extended to me. By then they were getting nervous about keeping this information to themselves and decided their not so timid niece might have some advice. Uncle's employer had reprimanded him once already for unauthorized detours home. The man was afraid he might lose his job this time. In the last full minute of our discourse Marie said the visitor looked like an older man, perhaps sixty, and wore rather formal black clothing. Since at the time he didn't know how important it would be, that was all her uncle remembered. He was quite sure he had never seen the man before.

"Don't leave this morning without getting back to me first," I ordered Marie as we both headed back to our duties. "I'll think of something."

My patient's labor pattern was stalled but she did not want any intervention, at least not yet. Since her physician was happy to sleep rather than try to coax the lady into medication to speed things up, I made the mother-to-be and her family as comfortable as possible and let things coast along. Of course this situation allowed me time to make good on what I had told Marie. Instead of joining in on the conversation going on at the nurse's station, I went into the stock room to straighten up supplies and to rack my brain. I had to figure out a way to pass on the information Marie had given me to the police without breaking my promise to her and maybe put her uncle's employment at risk.

Why I cared about saving the man's job for him I couldn't say, except Marie had taken a risk to share their secret, and that made me feel some responsibility. It seemed to me, between the three of them—or four, if Marie's husband had been informed—they could have thought of something. I did not consider myself any cleverer than average mankind.

What I was beginning to consider myself was devious. At seven-thirty, joining Marie as she walked out to the parking lot, I put forth self-assurance and control.

"Don't worry about this, and tell your aunt and uncle not to worry. After I talk to the detective in charge of the case, he'll understand. Of course he has to know about this man in black and he'll come back to talk to them, you know that can't be avoided?"

She nodded, and had nothing to say in reply. Whether she was speechless from apprehension or fatigue, I couldn't tell. Twelve-hour shifts can be rough, especially at night.

"I've been going over this ever since you told me, and I wouldn't be surprised if your uncle's employer never has to know at all. Why would he?"

"Well, uncle thought the police might want his boss to confirm his hours and where he was supposed to be." Marie wasn't totally brain dead from the long shift.

"Okay let's say that it does come out that your uncle stopped at home that day. So much time has gone by since that afternoon, who's to question why? He could have torn his shirt or forgotten something."

Marie gave me a smile and nodded at this possibility. "That is a good idea. I will talk to him tonight."

"Whatever happens," I urged, "he must tell the truth now. Who knows? If this leads to catching the killer he could be a hero. His boss couldn't argue with that, could he?"

“No,” she said slowly, but then with dismay, “but this won’t come out in the newspaper, will it?”

With reckless abandon I said, “Of course not. Not until this is solved, at least. The police won’t want to risk tipping this mystery man off.”

That made sense to Marie. Looking relieved, she left me at my car and walked over to her own.

On a normal day I can be ready to slide under the covers ten minutes after parking my car in the garage. That’s what I wanted to do. But this morning I had to decide what to do about this new revelation. It was Sunday so that complicated matters. After twenty minutes of floor pacing, the only course of action open seemed to be another consultation with Detective White. It wasn’t likely he would be on duty on a Sunday morning, but at least it would go on record I had tried to reach him promptly. The officer who took my call was someone unfamiliar, both in name and voice. He was polite. I put no urgency into it, asking him to leave a message for the detective to call me back at his earliest convenience. I was beginning to feel like a nuisance, but thought when the detective heard what I had to tell him, he would get over any annoyance he might initially have. The desk officer took my number, which was probably not necessary by this time, and did not volunteer when I might expect the return call.

For a change I left the ringer on to the bedroom extension and fell asleep at last. No one bothered me and I woke up on my own volition about five hours later. The return phone call would not come until Monday morning. In the time frame that lapsed between some other interesting facts presented themselves.

George called late in the afternoon. He caught me wrapped in a towel, my hair dripping, and he had to wait a minute while I turned my Strauss waltzes down a few decibels.

“Are you up?” he asked unnecessarily. Why do people do that? I swallowed a sarcastic reply to say simply that I was and had been for a while.

“You don’t have to work tonight, do you?” Another brilliant question.

George knew very well if I didn’t sleep all afternoon it was because I planned to go back to bed sometime again that night instead of to the hospital.

“No,” I said neutrally, “why?”

“Well, if you aren’t going to church or something, maybe you’d be free to get back up with me. In fact, I wouldn’t mind if you’d bring that sweet old lady with you, if she could come on short notice again.”

I readjusted the towels, one around my head and the other around my torso, and considered his invitation.

“Am I to understand you want a pow-wow of the vigilante committee committed to unraveling the mystery surrounding Mrs. Amelia Marsh?” Flippancy won out at last.

“Something like that,” he admitted. “I hate to say it, but you’ve got me hooked on this thing.”

“Are you saying you’ve spent your weekend on the computer following more leads?”

“Some of it. I think you ladies could help me out here.”

“Well, well. A rare thing, a man who admits he could use the expertise and brain power of not only one, but two females,” I teased.

“That’s me all over, a sensitive male,” George agreed drolly. “What about it?”

“There’s no way I can speak for Miss Carey, George, but I’m up for it. I have some news for you, too, actually. It would be a nice touch if you phoned Anne to ask her yourself. She’s the one who might have plans for tonight, church or otherwise. She’s quite a socialite. She likes you, though. If she’s free, she’ll come.”

George can be shy. He wanted me to call Anne, but I insisted he do it so he took her phone number down and said he would get back to me. Not knowing how long that would be, I took the cordless with me into the bathroom and proceeded with my toilette. Completely dried off and moisturized, I picked up the phone again on the second ring. It was Anne Carey this time. Apparently George had charm I had never observed. Her reedy little voice was cheer itself as she told me we were to meet George in an hour at his house. She had cancelled her other plans and was changing into slacks. More casual dress called for. Didn’t I think so? That nice Mr. Thomas was providing a light supper, and would I like to drive or should she?

“Honestly,” I said out loud after she hung up, “what in the world have I started?”

We were twenty minutes late. More surprises. George’s light supper was a very respectable chef’s salad and a loaf of French bread. What a relief, no pizza and no fried chicken.

“How did you put this together on such short notice?” I was curious.

“I took the chance you would accept my invitation,” said George. “If you hadn’t come I’d be eating this myself for the next three nights.”

We sat down to eat before adjourning to his computer room, and between bites I shocked them both with my story of Marie and her revelation. I admit in the hours since she had come to me, I had wondered a couple of times about the authenticity of Marie's tale, but neither of my companions seemed to have a moment's doubt. In fact Anne triumphantly verified the story. She had seen the appliance van in the driveway across from Amelia Marsh's own drive on at least two prior occasions.

"But not on that Wednesday," she clarified. "I was out to lunch that day."

When George wondered out loud why the neighbor didn't put his company van in the garage out of sight, Anne knew the answer.

"It looks too high to fit," she said.

"But no one else saw him come home that day," George said thoughtfully, buttering himself another piece of bread.

"Not a surprise," I answered, and Anne nodded in agreement. "The office is around the corner, and the way Barry's desk is situated he doesn't have much of a view anyway. I was asleep, and everyone else was at work, the very reason no one saw anything."

"Marie's uncle may have noticed how deserted the street is mid-day." I added. "One reason he feels safe to sneak his little cat naps when he's not too far from home."

"Did he see the man come out again?" Anne asked this.

"No, he didn't. He was on his way out himself as the mystery person walked up the driveway. Marie says he didn't even see Amelia answer the door."

"Does this shy neighbor of yours have a name by any chance?" George asked wryly, "Or do we call him 'x' or something?"

"I think we'll call the man in the black suit 'x'," I said, "but I am ashamed to admit Marie just called him 'uncle' and I went with that. I knew it would be no trouble to find out. You are such a great source of facts, Miss Carey, do you happen to know?"

She thought about that for a moment. "I think the last name is Reiman," she said with a little hesitation, "but I don't know their first names. They moved in last summer." She looked at me, "What are you going to do about this, Sally? You can't keep it to yourself."

"Of course not. I've already put in a call to my contact at the police department. He'll probably get my message tomorrow. I didn't make it urgent."

"After hearing from the FBI last week, this guy probably wonders how you could beat that one," George commented with a grin.

"He should be working doubly hard to solve this just to be done with me," I agreed without offense, "but what do you make of this unknown man coming to see Mrs. Marsh?"

"Dressed in a black suit, sort of elderly," George reiterated slowly. "That still leaves it pretty wide open."

"But it is very likely this is the person who killed her," Anne Carey added somberly. "The timing is right, and you knocked on her door an hour and a half later getting no answer, Sally. I know some elderly men, of course. Amelia did, too, but none of them are in the habit of wearing dress clothes in the middle of the week unless they're attending a funeral."

"I suppose it is possible this Mr. X knows about the murder, didn't do it, and is afraid he'll be blamed because of the timing," I theorized, but added practically, "but that's not very probable."

"We have to consider another possibility," George put forth. "If 'x' doesn't live nearby and he didn't hear it on the news, he may not know Mrs. Marsh was killed that day. Maybe the guy had a perfectly legitimate reason to come and see her, left her alive, and has no idea what happened."

"Possible, but again not likely," was my take on that.

George and Anne agreed. All three of us thought Marie's uncle saw Amelia's murderer approaching her front door at twelve-thirty. This was some real progress. We could only hope the investigating officers could get some more crucial information when they interviewed him personally.

"Marie didn't say anything about a vehicle," I remembered in retrospect. "I wonder how he came."

Because we were both familiar with the layout of the housing complex Miss Carey and I knew Amelia's caller could park his car a lot of places without being noticed. There was some public parking for visitors near the office, and again Barry could have missed it. The park was nearby. In their extensive interviews of the residents of The Hedges, the police found no one who could give them a decent description of an unknown

vehicle. If there were any inquisitive elderly invalids who watched the streets, none of them had been at their windows that day. Anne knew this from her contacts, and I knew it from my conversations with Detective White.

“If this lead cracks the case, there won’t be much use for what I’ve got,” George said as we helped him clear the table. We ladies told him we still wanted to know what he had, and form our own opinion on that.

George had moved an extra chair into his office in deference for his guests, which made things a bit cozy, but not impossible. He set his own weight into the well-worn office chair in front of his computer and got down to the business at hand.

“Wednesday while I was working, I remembered one of Robin’s friends has a father who works for the feds, immigration or something. We met once at a parents’ weekend at the college.”

Here I explained to Anne who Robin was. George apologized for not making himself clear and went on.

“One thing led to another, and I got up with him pretty late Wednesday night. We talked for awhile, and eventually I told him quite a bit about our situation here, trying to find out past history on this couple, and about our run in with the FBI. I hope it was okay to fill him in.”

“How could you not?” I reassured him.

George went on. His acquaintance knew a longtime federal employee who kept track of statistics and logistics in Washington. He would do some checking on his own, he promised, and if possible have this man, a Dennis Chenowski, get in touch with George. Dennis had done just that, on Friday night, and the two of them hit it off. After a long conversation, Dennis promised to see what he could do. It was clear he had the credentials to access files George could not, and to do so without the alarms going off that could earn us another visit from Stoner and Hinckley. Dennis admitted both he and the other agent had done a little checking on George and myself first. In Dennis’ case, that included reading the report submitted on us by none other than the federal agents just mentioned. Not being too alarmed by that, and not getting any negative vibes by his chat with George, he had taken some of his own time on Saturday to look up what George wanted to know. He called back Sunday afternoon and what he had to say sent George to the telephone asking Anne and myself to come and see him.

“Just what was it you asked Mr. Chenowski to find out?” Anne asked politely when George stopped talking.

“It seems you ladies are drawing a lot of blanks about your deceased friend,” George responded promptly. “This guy was able to dig up quite a lot, oh excuse me, poor choice of words.”

To my amazement, George turned bright red and was stammering like a schoolboy. Miss Carey reverted to her years of professional teaching finesse and reassured him, while I lowered my head to hide a smile. “Do go on, George,” she urged.

“So, I asked him if there was a way to learn more about the Marshes while they were in England during the war,” he continued, mollified, “and he said he would be glad to try. That’s what he did yesterday, I guess, which was a big surprise to me. I didn’t expect to hear from the guy for a while.”

“He must have found out something interesting,” I observed, getting a little impatient. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have brought us over here.”

“Yeah, he did,” George continued, refusing to be rushed. I thought this business was giving him many opportunities to be the center of attention, maybe one reason he was enjoying it. He pulled a legal pad out from under his keyboard as I made my comment, and now he consulted it

“Some of this we already knew. Three things stand out that we didn’t. First, the Marshes were married in April alright, in London, by an army military chaplain, and the ceremony is on record in the Marsh file, but the funny part is, there is no civil document to back it up.”

“What?” I said after Anne and I ingested this for a few seconds, “are you trying to say the Marshes weren’t legally married?”

George shrugged. “Who can say for sure? Dennis says there was a notation that Leonard would present the civil document as soon as he returned from an emergency trip to France. His excuse for the delay was there had been a glitch in the wording and it had been resubmitted to the appropriate civil magistrate for correction.”

Anne’s brow was creased in a frown as she listened. She brightened as her memories surfaced. “Amelia talked about her wedding to Leonard once or twice. I was interested, it being one of those wartime weddings, you know. She said it was decided upon and done quickly, like so many were. They fitted it in between

Leonard's duties. She mentioned the chaplain, who was a friend, and performed the ceremony for them on about twenty-four hours notice."

"It's possible the civil document was misplaced," I said slowly, "but it is interesting. What else have you got?"

"It's more interesting when you know fact number three," George commented, "but first, fact number two. There was a file on Mrs. Marsh, too, not only because of her spouse's profession, but because before they married she was doing secretarial work that required security clearance. That was on file with the Brits, and when she became Mrs. Leonard Marsh they just incorporated it into her husband's dossier. Now, there's still a note in the dossier that says a portion of that information disappeared. The note is dated 1947. Some agent was assigned to look into it, and there's a note from him, too, dated 1948. The gist of it is, there was a tremendous amount of work to be done, and looking into Leonard's wife's past was not considered all that important, especially since by then they had been married almost two years and she had already passed a security check during the war. The agent did a superficial investigation into her London years, interviewed a sister, and was assigned to more pressing matters." George stopped for a breath, and then added, "Oh, and in case you're wondering, Amelia Marsh's file with the British is gone, too. That's in the 1947 note, and one reason it was looked into at all."

I let out a heavy sigh. "Can this get anymore complicated? But how can we tie all this together? Maybe it doesn't. Surely in all of the confusion and vast paperwork network of World War II, many facts like this got lost."

"Maybe," George allowed, "but here's one fact that didn't. When Dennis pulled the Marsh file out of the archives, the information about his death and bequeaths were listed first, prior to his biography and career record. He noticed something else he thought we might like to know. Amelia Marsh received a pension from her husband's service for the rest of her life. But the recipient of his life insurance policy was a lady named Rosamond Marsh Reed."

Chapter Fifteen

We digested that bombshell for a while. The inference was, of course, that perhaps Leonard had been married to Claire Marsh at one time, and certainly that Rosamond was his daughter. But he had to have divorced Claire, if indeed they ever had been married, in order for his brother to marry her. It was more plausible to suppose Rosamond was Leonard's child out of wedlock, and his brother Arthur had married her after the conception. George pointed out the obvious, that this was the only explanation for only one of Claire's children being on the receiving end of the life insurance. This revelation could explain what Elaine Barclay had alluded to, that during the last years of their marriage there had been hurt between Leonard and Amelia. It might also explain why Amelia decided to leave New Jersey and join her friend June in the Midwest. It still did not explain murder.

While we fretted over the whole thing, I made the decaf coffee and went back to the kitchen to pour and to serve. Anne declined tea and joined George and I in a mug of the brew. It was probable George had been indulging over the weekend, as he offered no dessert. That was fine with me. I had eaten a blueberry pancake when I got out of bed.

Studying the steam rising from her cup, Anne mused, "If only there was a way to talk with Claire Marsh, if she's still alive. She should have some answers."

"Have you tried to find her?" George asked casually.

"Not really," I admitted. I told them about my unsuccessful attempt to find a phone listing for Claire's daughter and her husband. "After all this time it seemed unlikely Claire would have her own phone number even if she still lived in Richmond."

George swiveled in his chair and put his own coffee mug down. "There's no harm in trying," he said philosophically.

And darn it all, if ten minutes later he hadn't come up with a phone number in Richmond, Virginia, for a Mrs. Claire Marsh.

Since it was between nine-thirty and ten out east, and our Claire Marsh had to be about eighty, it was unanimous: the phone call would have to wait until the following day. It was a hard pill to swallow. We were all dying to know if this was our woman. My suggestion was that Anne makes the phone call, and George seconded the motion. With just a little bit of protest, her initial idea being I should do it, Miss Carey came around to our way of thinking.

“But we really must get together again soon,” she urged. “I could phone to let each of you know what happens with my effort to locate Amelia’s sister-in-law, but Sally should have more to tell us after she talks to the detective again.”

We came to a mutual decision that I would call Anne, then George, early Monday evening. We would exchange any new developments and go from there.

Our coffee was gone. Anne and I refused refills, and in mutual accord got up to leave. That was postponed for about fifteen minutes as George took Anne out to the backyard to meet the animals, and I quickly stacked the dishes in the dishwasher. We thanked George for a nice supper and an interesting evening.

“You’re welcome,” he said cheerfully, standing out on the front porch as we got into my car, and going inside only after we had started off.

“Such a nice man,” observed Anne, giving me a sidelong glance.

“Yes, he is,” I agreed. I told her briefly how George and I came to know each other.

“Any chance of a romance in your future?” she asked coyly when I stopped talking.

“Slim and none,” I retorted. In the silence that followed this pronouncement I was afraid I had offended Miss Carey with my abruptness so I added, “I just don’t think of George that way.”

“Maybe you don’t,” was her response, with an emphasis on the “you”.

Trying to keep the tone of my voice light I responded, “And what is that supposed to mean?”

She chortled. “Now don’t mind an old lady’s observations. I just think George is very fond of you.”

“We’re friends,” I said firmly. This was not a line of discussion I wanted to pursue but Anne was not easily diverted.

“Haven’t you noticed that very few men are able to be alone? In the movies and novels single men abound, but in real life most men seem to need someone. The solitary life is far more common with women.”

I agreed with her, albeit conditionally, as I knew several women who at least thought they couldn’t survive without male companionship.

“And since you have opened the subject matter,” it was an ideal moment to turn the tables on my companion and we still had about ten more miles to her driveway, “have you never considered marriage?”

“Oh yes, twice,” Anne answered readily.

When she didn’t go on I continued boldly, “Care to share? Do you mind talking about it?”

She chuckled. “No, not at all. It was years ago and no one has asked for a very long time. Amelia did, when we were first getting to know each other.”

The night was quiet and the road almost deserted. Our vehicle hummed along in the dark and I listened intently. She seemed to sense my interest and talked easily.

“There was a boy I grew up with, and by the time I finished high school we had an understanding. His parents had managed to send him on to a two-year business college, and we were going to announce our engagement when he graduated. But, the war came, you know, to us too. He was drafted and sent to the Pacific theatre.”

It was rude to interrupt, but I was caught up in what I thought she was going to say. “Oh, no, he was killed?”

“No,” Miss Carey replied calmly, “he was wounded, and while recovering in Hawaii he fell in love with his nurse.”

“That must have been awful for you.”

“Well, yes it was,” she allowed, “but time heals. A maiden aunt thought the best anecdote for me was to continue my own education, and she was right. With her financial aid I went on to college myself. Later I realized we were probably not as well suited as we might have been, and it was all for the best.”

There was a minute of easy silence between us before I ventured, “And the second time?”

“The second time I considered marriage, I was almost thirty. There was a man at the church I was attending at the time, a widower with three children. He had a good farm and he was a charming man.” Miss Carey

twittered self-consciously. "I was always too thin and my nose too long, and his attention made me feel so attractive. To tell you the truth, Sally, I always wondered what he saw in me."

"You are too hard on yourself," I protested sincerely. "I have seen photographs of many women in those days who were thin with prominent noses on the arm of a good looking guy. Besides, you have fine eyes and a great smile. I looked at the pictures you have hanging on your wall when we had dinner together so I know what you looked like when you were younger. What happened?"

"He courted me for over a year and we did care for each other. We talked about getting married. But there were problems and eventually, we drifted apart."

It was natural, at least for me, to want to ask what those problems were. It was on the tip of my tongue to do that, but I bit it, and stayed silent. If Anne Carey wanted to share the details she would.

"So," she went on after a couple of minutes, "I remained single. But it's been a good life. I've had many good times and teaching was what I was born for, I think. Not every one can say they found their calling in life."

The world would be a far better place, I thought, if everyone had my friend's outlook. Before Anne pulled out of her reminiscence we were home, and the subject of how George and I felt about each other was not again, thankfully, broached.

It would be appropriate to say that Monday morning all hell broke loose. There is no better way of putting it. Detective Sergeant David White called me promptly at nine o'clock. After a few seconds of listening to what I had to say he abruptly cut me off, saying it would be better to hear it face to face. Okay, that was fine. Should I come to the station again? No, he would come to the house, and I should expect him in twenty minutes. I was already dressed and could see going out for breakfast might not happen. I ate a bowl of stale cereal, nursed some orange juice, and put the coffee on to brew.

The good officer arrived in eighteen minutes, his demeanor totally professional. I was wondering if he would even accept a cup of java, but he did. We sat down across from each other at my dining room table.

"Start again," he commanded, "with what you were telling me on the phone."

So I repeated my entire conversation with Marie, carefully keeping it as close to what had actually been said on Saturday night as I could without having the advantage of a photographic memory. It sounded presumptuous now, but there was no choice but to also admit the promise I made to Marie before we parted company Sunday morning, to protect her uncle.

My usually friendly police contact listened to my entire narrative with no expression on his face, no response. It was unnerving. Whatever I had expected, that was not it. Finally he asked me some specifics about Marie herself, but I couldn't help him very much there, I hardly knew her. I suggested he call the personnel department at the hospital, or ask her aunt and uncle.

"Why do I get the feeling you don't believe me?" I queried. "My story is fantastic, I grant you, but it's easy enough to check out."

"Why have you waited so long to report this?" he asked in return, rather than answer me.

"Was I supposed to find out where you live and walk up to your front door?" my turn for a question. I admit I was defensive. "I called the police department, as you know. The officer on duty was not familiar to me, and I had no idea how familiar he is with Mrs. Marsh's case. He did not indicate you were reachable, and it seemed best to wait until I could get up with you personally. This man has been sitting on this information for weeks. What is one more day?"

"That is not for you to decide," he shot back sternly. "You should have reported all of this yesterday morning, as soon as you found out."

"Well excuse me!" I shot back. "Since this is my first time to be mixed up in a murder, I am not quite up on protocol. Next time I'll do better."

We glared at each other for about five seconds. David White shifted in his chair and said with a sigh, "How about a refill on the coffee while I make a phone call?"

I got up and brought the pot, filling both of our cups while he used my telephone. He spoke softly and I made a point of trying not to hear what he said. Five minutes later he continued his lecture.

"How is it that you are always right in the middle of this?" he demanded. "Every time I turn around you've come up with some new piece of information, or an idea. I thought we had reached the limit when those two feds were standing in my office last week, but now this!"

We looked each other straight in the eye and I wondered if now was the right time to confront him with some questions of my own. Deciding to go for it, knowing full well acting on emotional impulse could be a mistake, I replied, "Yes, I have been right in the middle of this all along, haven't I? And you encouraged that at first. You know, on the day I sat in your office after we went through Mrs. Marsh's personal effects, you were just so patient listening to me, making time for an interested neighbor of the deceased. At first I thought what a considerate policeman you were, which is just what a middle-aged widow is supposed to think, isn't it? But somewhere in the back of my mind it bothered me. Just because we met before and I was the nurse at the birth of your daughter did not explain your encouragement, did it?"

Now I paused, but my eyes still held his, as they do my son's when I am making a point and not to be put off. David White did not look away, but his gaze flickered and he grimaced.

It was too good an opportunity not to carry the ball straight through. "I've been a suspect right along, haven't I?"

Giving him time to take another swallow of coffee and collect his thoughts, I followed, "Now do you want me down at the station?"

"No," he answered shortly. Fifteen seconds of silence, another shift in the chair, and another sigh.

"Okay," he said finally, "here it is. You were the person she was expecting that Wednesday, and the door was wide open. You were the one who summoned the manager, and who with him discovered the body. That made you a suspect immediately. Your history and your personality lowered the odds considerably, meaning you have been up to now in your life a respectable member of society with no history of mental instability, and so on. But there was the matter of your husband's death."

My eyebrows did a lift, and the expression on my face was indicative of the surprise he had just given me. "My husband's death?" I echoed.

He nodded. "After a long and happy marriage you lost him suddenly. That can unbalance some people." He put up a hand to stop any flow out of my mouth. "Let me go on. None of our inquiries supported the theory you might have gone off the deep end. But we found out before you did what Amelia Marsh's history was, and her husband's clandestine occupation. Your husband had been a career military officer. Leonard Marsh was a covert agent for the military and some of his assignments were to do things you might have found, well, shocking. It was possible she had confided in you and you might have some twisted resentments about what he had done, and what your husband stood for."

"That seems pretty far fetched," I objected, when he paused a second.

"I agree," David White said, "but I'm not the only person working on this. All possibilities have to be considered. Two days after the murder you were pretty well excluded. After we met with the lawyers at her house and found those things missing, you were back in again. How many people could have taken those missing items and gotten away with it?" He held up a hand again to keep me quiet. "If Miss Carey hadn't mentioned the planner, it would never have been missed. Then you bring up the missing Bible, but only after she started us looking for missing items again. Chances are someone would have told us about the Bible eventually, anyway."

Once again I got to talk. "Why haven't you searched this house?"

He had an answer for everything. "Because we didn't want you to know you were suspect. By that time you could have gotten rid of everything, and then you would have known you were being considered. I can tell you, Sally, that from the very beginning I've been sure you didn't do it. But as far as the whole investigation goes, every time we're about to cross you off the list, you go and do some crazy cockeyed thing."

"Oh? Like what? I didn't invite Marie to sit down and confide in me."

"Like wanting to take the jewelry to Texas."

That gave me pause. "The police found something suspicious about that? The police could only have known if they got a call from the law office."

"They did. Mr. Bedeman was told to contact us immediately if anyone asked about Mrs. Marsh's affairs."

"It did occur to me they were mighty congenial about letting me be the courier. That was one of the things that made me wonder. I thought I would have to do some hard selling to convince them. But honestly, I know I'm not objective about this, but surely I haven't given the impression of being the kind of unstable person who would throttle my neighbor? There is nothing in my past, even grieving about Michael, that lends itself to that."

“No,” he agreed. “That’s my point. There is no reason to think you did it, except you keep coming up with stuff.” He eyed me contemplatively. “The feeling is, maybe you are coming up with all these ideas to make sure the scent is off of you.”

It was not a nice thing to realize there were people in the law enforcement community who suspected I was a nut, and a homicidal one at that.

“You know,” I said deliberately, “why I am interested in this, and Anne Carey, too? Along the way we have sucked my friend George Thomas in. By your own admission, the police don’t think there is any link between Amelia Marsh’s past and her death. I have always thought otherwise.” Now I put up my hand to stop him from interrupting. “There’s no tangible reason for it, it’s just a feeling, and it gets stronger the deeper I go.”

No reply. David White folded his arms and lowered his head to his chest.

I let him think for a short time, then asked, “What now?”

He pushed his cup away and slowly got to his feet. Not wanting to look up at him, I got up too.

“Your correct assumption doesn’t change much,” he said, reaching for his hat. “I’m picking up a partner, and we’ll go find Mr. Reiman and take him to lunch.” He added, rather sarcastically, I thought, “We’ll try to be gentle with him.”

“Will I find out what he says?”

Detective White thought that one way or another, I would.

Before the afternoon was over not only Mr. Reiman had been questioned—his first name was Henry—but his wife and Marie as well. I was summoned over to the Reiman’s home about one, and guessed the unhappy man had been forced to take the afternoon off, perhaps as punishment for holding out on the police. All three of them glared at me when I walked in the front door, held open for me by a uniformed policewoman, the same one I had seen on two other occasions. Her look was polite and noncommittal. This was not a pleasant day at all, first being chastised by my formerly friendly contact with the law, and now considered an enemy by the Reimans.

Detective White asked me to repeat what Marie told me, ergo what I had told him. Then I was excused. Before leaving I looked at Marie and told her I was sorry for any problems caused because she confided in me, but there was no help for it. A murderer had to be caught. No answer, just another dirty look. In retrospect, I can say Mr. Reiman did not lose his job or lose too much dignity, and Marie never worked on the maternity ward again, so we never had to try very hard to avoid each other. It took several weeks, but the Reimans eventually got over their offense enough to wave if we saw each other.

Feeling depressed, I dusted, vacuumed, and scrubbed my kitchen floor, trying hard not to think too much about anything. But a replay of the confrontation with the neighbors kept coming back to mind. Henry Reiman was a thin, middle-aged man with thinning brown hair. He told the very same story his niece told me, and although he had to repeat it several times he was consistent, and perhaps, although not admittedly, relieved to finally get rid of his secret. Mrs. Helen Reiman was an older version of Marie, which told me her sister was Marie’s mother. She totally corroborated everything her husband said, meaning she got the same story from him Wednesday evening when she got home.

There weren’t as many details as the police or I would have liked there to be. Mr. Reiman never saw the front of the mystery man. I wondered if all of the elderly men Amelia had known would be dressed up in black suits and paraded before poor Henry. I hoped all of them had an alibi for that afternoon.

I was off the hook. Marie had come to me with her story, it was authentic and provided a clue for the investigation. I should have felt vindicated, smug even. Again, emotions are not easy to decipher. It was not pleasant to be considered a murder suspect, even if not a very plausible one. Maybe it was a bad idea to force the detective sergeant’s hand. As a non-verbalized possibility it was easier to swallow than a hard fact.

Feeling blue did not make me forget about Anne Carey’s assignment. By five o’clock I was restless, eager to hear what she had to say. It was as bad as being a teenager and waiting for that certain boy to call you. At exactly five-thirty one I dialed my elderly friend’s number. She answered on the second ring.

“I am nothing if not prompt and to the point,” I said after she greeted me with her usual cheer. “What happened?”

“She was home,” Anne took up my cue and didn’t waste words. “I caught her just getting home so that was fortunate. A younger woman answered. She’s a great-niece. The young woman had nice manners, and she must

have taken me for a friend. She put her aunt on right away. Well, this Mrs. Marsh was surprised, I can tell you! She never questioned who I was.”

“What did she tell you?” Might as well get right to the quick.

“Well,” and here Miss Carey’s voice wavered, “she told me she was definitely the Claire Marsh we were looking for. Of course then I had little choice but to be the bearer of the bad tidings again, and that took a bit of time.”

“How did she take it?”

“She seemed to take it alright, not getting hysterical or anything. I don’t think she’s the hysterical type. At first she didn’t say anything, then she said she was very sorry. After that she asked how I found her, and I said we tried the Richmond phone directory, which was the truth. She didn’t ask how we knew she lived in Richmond.”

“And then?”

“Well,” she hesitated again, “well, that’s about it.”

“Oh.” I was at a loss. If it had been George I was talking to, I might have harangued him for not getting more information, but one really could not do that with a lady in her seventies, no matter how sharp she was.

Miss Carey spoke again. “She was very polite, and she thanked me for taking the trouble to let her know, but then she cut me off, really. When I called the Barclays they wanted to keep talking, so I guess I thought it would be the same this time. I wasn’t prepared when she ended our call like she did.”

The disappointment in her tone was unmistakable. “Please don’t be disappointed in yourself,” I soothed, “you did great. At least she talked to you. It was presumptuous of us to think she would bare her soul to some stranger. It was a shock to her, too. We don’t know what state her health is in.”

“Yes,” my partner seemed partially mollified, “but where do we go from here? We need the knowledge she may have to continue this.”

“That’s a good question,” I returned, “and I, for one, need some time to think about it.”

“But what about your day?” Anne countered. “How did you do, giving your new information to that Detective White?”

I told her all about it.

The end of that scenario was both of us consoling each other for a while, and then trying to decide who was going to call George and tell him everything. We were both in favor of the other party going it. In the end I gave in and agreed to make the call. Anne did offer to come over and be with me while I called, so we could sort of do it as a team, but when pressed admitted she had somewhere she was supposed to be at six-thirty. I let her off the hook and promised to be in touch again sometime on Tuesday.

When I got a hold of George half an hour later, he had just walked in the door. By that time I had decided to ask him out to dinner.

“I am seeing far too much of you,” I told him, “and Miss Carey, among others, may start to get the wrong idea. But I’m hungry and it will take awhile to tell you everything.”

“My secret crush is Miss Carey,” he confessed, “but you will do. Never mind who’s taking who to dinner. I’ll wash up and be at your place in half an hour. You decide where you want to eat, but for Pete’s sake make it casual. I’m not taking the time to change more than my shirt.”

I could not recall George and I ever eating anywhere together a step above casual, but hanging up the phone, I already felt better than I had since getting out of bed that morning. Looking down at the jeans and tee shirt I had been cleaning in, I hustled off to the bedroom to do some cleaning up of my own. Casual is one thing. Grunge is another.

Chapter Sixteen

Six days later I was on a plane bound for Baltimore. There I would pick up a rental car and head for Richmond, Virginia. The idea began to present itself while I was explaining all of the Monday happenings to George over lasagna and garlic bread.

During the salad I politely asked him about his own day. At the time it was rather interesting. Now I don’t recall what it was all about. When he finished he said, as expected, “your turn.”

It was easier to eat and tell him about Anne Carey's conversation with Claire Marsh, than to start in on my own ordeal, as her experience was more straightforward. George nodded noncommittally, asking no questions and expressing no opinions. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, thinking he would have to mull over the situation before giving up any ideas.

Over coffee I told him about my own day. George's eyebrows went up a notch, but again he just listened. It was very tempting to prod him a little, but I resisted the urge and quietly enjoyed my drink when I was through.

"We had it right the first time," he said at last, after the waitress had given us both a refill.

"We did?" I said blankly.

"Yup. Don't you remember? The night the old lady died, we ate together and wondered if you were a suspect."

"Small comfort," I retorted rather bitterly.

"You're in the clear now," he pointed out.

"I think I am. The authorities are probably trying to find out for sure if I set up the neighbors to plant that story."

"Stop being so negative," George reproved me. "The story is true and they know it. Whether or not they find the guy is another thing, but he's real alright."

We sat in more comfortable silence.

George spoke again. "What do you think Mrs. Claire Marsh knows that can help?"

After further thought I replied, "I think she has some more pieces of the puzzle." It was then plans for another personal interview started taking shape. I asked George if he thought the man who had killed Amelia was someone who she knew from her recent life, or someone from her past. He said his guess was someone from the past.

"But heavens knows how it all comes together," he added.

"George," I asked him, "why do you suppose Inspector White came to the funeral?"

He looked at me quizzically. The question was out of left field.

"Maybe he thought it is like arson," he answered after consideration, "you know, the guy who sets the fire liking to be around to see the response. What do you think?"

"That your assumption is a valid one. And, I think they checked every person out who was there, which includes me, of course. You'll notice that angle didn't give them an arrest."

"Very good reasoning," George approved. "Circumstantial maybe, but still, evidence our conclusion, this guy is an unknown, is right."

"Do they have cheesecake here?" I asked him. We were at a small Italian/American diner that had only been open a few months. It was my first visit.

It was possible to visibly see his mind change gears again, but he swallowed the complaint he was going to make about females always jumping from subject to subject and said he thought they did. But George had been here before and eaten their fried ice cream. It was delicious. Couldn't we have that? He knew I wanted to share dessert.

"Okay, fried ice cream. While we eat it I'll tell you what I want to do next. Did you know I haven't had a vacation in over two years?"

Getting to leave in less than a week was a bonus. My expectation was the preparations would take at least two, but everything fell into place. Early Tuesday morning I called the staffing co-coordinator, asking what my chances were of taking some time off with the understanding I would return before Thanksgiving. She said no one else was going to be on vacation, and only one person, not on my shift, was out on medical leave. You wouldn't think anyone would want time off in early November, but that wasn't always true. I asked what the chances were of covering my hours already scheduled. She would check with my charge nurse and call me back.

Two hours later the call came, but from Terry Babcock, my supervisor on the obstetrical unit. She was personable and not a bad boss, but we had never gotten to know each other, probably because she took her position just four weeks before I became a widow. I buried myself on the graveyard shift after that. We saw each other at staff meetings and training sessions.

Terry gave me her blessing for up to three weeks of vacation time saying it was definitely my turn, never mind the short notice. Gratiated, I thanked her, and asked if I should get back with staffing.

“Just send in a written request as soon as you can,” Terry answered. “Plenty of people want to work a little extra for holiday shopping, and you’ll be covered.” We agreed I would work my scheduled hours the next two nights, Wednesday and Thursday, before starting my leave.

It crossed my mind after I hung up that the last time my plans had come together so smoothly was arranging with the law firm my trip to Texas. That had turned out to be a set up job. Further consideration convinced me this was unlikely now, but even if it were, what difference did it make? If this trip to Virginia was as profitable as the one to Texas had been, it was worth the time and money.

With that hurdle behind me I spent the rest of Tuesday and much of Wednesday making arrangements to be away for an extended time period. There was also the matter of booking my flight, a rental car, and informing my children what I was up to. That took a bit of doing with Janelle, who until then had no idea her mother was involved in a murder. In order to explain a trip out east, a trip out east not to visit my daughter, I had to tell her the whole story. Well, most of the story. Even now I glossed over the police’s suspicions about yours truly.

Janelle was still in Chicago with three weeks to go. I caught her Tuesday night in her hotel room, munching a dinner she had ordered from room service. It took over an hour to bring her up to date on events and the reason I would be away from home for up to three weeks. She was amazed, but reasonable. I promised to be back in touch from Virginia. Not a word was said about Robert.

Speaking with Everett gave me the opportunity to ask him if Joel had received the two shirts I sent him, size 4, with Batman decals. He had, that very day, and was asleep in one of them. Judy intended to call me Wednesday morning to let him say thank you, and so they did. But Tuesday night after finishing with Janelle I had no time left for a great deal of other subject matter. It took time to get them caught up. I skipped over my confrontation with Detective White with Everett, too, but left nothing else out. Judy and Everett were both enthusiastic and supportive about my plans. Everett stuck with his theory Amelia’s sister-in-law could be a gold mine. Another promise made to call from Richmond, so I mentally added the cost of long distance phone calls to my travel budget.

George and Anne insisted on driving me to Louisville on Sunday morning to catch my flight. I admit it was a relief not to worry about transportation to the airport. We had a pleasant breakfast in route, and chatted amicably about a number of things, none of them pertaining to the reason for my journey. Only during the hour wait until boarding time did we discuss possibilities. Again I promised phone calls to keep them current. They knew it was possible I would go from Richmond to New Jersey, depending on what I could learn from Claire Marsh.

As the plane left the runway I opened the card Anne Carey had pressed into my hand as she gave me a goodbye hug, instructing me in her best school teacher manner not to look at it until I was on my way. It was a five by seven greeting card with a bright, pretty Audubon scene on the front. Inside she had written:

“Sally, George and I will be with you in our thoughts and prayers, since we can’t go along. But it is not right for you to foot all of the expense. We are a team, you know! May this be a good adventure, and a profitable one! Love, Anne.”

Two large bills fell out into my lap when I opened the note.

It was late by the time I collected my luggage, my rental car, a nice sedan, and checked into my hotel. I was happy everything had gone smoothly, including the flight change in New York and the two-hour drive from the air terminal to Richmond. A few minutes past midnight I sunk down into a soft and fairly comfortable bed and was asleep almost at once. My reservations were for two nights so a check out time was an issue. I slept until two people laughing in the corridor outside my door aroused me. It was after eight.

Turning over, I considered how to approach Mrs. Claire Marsh. Her phone number was in my daily planner. Was it too early to try to call her now, and what was the best way to go about asking for an appointment? I had considered this the day before on the flight, and had not come up with any concrete plan of action. It might be too early. The call would wait. I showered, dressed, and went downstairs to the hotel café for breakfast with plenty of reading materials in hand.

It was after ten when I returned to my room and made the phone call. No answer, and no answering machine. What now? I was in no mood to do any sight seeing or shopping, with my mind entirely focused on the problem at hand. It was a possibility the lady I had come all this way to see was out for the day, or was even out of town

for some reason. If so, this leg of my journey had been wasted, but it was a chance I had taken deliberately, so the object of my enquiry would not have too much time to think about our encounter.

I unpacked all of the notes taken down since Amelia Marsh's death and organized them on the desk in my room. It was too early to call anyone back home, and there was nothing to tell them except here I was. Aimlessly I channel surfed on the television and watched thirty minutes go by before re-dialing; still no answer. I left the room, took a stroll around the hotel lobby, the indoor pool, and the gift shop. Returning to my room I checked the forecast on the weather channel; cool and partly cloudy. At exactly eleven-thirty I again dialed the number I now knew by heart, and this time someone answered.

The voice on the other end of the line was an elderly voice, clearly understood but with a slight quiver. My heart skipped a beat. Contact at last, so proceed cautiously Sally, you don't want to mess this up.

"Mrs. Claire Marsh?" I asked pleasantly.

"Yes," she hesitated just a little; probably afraid I was a solicitor.

"My name is Sally Nimitz, Mrs. Marsh," I plunged ahead, "we have never met, but I am from Hanley, Indiana, and I was a neighbor of Amelia Marsh. Please forgive me for intruding like this. You spoke to Anne Carey the other night, and she kindly gave me your phone number."

"I remember the call," the lady said quietly. "How is it you are here in Richmond, Mrs. Nimitz? Are you a Mrs.?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's right. I am a widow." Not only was this true, it sounded so respectable. My heart was thumping. "I came here just to see you, Mrs. Marsh, if you will allow me to."

There was a six second pause at the other end of the line. "I haven't seen Amelia in many years. Why on earth would you come all this way to see me about her?" The voice was still very controlled and quiet.

"That's rather a complicated issue, and probably better addressed in person," I answered. "I realize I am a stranger to you, and you would be understandably hesitant to allow me to come to see you. Would you consider coming here to see me? I am staying at The Richmond Inn, and would gladly send a taxi for you. We can meet each other in the lobby or the coffee shop."

There was a longer pause. It was hard to keep silent, but it seemed prudent. Finally she replied. "You are alone, then?"

"Yes."

A few more seconds. "My niece will be here later this afternoon. I see no reason why you shouldn't come here then. I admit I am curious as to why you have made this journey. I hope this isn't a mistake."

"Mrs. Marsh," I said earnestly, "I am a forty-nine-year-old widow, a registered nurse, and a grandmother. My purpose in coming here is totally honorable."

Did I detect a little chuckle? "Alright, Mrs. Nimitz. I will take a chance. Do you know where I live, and how to get here?"

We settled that, and agreed on a time for our meeting, three-thirty. Hanging up the phone I did a gleeful little jig around the bed. "Claire Marsh," I chortled. "You have some of the answers we're looking for, I just know it!"

So housekeeping could get into my room I left shortly after that, browsing through a historical section of the city within walking distance. I bought a ticket to a city museum and spent an interesting two hours learning some of the city's Civil War history. On the way back to the hotel I stopped for coffee and a croissant, munching them as I considered what to wear for the appointment. A skirt seemed in order, and I had brought two. After changing, applying some makeup and taking a little care with my hair, it was almost time to leave. Looking over the directions to Claire Marsh's residence twenty minutes seemed about the right amount of time to give myself to get there. It wouldn't do to be too early, or more than five minutes late, but I could always park the car a short distance away from the house and wait if I arrived ahead of time.

The rush hour traffic was just beginning and I got ahead of most of it. After missing just one turn and having to back track, I pulled my dark blue rental into an empty parking place almost directly in front of the address on my paper. Just three minutes to spare. Taking a deep breath and saying a little prayer, I walked up to the house to conduct my second interview in regards to the background of Amelia Marsh.

The peak of the fall brilliance was gone and the ground was heavy with fallen leaves. The house was well kept, smaller than most of the others on the street, the siding painted a slate blue, the shutters beige. The small porch at the entrance was trimmed in beige to match the shutters, and there were several brightly colored

flowerpots standing as sentinels by the entryway. Some of them were empty; two had lush ferns still thriving in them. I climbed the few steps to stand on the porch and ring the doorbell.

Immediately a small dog began to bark, or rather to yip. I rolled my eyes but had them properly back in my head when the front door opened. The young woman standing there assessed me as I did her, both of us doing so with pleasant expressions on our faces. She saw a slim middle aged woman of average height with short smooth hair, dressed in a fall outfit of chocolate brown and green, a leather bag on her shoulder. I saw a tall, stately blonde of about twenty-five, in well fitting jeans and a white sweater. She scooped up the dog as she had answered the door, a tiny white poodle. The canine stopped barking as soon as she did so.

“Mrs. Nimitz?” she asked perfunctorily. When I said I was she waved me in and led the way to the sitting room on the left side of the hall, where the object of my visit was sitting quietly in a plush dark red upholstered chair by the front window. She had watched me park my car and walk up to ring the doorbell, but I had not spotted her through the sheer curtains.

I walked up to the person in the chair and held out my hand. “How do you do, Mrs. Marsh? I am Sally Nimitz.”

She accepted my hand with a veined one of her own, invited me to sit down where I chose in the tastefully decorated room, and introduced me to the younger woman, “My great niece, Olivia.”

Olivia excused herself, but left the door to the sitting room open. I chose to sit in the most obvious place, on the other side of the front window in the chair that matched the one my hostess was sitting in. It was very comfortable. We were separated by a dark mahogany tea table adorned only with a lacy cover and a crystal candy dish. As I thanked Claire Marsh for seeing me, I looked around the room and complimented her on it. Her taste ran to space rather than clutter, as did my own, and she, or someone, had a flair for decorating. There was an elegance there, but comfort, too.

“I expect it is rather warm in here,” she said courteously. “I seem to need more heat as I get older. Please make yourself comfortable.”

I removed my jacket and draped it over the back of my chair. Then I turned my entire attention to the lady I had come hundreds of miles to see. Decades had gone by since the photographs Elaine Barclay showed me were taken, but she closely matched the description I had built up in my mind. She had a good hairdresser. Her hair was still blond, slightly curly, and well cut to flatter. The lined face was pleasant to look at, and her brown eyes were keen. Her hands and neck showed her years more than anything else, both lined and weathered. One ring adorned each hand, both yellow gold with diamonds, neither one of them ostentatious. She wore brown slacks, a bulky gold sweater, and hose under her brown flats.

She’s more fashion conscious than Amelia was, I thought, remembering my neighbor’s charming habit of mixing old and new, but she’s just as sharp, although maybe not as personable. Behind the charm one sensed a touch of steel.

I was about to begin, but Mrs. Marsh took the lead.

“Now,” she said in her slightly quavering contralto, “what can I help you with?”

“Amelia Marsh was murdered,” I said evenly, “several weeks ago now, in September. She was my next-door neighbor, and the day she died, a Wednesday, we were supposed to meet at her home. She didn’t say why she wanted to see me. As it turned out, by the time of our appointment she was already dead. Later that afternoon the manager of the housing unit and I found her body in the kitchen. So far no one has been arrested for that crime.”

I paused to see how this Mrs. Marsh was processing all this information. She already knew her former sister-in-law was killed. I was laying it all out again, with no idea what the lady’s initial response was when Miss Carey told her, what memories were stirred up by the news, and no clear picture what the relationship had been between Amelia and Claire Marsh. In spite of the many times I had envisioned this interview, now that it was taking place I was being extemporaneous.

“Go on,” the lady said quietly, her clear eyes looking directly into my own.

So I did. I told her about the last four years of Amelia’s life while she lived in Hanley, and my own relationship with her. I related Amelia’s reticence about speaking of her past, even with close friends, and continued on to describe the manner of her death, her funeral, and even included the afternoon with the lawyers at Amelia’s home. Finally, I told her about my trip to Texas and the meeting with June and Eric Fisk’s daughter.

“That Wednesday Amelia allowed someone to walk into her house, and that someone killed her,” I concluded. “I am convinced she knew who that person was, and there is no one in Hanley who had any reason to want her dead. You might think it very presumptuous of me and of my friends, but we have become committed to discovering more about the past that she was so evasive about, hoping we can find out who took her life.”

Claire Marsh listened intently and never interrupted. As I finished and before she said a word Olivia appeared. She leaned lazily against the door jam and caught her aunt’s eye.

“It’s past four,” she said. “Can I get you a tea or coffee?”

“Of course,” my hostess replied. This was obviously a daily routine. “Tea for me today, I think, Livy, and sugar cookies. Will you join me, Mrs. Nimitz? We have coffee if you prefer.”

Mrs. Nimitz would; tea for me also, and a small glass of water if it wasn’t too much trouble. We were all so polite it could have been absurd, but somehow it wasn’t. Such protocol seemed very in place here. Olivia gave me a small grin, as though she knew what I was thinking. It was a safe guess Olivia outside of this realm could be a very different person.

We didn’t continue the interview until the tea arrived. Meanwhile, in response to a compliment I made about Olivia, Claire surprised me and told me a little about her current situation. Olivia was her sister’s granddaughter, staying in Richmond to do some graduate studies, and getting room and board in exchange for being a part time companion to an elderly lady who shouldn’t live alone. Claire’s daughter and son-in-law lived in Chicago but they were moving back to Virginia in July. Rosamond’s husband, Arlin, was retiring. [So much for Ross Barclay’s memory about Mr. Reed’s first name, I thought in amusement.]

“I’ve invited them to come and live with me,” my hostess shared. “They haven’t given me a definite answer yet, but I think they will. This house will be theirs someday, and we’ve always gotten along well.”

“Those are family photographs?” I motioned toward the pictures on the mantle. “May I?”

“Of course.” Claire seemed pleased by my interest. Family is usually a common denominator.

I got up and walked over to the fireplace to look at them. The large framed portrait on the far left was Rosamond and Arlin Reed, taken on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The still handsome couple was dressed in formal attire. If the way he was looking down at her was genuine, it was still a love match. Mrs. Marsh supplied a few facts as I studied the photographs. The Reeds had no children.

In the middle was a black and white studio portrait wedding picture. The very handsome groom and a petite brunette with a beautiful smile had been married some time ago. The hairstyles gave them away. Here was the boy Elaine Barclay had a crush on and whose name she could no longer remember. It was Steven. The last photograph was an informal shot, and the most recent. It featured the three grandchildren Steven had procreated, two boys and a girl. It had been taken on the occasion of the graduation of the oldest from college in Sacramento. All of Stephen’s family lived in California, Claire said sadly.

I looked with interest at these healthy, handsome young people. These were the descendants of Leonard and Arthur Marsh. Did they know anything these men? Did Rosamond know who her father was?

Olivia must have had the tea steeping, because she returned in only a few minutes with a tray bearing the pot, cups, cream, sugar, and a plate of the cookies. Oh, yes, and a small glass of ice water. It would have been disappointing to be served in ordinary mugs. Not to worry. We used an English bone china tea service, the pattern lilac primroses and dark green leaves.

Olivia set the tea service down on the table between us, removed the candy dish, and excused herself. Her aunt poured the tea and I waited.

As we sipped the elderly lady returned to the reason for my visit. The interlude had given her some time to consider what to tell me.

“Amelia and I had not spoken to each other since Leonard’s death,” she said levelly. “She did not tell me when she left her home in New Jersey. Of course that tells you we were no longer close, no longer even friends. But June’s daughter might not have known that.”

I volunteered that she hadn’t. “Did June know?” I asked.

“Oh I think so,” Claire Marsh smiled. “There was little June didn’t know. It’s a shame she’s gone. She could have told you what you want to know.”

“And,” I hesitated, “you can’t?”

“I doubt it,” she replied. “Neither Leonard or his wife confided in me about their marriage or her past.”

I considered this. "Would you be willing to tell me about your relationship with Leonard Marsh?" I ventured. She smiled. "I have been considering that since you called me this morning. Well, Mrs. Nimitz, I don't see what harm it can do now, and it is rare to have the opportunity to share the past."

So we sipped tea, nibbled on her cookies, and Claire talked. One of four daughters raised in an affluent New York family, she came to Washington to visit a friend and met Leonard Marsh at a party. As she remembered it, he was there as an unofficial bodyguard to an important diplomat who was attending. They were attracted to one another immediately, and began to meet when they could.

"I had plenty of boyfriends in New York," Claire told me, a ring of pride in her tone, "but Leonard was not only handsome, but older, and different. I was only nineteen and I was crazy about him."

But it seemed two things got in the way of their romance. First, Claire's parents found out about Leonard, and were not too happy about their teen-aged daughter's relationship. Second, Leonard was called to Europe. Claire went home, attended business school, and waited two years before returning to Washington. Her father had connections there, and when his headstrong daughter showed no inclination to marry one of the young men he approved of, he helped her get a job in a prestigious law office in the nation's capitol. Apparently it didn't occur to him she would still remember her former flame.

But through the New York cousin Claire and Amelia had secretly managed to keep in touch. Several weeks after starting her new job, Leonard was back and the two took up where they left off.

For two years their romance continued, albeit, the lady admitted, sometimes it was stormy. Leonard was fond of her, but showed no inclination to settle down. She met his younger brother, Arthur, who would escort her around when his brother had to break a date suddenly. Arthur was stationed in New Jersey, an up and coming naval cadet.

"Arthur was wonderful, but I already loved Len," Claire admitted. "I was getting tired of waiting, though, so I thought I could move Len along a bit." She sighed and moved her gaze from me to look out the window. "So, we became lovers. But my little plan rather backfired on me. Four weeks later I suspected I was pregnant, and Len was somewhere in Eastern Europe, not due back for months."

I kept my face impassive, not admitting I already knew about Rosamond's paternity.

"Society was very different then. My parents would have been devastated and my life would essentially have been ruined, my reputation gone. I didn't even know what an abortion was, and probably couldn't have gone through with it if I had."

Now I helped her out. "So you married Arthur," I said gently. "Did he know?"

"Oh yes. It was his idea." She smiled again, in reminiscence. "He was a fine man. In retrospect he was probably the better of the two. I was becoming quite content with my life when I lost him, too. But you know about that. Elaine told you." I nodded.

"Mrs. Marsh," I put my teacup down, "what caused the division between yourself and Amelia?"

She looked surprised. "Oh, I guess you wouldn't know that." She took another sip of her own tea. "Amelia didn't know about my affair with Len and that Rosamond was his daughter. He never told her, not until a few years before he died, when he decided to make Rose a beneficiary in his will."

I digested this. "She didn't take it very well?"

"No. I knew Amelia pretty well by then. We visited in New Jersey every year. She thought it was because my children were the only family Leonard had, which was true, but I did want Rose to know her father, even if she thought of him as an uncle. But Amelia felt deceived, you see. There was a row, and I was there. She said if only she had been told. 'I shared everything with you,' she told him, 'and you kept this from me.'"

"She didn't think there was anything still between you and her husband?"

"Oh no," the reply was certain. "And there wasn't. I was a divorcee as well as a widow by then, but there was nothing improper between us. My love for him died when Arthur did, for some reason. I'm sure Amelia never thought that. It was the deception, you see, and perhaps it was worse because there had never been any children for them."

I thought about that for a moment. "You don't think Amelia ever conceived?" I asked.

She said slowly, "Well, she might have had a miscarriage, I suppose. There were a dozen years after they first married when I saw very little of them. If she did, it was never mentioned."

After considering this information I asked, "Mrs. Marsh, what if I told you I know Amelia had a child, at least one. The coroner and the police determined that."

“Well,” she raised her eyebrows in surprise. “She was my age, Amelia was, and about thirty when she married Leonard. Perhaps she was married before.”

“Yes,” I agreed quietly, “that’s possible.”

We had a second cup of tea, I ate another cookie, very tasty, and with a spark of humor my hostess commented that if she had been the murder victim after Leonard changed his will, we could have considered Amelia the culprit. As it was, she could not see how I was any closer to the solution to my problem. She had me there. I asked if she knew of anyone else I could talk to about Leonard and Amelia, and also if she remembered what their New Jersey address had been.

She thought about it. Perhaps she was deciding if she had revealed enough information for one day to a total stranger. But in the end she rose from her chair, asked me to excuse her for a moment, and left the room. When standing erect Claire Marsh had the posture of someone suffering from mild osteoporosis. There was a cane propped against the wall next to her chair, but she left it there and her gait was steady. While she left me alone, I wondered if Rosamond was told who her real father was when she received her legacy. How could her mother explain it without telling her, and Stephen as well, so he would not feel slighted? But those were questions I didn’t need the answer to, they were just the result of my curiosity, and it was unlikely I would ever know. There were still plenty of other things I did need answers to. Now it was clear why Amelia ended her relationship with her sister-in-law. She believed Claire and Leonard kept a secret they should have shared with her, especially Leonard. Was her reaction a little overboard?

Claire returned with an envelope in her hand, a letter she had saved from gone by days. The return address on it was the former residence of Amelia and her husband. As I copied it onto a pad from my purse, she volunteered, “There were neighbors across the street that might still be there. They would be in their fifties or sixties, now, I suppose, but they might still live there. They were friendly with both Len and Amelia. I think their last name was Wheddle.”

I thanked her profusely for her hospitality. Claire Marsh’s reply was as gracious as her manner had been the entire time, her face impassive. Did she grieve for Amelia, I wondered? She would never let me know, perhaps never anyone. Did she want justice for her former friend, or did she agree to see me only out of curiosity? Olivia appeared, miniature poodle under one arm, and escorted me back the way I had come. I wondered if she had been listening to our conversation. There was no way to tell, Olivia did not let on.

I turned back to look up at the window as I walked down the sidewalk to the car, and saw Claire Marsh watching me leave. I waved to her, and she nodded in response.

Sitting behind the wheel I said out loud, “‘I have told you everything, and you kept this from me.’ Amelia, what did that mean?”

Not wanting to linger, I started the vehicle and pulled away, focusing on the traffic but also thinking about this amazing visit with Claire Marsh. Unlike Elaine Barclay, she never vocally expressed any regrets or grief. She didn’t even say she hoped the murderer would be caught. But I had sensed no resentment, and certainly no hatred. She had agreed to see me. Perhaps that was her homage to her former sister-in-law, and the other love of Leonard Marsh’s life.

Chapter Seventeen

Indiana was an hour behind time wise so the phone calls could wait a while longer. With only a muffin and two cookies for sustenance since breakfast, I decided a decent dinner was in order, but not quite yet. As I drew near a city park I pulled over. The boots I was wearing were quite comfortable. It was time for a walk, a thinking walk.

Three hours later, well fed on a chicken Alfredo dinner, I made myself comfortable on the bed and started the calls. Everyone answered; they were all waiting for me. By nine-thirty my voice and the ear pushed against the telephone receiver were both tired.

My first call was to Anne Carey whose main comment was, “Oh very good, dear, very good! What should you do next do you think?” So I told her. She was admonished for being sneaky, but I thanked her for the card and the extra cash. “Not nearly enough, I’m sure,” was her reply, “especially now.” After reassurances I was financially solvent, she allowed me to go on to my next contact.

That was George. "Nothing dangerous here, George," I remarked cheerfully after he answered the phone. "Just a late afternoon tea party." Then I elaborated. He also complimented me on my ability to make such prompt contact, and remarked that perhaps I had missed my calling and should have been a news reporter, to which I replied if I had been, the elderly lady would never have seen me. "What do you think?"

He agreed with my impression, that there was something important involved in Amelia's response to the discovery of Rosamond's paternity.

"That lady definitely had secrets," he voiced. "If you're right and the answer to who killed her is her past, you'll have to keep digging."

I asked him how the dog and cat were getting along. Better all the time, he said.

"And thank you for the financial assistance."

"No problem."

He also wanted to know what my plans were, and had no criticism.

I moved on to Everett and Judy. Joel was about to climb into the bathtub so we had some over the line hugs and kisses first.

"I want to hear!" I heard Judy protest, as Ev scooped up the phone from his son and suggested Judy help with the bath. He promised a verbatim report, and told me to start talking. When I finished, he was as good as his word, filling Judy in completely while I waited.

"What now, Mom?"

"What? Don't you have some advice for me?" I teased.

"Only to keep looking," he said in encouragement.

I hesitated before placing the call to Janelle. She was not necessarily expecting to hear from me this soon. But in the end I spoke with her too, and our call was the longest. She had thought about all the information I had given her on our previous talk, and had some questions of her own. I answered them all honestly but did not elaborate.

"Honestly, Mom, a murder!" she said more than once.

"I told you that the other night," I pointed out dryly.

"Yes, but, it didn't sink in right away. I was really tired. Do you really think you'll find out who did it?"

I sighed. "Honestly, honey, it's a long shot. But I can tell you this, finding out about Amelia Marsh's life has become a passion. It's like the epitaph that needs to be printed on her tombstone."

She didn't say a word about how long it took me to inform her about the violent death of my neighbor, and my involvement. I had expected real rebuke. Her response told me she wasn't concerned about my safety, so she didn't think Amelia's killer was a direct threat. Come to think of it, neither did I.

Janelle surprised me again by laughing. "Well, Mom, you seem to be enjoying yourself, and heaven knows you deserve to be doing that for a change. What next?"

She too, was informed. The next morning I would start for New Jersey, and probably after that, London.

It had been my intention to leave the next morning, but upon further consideration I changed my plans. In the morning I called the front desk, asking if I could keep my room for one more night. No problem. It would take time to arrange an overseas flight. By the time my plans were finalized it could be after lunch, not a good time to leave and head north. Besides, when would I return to Richmond? When I had everything settled I would do the tourist thing again. Richmond was bound to have some more great museums or an antebellum house to tour.

I left Wednesday about nine, the day crisp and cool. It took me over six hours to reach my destination in southern New Jersey, and the trip was memorable. I made a vow to avoid the eastern highways, and especially the beltway for the rest of my life. It may have been a scenic drive but I dared not take my eyes off the road long enough to find out. The last twenty miles, on a picturesque local road to the country town of Bertha, I breathed easy at last. My plan was to find the address Claire Marsh had given me before looking for lodging for the night. There should be no problem finding accommodations in early November, with time enough left before sundown to do that.

The retirement home of the Marshes had been roughly twenty-five miles from the seaboard, and about forty miles from Atlantic City. After stopping twice to inquire, I found the street and the residence. I wanted to linger, to get out and mosey down the street on foot to get a closer look, and to find the house of the neighbors who

might be able to help me. But it was after four o'clock. It would be more prudent to come back in the morning. I had plenty of time. My flight to London did not leave until Sunday.

That decision turned out to be the right one. It took awhile to find my way back to an area zoned for lodging. The first inn I tried was attractive but shabby, and the clerk behind the counter, with his scruffy beard and bleary eyes, did nothing to reassure me. The second hotel had no vacancy because of an on site seminar, but as with goldilocks, my third choice was just right. The elderly gentleman behind the counter grinned when I asked if there might be a discount for committing to a three-night stay. He gave me ten per cent off the original rate quoted for one night. The spotless and rustic surroundings made it appealing, but there was another factor urging me to search no more. The weather was turning. The wind had come up suddenly, the sky was clouding up and nightfall was coming in a little early. Rain looked eminent. The small dining room to the right of the lobby was just opening for dinner and my stomach was growling. I smiled back at the clerk and pulled out my credit card.

The Shadow Lake Inn was not a bad home for my sojourn in New Jersey. There was a small pond behind the establishment, which hardly qualified for a lake at all, but it was nicely shadowed every afternoon, as I could verify from my second story window. My accommodations were not as modern as they had been in Richmond, but made up for that with the canopied bed, the flowered cotton curtains that matched the bedspread, and the large braided rug covering the floor between my bed and the bathroom. The bathtub was old and slightly stained but huge, and there was plenty of hot water and two over sized bath towels. A sign in the lobby said the business had been established in 1943. By my second day there I was almost sure every modern convenience had been added grudgingly, only to keep enough guests coming to stay afloat. But the whole effect was charming.

That Wednesday night when I walked into the dining room three of the eight tables were already taken. Being alone I was escorted to the smallest table. The place was not much bigger than the dining room of the bed and breakfast I had stayed in on my way home from Texas. Two people looked up and smiled, and of course I smiled back and said hello. This was unexpected in the east. I thought people would be more aloof. That evening the book I brought along didn't get much attention.

One of the other three parties was a young couple, perhaps in their late twenties. The woman was plump, pretty, and very outgoing. She didn't hesitate to ask me if I was traveling by myself, and that started a conversation. Her husband's demeanor implied he was used to this. He added a comment now and then, and leaned back patiently in his chair to listen to the dialogue and to eat his meal.

Party number two was a couple about my own age, accompanied by an elderly woman who turned out to be the mother of the gentleman. They were soon drawn in, having a relative who lived in Indianapolis. Party number three, two businessmen, refused to participate. They huddled over their food, drink, and private affairs at the table closest to the entrance to the lobby. Their isolation policy did not dampen the festive air begun by the natural friendliness of the young wife, fueled by the close proximity of our tables, and the encouragement of the waitress. Shortly after my arrival another party of three completed our group, a couple in their forties with a gangly teenage son.

"How nice!" the server said, looking around as she took our orders. "A cool stormy night and here you are, warm and cozy in here getting to know each other!"

So we chatted amicably if superficially. We exchanged travel stories, none of them extraordinary. What brought me to New Jersey? I was looking into some past history. Maureen, as the talkative young woman's name turned out to be, had a natural curiosity and a dry wit. She flashed her large dark eyes at one of the older men in mild flirtation and he unconsciously preened. His wife smothered a grin, a wise woman, I thought. Maureen's husband didn't act threatened. His standing seemed solid.

It was a pleasant way to spend an hour and a half. I excused myself after that. The businessmen were already gone, so was the teenager. No one else seemed to be in any hurry to leave. It did not escape my notice that the elderly woman had taken three glasses of wine, and was beginning to nod in her chair. She was no lightweight, and I hoped she would make it to her room on her own power. Her son did not look up to the task.

I had eaten a salad entrée, not wanting to be stuffed before bed, and there would be no opportunity to walk it off. I wandered around the lobby looking at the photographs of the hotel as it had been in bygone years before taking my book up to the bathtub. The heat wafted up heartily from the baseboard system. I fell asleep to the beat of rain, turning to sleet, pounding against the window.

The rain persisted into Thursday. I was glad I knew my way back to my destination. Once again it wouldn't do to be too early. I had decided to take my chances by just showing up on the doorstep of the former neighbors of the Marshes. I lounged in the bed after waking, and took my time getting ready. It was after nine by the time I entered the dining room for breakfast. Most of the tables were occupied, but not with the familiar faces from dinner the night before. Apparently they had already flown. In fact, as the morning waitress told me, their little restaurant, which served only breakfast and dinner, was popular for the former meal with the locals. Occasionally the guests would partake, but they provided only a fraction of the a.m. business, perhaps because the reasonable room rates did not include a free breakfast.

"So, what's the draw?" I asked her.

"The pancakes, and the homemade muffins," she replied enthusiastically. "Today we have blackberry, and they are delicious. Better say so if you want one, though. Only two left."

So I ordered a muffin, scrambled eggs and coffee, passing on the pancakes, although it was tempting.

This time I buried my face contentedly in my book, eating without interruption. While finishing a second cup of well-brewed coffee, three elderly gentlemen arrived. They took the biggest table. Listening to their chatter it was obvious they were ten o'clock regular coffee patrons. One of them noticed me noticing them and winked at me.

"You from around here young lady?" he boomed. His voice was clear and loud. I answered that I was just passing through.

"Where ya from?"

I told him. Everyone in the room heard me; they couldn't help it. I was glad my mission wasn't a clandestine one.

"Traveling by yourself?" he continued, undeterred.

I admitted it. He shook his head in disapproval. His two companions leaned back in their chairs and gazed at me in their own mild curiosity.

"Many ladies travel alone nowadays, sir," I rejoined.

"Maybe so," he allowed, "but that don't make it safe. Plenty of crazies out there. There was a time around here you could sleep with your doors unlocked and not think a thing of it. Not now."

I promised to lock my car doors, and make sure the door to my room was always locked and got up to leave. Then I had a thought.

"Have you all lived around here a long time?" I asked the three collectively.

Two of them had lived locally most of their lives. It was a long shot, but why not. Had they ever known two gentlemen, one named Eric Fisk, the other Leonard Marsh. No surprise. They hadn't.

"What about a family named Whedde?" Here I got a response, but not from the two long timers. It was the third man, tall, stooped, and almost bald, who came through.

"There's a family lives down my street by that name," he said. "Don't know 'em very well. We've been there about five years, and the older lady takes a walk every morning, rain or shine. She did today."

"Would that be on Joiner Avenue?" I asked timidly, hardly daring to hope it would be.

But it was, so the men were told I was looking for some contacts of an old friend from days gone by. They chorused a good bye and a good luck, and the source of my information added as I left the dining room, "There's a bunch of kids in that house. I think she has a son or daughter and their family living with her."

It took over twenty minutes to return to Joiner Avenue, thanks to morning traffic, slow stoplights, and the rain. I had the foresight to pack a lined hooded raincoat. It hadn't occurred to me to pack an umbrella. The last mile was down quiet, residential streets, with little traffic so I could cruise very slowly. There was evidence the neighborhood had deteriorated since Amelia and Leonard's day, from an affluent middle class neighborhood to a lower middle class one. Some of the larger houses had been converted into multi family dwellings. Between some manicured, well kept homes, there were others now needing upkeep. I recognized the signs of homes lived in by the elderly who were finding it difficult to keep up their landscaping, and either could not or did not want to pay someone else to do it.

There were many cars parked on the street because a lot of the old homes had one-car garages or no garage at all. But I found an empty spot in front of the house I had the address for, and pulled into it.

I left the motor running because of the heater and looked out of the passenger window at the house Amelia Marsh had lived in for many years, most of them with Leonard. The opportunity to get any closer never

presented itself, but I was strangely moved, just sitting there, looking at that house. It was white-framed with dark green shutters, a large porch, and two huge maple trees in the front yard. It was nice to see this was one of the better kept residences in this area. If the items sitting on the front porch were a good indication, a family with young children lived there now, and I thought Amelia would have liked that. She had told me a realtor sold the house for her and she had no dealings with the buyers. It was possible the house had changed hands again. Remembering how Amelia loved her gardening, I hoped someone was keeping up the backyard and enjoying it as she had.

The rain had tapered to a drizzle. Presently I glanced at my watch. It was going on eleven o'clock, certainly a respectable hour for callers, so I turned the engine off and pulled up the hood on my coat. The house directly across the street was not kept up nearly so well.

Approaching, I could hear the radio blasting through the closed door. Getting closer still I could hear a small child crying and a woman's voice yelling for him or her to shut up. The idea that anyone living here could have had a close friendship with the Marshes seemed ludicrous, but I was only a knock away from finding out. The doorbell didn't work. To be heard over all of the racket I knocked very loudly.

The child stopped crying and said clearly, "Mama, somebody's at the door."

Mama said, "What?" the child repeated the information, and the radio went down a few decibels. I validated what the little one said and knocked again. She peeked through the window to my right and looked at me. Rather than appear confrontational I pretended not to see her.

In her place I would have hesitated to answer. In my attire of boots and a raincoat with a handbag dangling from my shoulder I could easily have been selling something she didn't want. Maybe she thought any solicitor determined enough to work in the inclement weather deserved a chance. Whatever she thought, she answered the door.

"Good morning," I said courteously, facing a thirty something female in faded jeans and a worn flannel shirt, her dirty blond hair pulled back in an untidy ponytail. Standing slightly behind her was the child, a boy, three or four years old. His face was smeared with jelly and, I am not making this up, he had one finger up a nostril as he stared at me. "I apologize for disturbing you. My name is Sally Nimitz, and I understand there are old neighbors and friends of the Marshes who still live here. Marsh is the name of the family who used to live across the street? I knew Mrs. Amelia Marsh."

She thought for a second and nodded. "Oh yeah. They lived right across the street until a few years ago. He died, and she moved a way after a while."

Now I nodded. "She moved to a small town in Indiana, where we were neighbors. I was hoping to talk to someone who knew them pretty well."

The woman considered just a second longer, then motioned for me to come in. I thanked her and stepped into the foyer. The house was not dirty, but cluttered and messy. As with the outside, everything needed a face-lift.

"Ma!" the woman yelled up the stairs. The child continued to stare at me, and since he had removed the finger from his nose I smiled back.

The woman upstairs must have heard the knock and her daughter allowing me entrance, because she appeared almost instantaneously.

"Here's someone from Indiana who knows Mrs. Marsh, you know, the old lady who used to live across the street. You want to talk to her?"

"How do you do? Am I correct, your last name is Wheddle?" I called up the stairs. "My name is Sally Nimitz, and I have come from Indiana to speak with you, if I could."

This lady looked about sixty, short and plump with gray hair cut very short, and glasses perched on the end of a nice nose, not too long. That was about as much as I could tell, with me standing on the bottom of the staircase looking up at her as she looked down at me from the landing. I did notice the dark blue slacks she wore, blue slippers, and the light blue sweatshirt that was embroidered with a patchwork pattern of some sort.

She told me to come up. I had wiped my boots very thoroughly on the mat at the entrance, but I asked the daughter if she wanted me to remove them.

"Heck, no." she replied. "I wish I could get the kids to wipe their feet at all. Go on up."

So I did. Mrs. Wheddle waited for me at the top. She invited me into her bedroom to talk. It was apparent this was her sanctuary away from the bustle of her family. A knitting project, a blanket done in cream and shades of green, was lying on top of the bed. Yarn and squares of material cut for quilting were piled on a table

in a corner. A sewing machine stood next to it. She was in no hurry for me to get down to business. I complimented her on the blanket and we chatted awhile about her projects. She was working on Christmas presents. Once again I took a seat in a chair by the window. The room was large enough for two chairs and a small table in addition to the other furniture, but it was tight. This window overlooked the backyard with no view of the front entrance. Mrs. Wheddle told me first name was Grace, that Mr. Wheddle had passed away a year after Amelia left, and his widow found out she hated living alone. She invited one of her daughters and family to come and live with her. I never knew exactly how many people that was, but for sure there were more children at school.

"They drive me a little crazy sometimes," Grace admitted, "but it's better than being by myself, and I haven't found another man I want to marry."

I thought it was nice living alone and being able to enjoy it, but I didn't say so. My mother never adjusted to it either, and enjoying solitude seemed to be a gift for some people. Instead I asked her if she minded talking about the Marshes.

Apparently not. Predictably she wanted to know my connection with Amelia, and for the first time I spoke with someone about Amelia Marsh and did not tell them how she died. I sensed it would have upset this woman in a way that would hamper my investigation and do her no good. It was not too difficult to tell her everything Claire Marsh and the Barclays had been told, including the fact she was now deceased, omitting only the manner of her death.

Grace Wheddle seemed genuinely sorry to hear of her former neighbor's demise, but not surprised. She accepted the assumption given that Amelia died of natural causes. She was happy to tell me about their relationship, and never questioned my reason for traveling so far to learn more about the Marshes. I told her I was trying to locate Amelia's family in England, that she had been curiously silent on her past, and I was trying to fill in missing pieces. All of this was true.

Picking up her knitting, my companion absently began the knits and purls, pursing her lips, and thinking about the past. I left her to that for a moment before asking, "Did you ever hear from Mrs. Marsh after she moved away?"

"No," she replied promptly, "not even a Christmas card, and we were neighbors here for over twenty years. But she told me not to expect it."

"She did?" I said, surprised.

Grace nodded. "Mely, all of her friends here called her Mely, came over to see David and me the day before she left. We hadn't seen so much of her after her husband died, but we were still on good terms." Here Grace regressed a bit, and explained how the two couples had become friendly in the first place. It was interesting, as David had been the son of a ship builder and Leonard Marsh loved sailing, but not very pertinent to what I wanted to know. A few minutes later I managed to steer Grace's explanation back on track.

"Anyway," she continued, "Mely stayed for a while that day. She told us where she was going, and thanked us for being such good neighbors. I remember she hugged me before she left, the first time she ever did that. She wasn't the touchy type, you know."

I nodded that I did know.

"Being English, I suppose," Grace surmised. "Anyway," she began again, "she hugged me, and gave me a present." Here there was a pause as I was supposed to ask what the present was. I obliged.

"It was a soup tureen, English bone china, such a pretty thing." My hostess sighed and added sadly, "My grandson dropped it last Thanksgiving."

"Well," I said, trying to be comforting, "Amelia won't ever know that now."

"No," agreed Grace, "and she never would have. She said, and I remember it so well, that another chapter of her life was ending, and once you closed a part of your life it was no good going back. She said she would never forget us, but that we probably wouldn't hear from her again."

"Didn't that strike you as rather odd, Mrs. Wheddle?" I ventured. "Lots of people move on in their lives without breaking all ties."

"Of course it did," she said tartly, glancing at me over the top of her glasses, "that's why I didn't forget it. But she could be different in her ways. I thought it was just being foreign, you know, and then getting older, too. She must have been in her seventies when she left here."

"She was," I confirmed, and then pursued, "did she ever talk about her life in England, or her family?"

Grace considered this. “Usually we talked about current things, you know, like our children, or David taking Mr. Marsh out to a good fishing spot. Sometimes she would tell a story about her childhood in England or her travels overseas.”

I groaned inwardly. There was nothing new here. “She never talked about a sister or brothers?” I persisted.

“She had a sister, I remember, and I even think her name was Mary. Mely never mentioned if they kept in touch. She never came here to visit.”

“Do you think the sister might have died?” I continued my query. Now I had a name for the sister, which was something.

There was another moment of contemplation. “No, I think that at least while Mely lived here, her sister was alive. I can’t tell you exactly why I know that, but I do. Once when my daughter Sandra, she’s the oldest, had a birthday, Mely said her niece had the same name, ‘my sister Mary’s girl,’ is how she put it. Then I asked her if she had ever seen her,” here Grace paused, putting down her knitting needles, and getting a bit animated as her memory obliged her, “and she said no, not for many years. I asked her then, point blank, why didn’t she go back to England to visit.”

“Did you?” I was perking up a little myself. “What did she say?”

The brown eyes behind the glasses looked at me reflectively. “This is the first time I’ve realized it. She said the same thing, the same words she said the last time we saw her.”

“That there was no going back,” I repeated slowly.

“Yes,” Grace confirmed quietly. “I remember thinking there must have been some kind of quarrel or disagreement that ended badly. But I didn’t ask. I could tell she didn’t want to talk about it.”

I groped mentally for anything at all that might give me more information. “Then, Mrs. Marsh never heard from her sister, or anyone else in England, as far as you know,” I summed up slowly.

“That’s about it,” admitted Mrs. Wheddle. “At least as far as I know. Sorry I can’t give you more. Are you looking for beneficiaries to her will?”

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “But if there is any family left I would like to find them.”

“There is one other person you might talk to,” Grace suggested. “Mely was active in the local beautification club, you know, planting trees, flowers for the park, that sort of thing. The other day I saw a lady who was another member. Her name is Margaret Beeson, Mrs. John Beeson.”

She put the knitting aside, walked over to her bedside table, and pulled a telephone book from the drawer. “I think they’re listed, he’s a dentist, retired now. Yes, here it is.”

Helpfully she read the number out loud for me to copy down.

I took my leave of Grace Wheddle shortly after, stepping carefully over a toy truck that had found its way to the bottom of the stairs while I was visiting in her room. No one seemed to notice my departure. The radio was again playing loudly, Grace said goodbye to me upstairs before heading for the bathroom, and her family downstairs were nowhere in sight. I let myself out.

I sat in the car and thought about what my next step should be. I could go back to my hotel room and try to call my next contact, the Beesons. But it was almost noon and very likely Margaret Beeson would be out somewhere. Older people tended to stay at home on cold nights: I would wait until evening.

There was some shopping to be done before catching my plane on Sunday, and this was a good afternoon to be at the mall.

Chapter Eighteen

Four-thirty in the afternoon found me plopped on my hotel room bed, telephone in hand, coffee cup on the bedside table. My raincoat was hanging in the bathroom to dry, my boots were doing the same on the mat by the door, and the coffee kindly provided by the front desk was chasing away any lingering chill. The steamy stuff plus my note pad and a pen were all within reach.

Mr. John Beeson answered and listened to my introduction. He told me his wife would be home by five, could she return my call? I said yes and she did, but in the end my interview with Margaret Beeson came to naught. In spite of my best efforts she was stiff and brusque. She was also hard of hearing and told me to please speak up, which I did, but that didn’t help. I never knew if the lady didn’t believe me, didn’t like Amelia, or just

didn't feel like contributing, but there it was. What little she was willing to share I knew already, and it was clear a personal interview would not be welcome. I thought George would be disappointed in me. The Beesons were a washout.

Readjusting the pillows behind my back, it seemed to me the east coast portion of my investigation had come to a dead end. Leonard Marsh had died over ten years earlier at the age of eighty. Five years later his wife sold their home, broke all connections, and moved to the mid-west to be closer to her long time friend, June Fisk. Most of the people they had known were gone, dead or moved away. I had managed to contact two ladies who had known her fairly well, but neither one had been privy to her most private knowledge or thoughts. It was likely no one had been. Amelia had probably carried many of her secrets to her grave, and maybe the name of the person who had killed her, too.

But still, I had learned a few things and confirmed some previous information.

After talking to Margaret Beeson it was late enough to start the calls to update my friends and family in Indiana.

I gave my son an itinerary of where I could be reached until leaving for London, and the name of my hotel on the night of my arrival there as well, waiting patiently while he wrote everything down. When he asked if I had anything more to tell, I told him not really, but that I had high hopes for England, which was not entirely true, but I was being optimistic.

"Gram'ma called here last night, looking for you," my son volunteered. "She wasn't too happy when she found out you were on a trip without telling her you were going."

"Oh, oh. Did you smooth the troubled waters?" Drat. My mother usually didn't call all that often, but she thought it was her right to be kept up to date on the affairs of her children.

"As best I could," he said wryly, "but I would say you are in deep doo-doo."

I told him I would handle that when I got home, not inclined to add my mother to the list of evening phone conversations.

My next call was to Anne Carey. She got an almost verbatim report on my visit with Grace Wheddle. Anne thought Amelia had mentioned the Wheddles once or twice, and putting a name to Amelia's sister interested her.

"Do you have any ideas on other lines of enquiry out here?" I asked her advice.

"Maybe Leonard Marsh wasn't so closed mouthed about his professional life after he retired," she mused. "Could any of his friends still be living?"

That thought had occurred to me also. "But where would I start; with the government again or maybe the nursing homes? It would take time, and seems like an overwhelming project."

She admitted there were problems. She also said she wished she could come with me to England so I wouldn't have to go alone. "Next time", I told her with a smile, "when the weather is better and you can enjoy it. Had she heard anymore from George?"

As a matter of fact she had, just the night before, and he left a message I was to call him before leaving the country. Anne did not know why, but thought she would find out after I did. George seemed to think I should be the first to know, whatever it was.

On that encouraging note I said goodbye to dear Anne and dialed George's number. No answer. I got up to get a cold glass of water, took a peek out the window—dark, but by the outside lights, no longer raining—and tried the number again. I was successful this time.

"Tell me what you have, George," I said without preamble. "I'm getting hungry."

"Shoot, you're lucky to get up with me at all," he pointed out grumpily. "I'm only home because of the weather."

"Oh? Nobody mentioned the weather."

"Well, it's rainy, windy, and cold."

"Sounds delightful. Here it's only cold. The rainy windy part seems to be over."

"From what I hear about the British Isles weather this time of year, you'll get plenty of all three. You are still going?"

"I am. I bought an umbrella today. I just finished talking to Anne and she says you wanted to tell me something?"

"Yup, and it's pretty good. It may be worth bringing me back some of those genuine English scones."

“Really? If it’s good you can count on the scones, name your flavor.”

It was good. After my basically disappointing day it was an energy booster. It had been weeks since I had asked George to try and find a line from Amelia Marsh’s maiden name and the county where she had lived growing up. His efforts finally paid off.

“The whole process has been like a pass the torch footrace,” George explained. “I’ve had to wait for one person to contact another, and for the third or fourth person to find the time to explore the local records. Very interesting, though.”

“You have been on your own treasure hunt again,” I commented, feeling very magnanimous.

“What I got was confirmation of where Mrs. Marsh was born. Her birth was recorded at the time of her baptism in the records of a church in Stafford, Church of England. Once I had that, I asked if there were any other Tuckers also listed. You were right; there were two older brothers, born to the same father, but a different mother. She died in childbirth, and three years later Mr. Garrison Tucker married Caroline Hinson, and there are two recorded births from their marriage. Three plus years before your friend, there was another girl born, Mary Louise.”

As George read his report I copied down everything he told me.

“This is good,” I complimented. Not to be ungrateful, but I was hoping for even more information. There was more.

“Now what I really thought you would like to know,” he went on, “is I think the sister is still alive. She will be eighty-four next month. Her marriage took place in that same church, in 1933. There is a place in the registry for deaths, and both of the brothers are deceased, and the parents, too, of course. The sister is no longer a local resident, but my English contact says if she’s gone her death should be noted. Apparently there are locals who like to keep up with that sort of thing.”

George kept reading. “Mary Tucker married a man named Stephen Whitaker, and they had two children baptized in the same church before moving their membership to Coventry, after the war. The Coventry church has record of two more Whitaker baby baptisms, and the death of Stephen Whitaker in 1988.”

“But no record of the death of Mary,” I finished for him.

“Exactly. I can’t tell you where she lives, although maybe with more time I could find out if she still lives in that county. Sorry, there’s nothing else in the records from either church about either one of the Marsh sisters.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Too bad Amelia and Leonard’s marriage isn’t recorded in one of the church records. It wouldn’t be unusual for her marriage to miss the local registry would it? They were married in London. Were the marriages of her brothers listed?”

They had been, although one of them got married in Scotland. George had been told by his English contacts the records of births, marriages, and deaths were more up to date before the war, when the majority of people lived their lives where they were born, and if they did leave, they had family who remained to keep the information current. I asked George if he had the dates of the deaths of Amelia’s parents. He did so I copied that information also.

Now I had the married name of Amelia’s older sister. There was a good chance Mary still lived, and perhaps other more distant family members and old neighbors, as well. When you put it all together, I had learned several facts since boarding that airplane in Indiana. I thanked George sincerely and promised he would have an abundance of scones.

“I didn’t even know you liked them,” I commented.

“Don’t know if I do. I never had one.”

The next day, Friday, I had a number of small details to attend to before leaving the country. The flight was all arranged in Virginia, and I made certain my passport was in order before leaving home. I still needed to call the airline to make sure there had been no changes in flight times, confirm my reservations at the hotel I would stay in near the airport, plan my itinerary to give myself plenty of time to turn in my rental car, etcetera. There was also the matter of several days of dirty laundry.

It was almost eight-thirty and I was thinking about breakfast when the phone next to the bed rang. That was a surprise. Surprise turned to astonishment when I picked up the receiver.

“Is this Mrs. Nimitz?” asked a throaty voice on the other end of the line. I admitted the same.

“Mrs. Nimitz, we hope you’ll forgive us for bothering you like this, but we, that is my husband Ed, my sister and myself, heard you were here and inquiring about Amelia and Leonard Marsh.”

“That would be correct,” I acknowledged politely. “How did you know?”

“Well, John, that is John Beeson, called Ed yesterday and told him about your call to their house. He and Ed both played cards with Leonard sometimes, years ago. I was in the garden club for a number of years myself, although I haven’t been now for awhile.” She paused and then added suddenly, “Do forgive me! I haven’t even told you my name. I am Ellen Thayer, Mrs. Edwin Thayer. My sister, Dolly, knew the Marshes, too. She lives with us now.”

This could be interesting.

“Mrs. Thayer, you actually went through the trouble of finding out where I am staying to talk to me about the Marshes?”

She reminded me I had given my whereabouts to the Beesons, both address and phone number at the inn. I told her frankly but nicely that the Beesons were not interested in talking to me.

“Oh don’t mind them, dear,” she soothed me. “Margaret is getting old and a little grouchy; forgetful sometimes, too. John just goes along with what she wants, less trouble that way, you know.”

“I would love to take you, your husband, and your sister to lunch,” I ventured, “if you would care to chat with me about old times with the Marshes.”

Mrs. Thayer cooed in delight, but had to consult with the other two, both of them close at hand. It was unanimous. Then it took a few moments to decide on where we should rendezvous and to give me directions on how to get there.

I was spending a lot of time with the geriatric set, something new for me. The experience was mostly positive so far.

My assumption had been we would lunch together at the dining room of a historic hotel or perhaps a local diner with an established reputation for good food. I was surprised to follow my directions to a new plaza still partially under construction. The large restaurant was cafeteria style. The Thayers and Dolly flagged me down as I entered, one of the ladies waving her hankie from her wheelchair.

We analyzed each other. What I saw were three people over seventy, and it was a good guess the married couple would never see eighty again. All peered at me through glasses, and Ed held out a hand for me to shake. After doing so I leaned over to give a gentle squeeze to a hand in the wheelchair, who identified herself as Ellen. Dolly, the most reserved of the trio, gave me a small smile with a nod. No one said specifically why she lived with her sister. In the course of our dialogue there were references to children, most of who lived out of state, but it was never clear how the offspring lined up. Thinking about them afterward I suspected Dolly assisted with housekeeping and Ellen’s care. Ellen’s limbs bore the unmistakable signs of advancing rheumatoid arthritis.

As it turned out I gave them more information than they gave me. But I enjoyed myself. For an hour and a half we chatted over fairly good food and drink. The surroundings were pleasant, with a contemporary mural of the seacoast covering one of the walls, and the rest of the décor done in restful blues, beige, and greens. They had come early and gotten a table in the corner, assuring us of a fair amount of privacy.

Ed, Ellen, and Dolly, as they insisted I call them, were curious. When they found out someone had come to town that had known their old friend, they wanted to know why. They wanted to know what happened to her. All had stories to tell of how and when they had known both the Marshes. The stories lined up with everything I knew about them myself. I learned a bit of trivia that was new, such as Leonard enjoyed baseball and followed the New York Giants. For years he was part of a monthly poker game, small stakes of course. Amelia had often hosted the club meetings of the organizations she belonged to, serving delicious lunches or afternoon coffees. She did not become reclusive after the death of her husband, but was not as active or social as she had been. Dolly and Ellen, I thought, were among those friends Amelia had enjoyed but never revealed much of herself to. Like she had with many other people through the course of her life, she walked away from them without strings, and, apparently without regret. It would not be surprising if Anne had never heard of them. I would ask her.

Dolly had counted June Fisk as a friend and asked me about her. She smiled sadly when informed June was also gone. At this time of life death was no stranger to these people but that didn’t mean it was easy.

I was in a mental quandary about whether it was a good idea to tell these elderly people their old friend had met a violent end. I mulled over it as they chatted on in their memories. Ed was finishing his beef stew and a recollection of Leonard's funeral when Ellen asked me point blank.

"So what is it that brought you back here, Sally? What happened?"

When backed into a corner, go with your instincts. First I explained my next-door neighbor's status, and told them about my two p.m. appointment on that fateful Wednesday. Carefully moving on, they heard the unedited version, albeit not every specific detail. They were stunned, dismayed, and nonetheless very interested. More questions were asked, all of which I answered to the best of my ability.

"But surely you didn't come back east thinking you could find Amelia's murderer here?" Dolly asked that.

I didn't admit I had hoped so, only saying as I had before, I wanted to know more about Amelia and Leonard, who seemed to have led such fascinating lives, and I decided to take some vacation time and do so.

"What a wonderful gesture, dear," beamed Ellen. "They were like that. Something about them rather mysterious, although I couldn't put my finger on it, exactly."

I had omitted from my story the facts we now knew about Leonard's occupation. That, I decided, would have been too much and would serve no useful purpose.

In another half an hour we parted amicably. Ed asked me what my plans were now. I told them I was going on to England, which met with unanimous approval. Ellen dug a pen and piece of paper out of her purse and gave it to Ed. He wrote down their address and phone number, urging me to contact them again when I returned.

"We haven't been much help, have we?" Ed said regretfully. "Seems like you know someone, then you realize you really don't"

That pretty well summed up Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Marsh.

Chapter Nineteen

I would never choose flying over driving. Overseas flights are especially tedious, and my years married to a career serviceman had subjected me to a number of those. Trying to doze during the red eye flight to London and not being especially successful, I decided long flights are like pain. You never really get used to it. About noon British time, I wearily surrendered my luggage to a taxi driver who deftly deposited me at my hotel, chosen in part for its location just twenty minutes from the airport.

My room would not be ready for another hour, so I took myself to the dining room and ordered a light lunch to pass the time. I knew it would be a mistake to let myself sleep, and I was in no shape to do anything that required much thought.

Although the official tourist season was over, a sign in the lobby offered a guided tour to St. James during the late afternoon, leaving at two-thirty, cost not too inhibitive. Eyeing the weather, overcast but not raining, I signed up. The room was ready in time for my belongings to be taken up before leaving. It wasn't easy to ignore those fluffy pillows and go back downstairs to board the bus, but it was a good move. My fatigue subsided and the only London sightseeing I would get an opportunity to do was worthwhile.

Knowing in advance nothing would get accomplished as far as my agenda the first day, I had reserved a room in my London hotel for three nights. I bought a map of England and a train schedule, and by mid morning on Tuesday was busy scrutinizing both. The concierge was also helpful. I knew it would not be cheap to make the phone calls and I considered whether I should take the train to Coventry or continue my search for Mary Whitaker locally. Tuesday afternoon I caught a bus to a library, thanks to the concierge, and considered directories of Stafford and Coventry, with the assistance of the friendly staff there.

Mary Whitaker was listed in the local Coventry directory, both address and phone number, the publication just six months old. I caught my breath as I read it. Was this my Mary Whitaker? Could there be another Mary Whitaker in Coventry? The name wasn't unusual. It could also be a daughter-in-law, but it was a good lead.

In Stafford, I found several Tuckers, but the first names were not familiar. Mary was still my best hope.

It was dark by the time I returned to my hotel, hungry and tired again. I bought a sandwich in the lobby deli and spent the rest of the evening in my room. Wednesday was rainy and cold. I made arrangements to catch an early train Thursday morning to Coventry, assured there would be no problem finding lodging there, but armed with several suggestions from both the library and the hotel staff. By noon I felt adventurous enough to follow

instructions, again by bus, to a larger branch of the same hotel chain. This one had Internet access. Fumbling around at first, I finally managed to send a message to George, telling him where I was headed and when, knowing he would get in touch with my son, as we had agreed in advance. Everett was going to notify his sister, and George would also call Anne Carey, so everyone would be in the loop on my travels.

Armed with a good umbrella and my raincoat, I moseyed down the street after sending my message, peering in windows and stopping in an attractive tearoom for just that. When in Rome ...

Well supplied with English currency, I checked out of my hotel and stepped into the taxi graciously called for me by the desk clerk. I knew it would be an expensive ride to the train station, and it was, but I suppressed my natural inclination to be thrifty and paid up without blinking an eye. Knowing ahead of time prepared me psychologically. After purchasing my ticket there was still an hour before departure. It wasn't hard to maneuver my luggage to a food booth; there were only two pieces. Settling at the one empty small table I grimaced at the strength of the coffee, thought about asking for some hot water, and decided to bear it. There was a prohibitive line at the counter. Mrs. Marsh told me once the British tended to brew coffee stronger than I was used to. The pastry was fresh and made it bearable.

The train left promptly at eleven forty-five in the morning. As usual I had a book handy, but I passed most of the two hour ride looking out of the window. Even in the early grasp of winter the scenery was appealing. It surprised me how much countryside there was even between London and Coventry. The train was fairly full, but not crowded. I had a seat to myself. The other passengers were mainly adults, and quietly read their own materials or conversed in low tones with their companions. On a head count there were only four young children, and it was nice hearing their childish chatter from my seat several rows behind them. The youngest, about two, slept in his pram.

So far the English people had been kind and friendly, and they did not disappoint me in Coventry. Traveling in an English speaking country was making my journey much easier, even with the differences in accents and figures of speech. A taxi driver singled me out the moment I stepped out of the station, rolling my larger suitcase behind me.

"Where to, mum?" he asked cheerfully, opening the passenger door to his conveyance, and reaching for my luggage, the trunk of his vehicle already open.

I eyed him contemplatively. He looked about fifty, wearing a slightly worn and slightly tight brown suit. But it was very clean, as was his scrubbed round face and his conveyance. Before leaving London I asked what to expect to pay for fares. If this man tried to cheat me he would soon find out he had not chosen an easy mark. But my guess was he wouldn't.

"Can you take me to this hotel?" I asked him, showing him the top name on my list.

No problem, he knew the place.

I asked him how long it would take to get there, and about how much the fare would be. It depended on the traffic, he told me, but fifteen minutes should do it, and he quoted me an approximate price within the parameters I expected. I got into his cab.

It was amusing to ride on the left side of the street and to watch the driver maneuver through heavy weekday traffic. As most American tourists do, I also found the smaller vehicles interesting. In a moment the driver began to make small talk. Late in the year for a holiday, wasn't it? I agreed noncommittally that it was, but added Coventry was still interesting in November. He urged me to make a point of visiting the cathedrals and the statue of St. Michaels. I told him I would.

"Bombed the hell out of us during the war, the Germans did," he said, never losing his upbeat demeanor. "Took some time and work to rebuild, but that's what we did, and St. Michael's, too."

We arrived in front of a motel that looked more like a boarding house. The driver assured me this was a decent place to stay so I decided to risk it and let him go. I paid what he asked and added a tip. He appeared satisfied, took my luggage up to the entrance, gave me a friendly salute, and departed.

I walked into a lobby and up to a desk that reminded me of a scene from a post war English movie. There was large stuffed furniture, a stone fireplace, old fashioned end tables with lamps on each one, and a huge, dark heavy wooden desk with a guest register on the counter top. Behind it stood a middle-aged woman, and behind her was another beautiful dark piece of wood with hooks and keys hanging from it. To my satisfaction everything looked and smelled immaculate. The desk clerk was a lady in a dark suit with a white blouse, her

graying blond hair pulled severely back from her thin face. I knew she was sizing me up, and that my cranberry colored raincoat and luggage probably pegged me for an American traveler. She would find out as soon as I opened my mouth she was right.

“Your establishment was recommended to me in London,” I said after giving her a polite greeting. “I shall be in Coventry at least a couple of days, perhaps a bit longer.”

“Are you by yourself, then?” she asked, her manner totally correct but devoid of any expression.

I replied that I was.

“We have rooms available. The most expensive is the largest with a private bathroom and bathtub. We have two with a small private bath and shower, and our most reasonable rooms share a bath with one other room. You are welcome to view the accommodations before making a choice.”

What a great idea, yes, I would like to see the rooms before choosing. She obligingly took three keys off the hooks behind her and led the way, quoting me a room rate as she opened a door to each one. Thrift won the day. The largest room was tempting but the smaller room with a private commode and shower would do fine.

The room was on the second floor. An overweight young man materialized to assist me with my luggage, which wasn't really necessary as there was an elevator and I had done fine without assistance at the train station. But it seemed rude to refuse so he led the way back up the lift and down to the end of the hall. He had the same lack of personality as the proprietress so maybe they were related. I gave him fifty pence for a tip and considered it fair. He said a perfunctory, “Thank you mum,” and closed the door behind him.

Fourth hotel room in less than two weeks, I thought idly, as I slowly removed my coat and looked around again. These accommodations were intended for function over luxury but they were pleasant and very, well, English. The bed was decidedly on the soft side. I hadn't tried it when viewing the room the first time. Oh well. I had no back problems, and it was for only a couple of nights. Wandering to the window and looking out through flowery cotton curtains, I looked down at the street below. It was around the corner from the main entrance with a view of a side street with little traffic. I could see into the back entrances of several establishments, some business and some private. All were clean, well kept, and some had gardens in the throes of late fall. It wasn't hard to picture how attractive it could be here when the flowers and the shrubs were in bloom. I loved the building structures so prominent in this part of the world, so much stone and brick masonry, some of it centuries old. I knew wood had gone out of favor as structural material because of the great London fire at the turn of the 17th century.

Heat was coming up through the grates in the floor, situated well out of the way of my feet, and the room was cozy. But all the caffeine digested at the train depot was in full gear and I was too restless to vegetate. That might come later, and there was the expected teapot on a tray on the desk, complete with prepackaged biscuits. I looked with pleasure at the china cups, a perk not expected. Right now half the afternoon was left and my appetite was crying for more than a shortbread biscuit. I freshened up and put my faithful raincoat back on.

If I had any intentions of going back to the front desk to ask for a recommendation in my jaunt, forget it. She was nowhere to be seen. There was no one else in the lobby, either. I paused on the steps after letting myself out and slipped on my gloves. I looked to the right, then to the left, and chose right, more activity in that direction.

Strolling down the street an unfamiliar feeling washed over me. It was loneliness. Here I was, a continent away from anyone who knew or cared about me, all by myself. Not many of the people I knew would choose to travel so far without a companion but I was often content alone. When my husband was alive he was often away. The wives of many of his fellow officers had hated the deployments, but I was among those who coped well. After retirement he was home more, but still occasionally left me to go on a buying trip or for a seminar. Sometimes I went along but other times my own commitments kept me at home. It wasn't necessary to beg a friend to stay with me, and I never needed to keep the lights on all night and the radio playing. Usually I enjoyed the solitude, at least for short periods of time. Crowds and constant noise bothered me more. I only wanted that in small doses. It was possible if I lived as long as Mrs. Marsh did I would become one of those crotchety old codgers living in a seclusion who went out once a week for groceries, the only time anybody ever saw them. Of course my children might have something to say about that.

But right now I would have loved some company. Well, the book in my bag would have to do. Besides, I needed to make a list of what to do next. Walking three long blocks put me in the middle of a shopping center. It was time to sample some English fish and chips.

It was after nine when I got back to my lodgings. At the eatery my doldrums lifted. The fish and chips were a little greasy but tasty. The restaurant was nice and the waiter attentive. After finishing my meal I read a couple of chapters of *At Home in Mitford*, which further melted the melancholy. Now the afternoon tea drinkers were filtering in, but there were still empty tables and no one was pressing me to leave. I ordered tea. Waiter Michael highly recommended the carrot cake but I was full and declined. Leaning back, casually looking out the window at the pedestrians scurrying by, and listening to bits and pieces of conversations floating around me, I decided what I needed was to be a tourist for a little while.

My addiction into the life of Amelia Marsh could be put on hold for a day. A shopping spree was in order. Not only would I shop tonight—and I was informed the shops would be open for a while yet—but I would visit the churches in the morning. Waiter Michael brought my check and courteously answered a few more questions about getting about in Coventry. A good name, Michael, I told him.

So it was that I got back to the inn with three shopping bags and tired feet. The concierge was back at her post.

“You can leave your key here at the desk when you go out, if you like, Mrs. Nimitz,” she said politely, “not that you have to, of course, but some people find it heavy, and there is an extra charge if it gets lost.”

I approached the desk and peered at her nametag. Right. Mrs. Oliver. Her voice wasn’t bad but her face was still a mask. Did the woman never smile? I thanked her for the information, and agreed it was a good idea to leave the key; I would do that from now on.

“We also lock the front door at eleven,” she further informed me. “If you stay out later, please just ring the buzzer. There is always someone on duty for late arrivals.”

“That is good to know,” I replied cheerfully, “but this is probably as late as it will get. “Mrs. Oliver,” I added impulsively, “have you lived in Coventry a long time?”

“Yes,” she answered.

I waited for her to volunteer more, but nothing doing.

“Then perhaps I could ask you about this address,” I said, ignoring her lack of spontaneity. I pulled Mary Whitaker’s address out of my purse, and held it out to her. After a second of hesitation she took it and read it.

“I believe Manley Place is toward the south end of the town,” was her response, “but we have very good maps here, only forty pence each.”

Sure enough, at the end of the long front desk there was a display of maps, city, county, and others. I paid up and gathered all of my loot. On the second floor, small sconces on the wall with low wattage bulbs lit the way down the hall. Once upon a time they maybe have been gas lit, or even held candles. The lights made interesting shadows on the walls as I moved towards my door, and there was no noise coming out of any of the other rooms. Decidedly spooky, I thought with a grin.

There was no explanation for it, but with my goal of meeting Amelia Marsh’s sister, Mary, so close at hand, I stuck to the idea of the previous afternoon and put it off. It was rather like reading a book, coming to the climax, and setting it back on the shelf until the next opportunity came to read again. Such behavior might be explained as prolonging the anticipation.

As I left the hotel, about eight-thirty, the sun was coming out. I took my umbrella anyway.

It was a great way to spend a morning. If you ever go to Coventry, I would recommend the cathedrals. I promised myself to return someday, maybe bringing Miss Carey with me. We would come earlier in the fall, or in the spring. The umbrella wasn’t needed

It was necessary to return to my room before going on to find Mary Whitaker. Not only did my blouse need to be changed because of splashing some coffee on myself at breakfast, but I needed the map purchased the night before and had neglected to slip it into my bag. After freshening up I looked at it again. According to scale, Manley Place was a twenty or thirty minute walk. Should I call first? What if she refused to see me? That idea was pretty hard to take. Knocking on the door and being refused admittance was preferable. At least that was final. Then I would have to try someone, somewhere, else. That was an unbearable thought, too. One step at a time, and this step’s time had come.

Tucking my map into an accessible spot in my shoulder bag, I brought it out for reference several times and took a wrong turn only once, which cost me about three minutes to back track. The sky was overcast again but no rain yet, and here I was at last, standing in front of the address I had for Mary Whitaker. I glanced at my watch. It was after two-thirty.

The building was brick, two-story, and very long, with at least five other private dwellings enclosed within the single abode. If it was pre or post second world war I could not tell, but some of the trees in the yards had to be several decades old. The numbers, which matched the address I had, were beside the door to the far left. Taking a deep breath, I climbed the six steps to the front door and lifted the brass knocker, rapping it loudly against the door three times.

For a long moment no one answered, and I was beginning to think no one would when the door opened.

Two young men looked at me curiously. The one on the right looked older, at a rough guess about thirty-five, the younger one maybe late twenties.

“Can we help you?” the older one asked. It was obvious they had been painting. Their casual clothes and shoes were dotted and splotted with a slate blue color.

“I am looking for Mrs. Mary Whitaker,” I said steadily, looking at each of them in turn.

They exchanged glances and the younger of the two spoke this time.

“Sorry, mum,” he said with a sad little smile, “I’m afraid she passed on a few weeks ago.”

Chapter Twenty

It may have been the look of disappointment on my face, curiosity, courtesy, or a combination of all three, but the two of them simultaneously asked me to come in.

As it turned out the painting was going on upstairs, one of the reasons it took so long for them to come to the door. They both came down, they explained later, because they saw me approaching from the front upstairs window and wondered what I was doing there.

The main living area of the house was on the lower floor, and I was led into the closest room on the left of the entryway, the dining room. This room had also recently undergone a facelift. The only furniture present was a dining room set and a large sideboard. The walls were so recently painted, a light yellow, you could faintly smell the scent.

I sat down in the dining room chair indicated and my hosts pulled up two more. Immediately the older one said, “What is it you wanted with our grandmother, madam?”

“Your grandmother?” I squeaked.

They nodded.

“You’re an American, aren’t you? Or Canadian?”

Whenever I look on a map, it seems to me Canada and the United States are both in America, but Canadians and fellow countrymen alike always seem to consider Canada another realm. Apparently the British made the same delineation.

“I am an American,” I informed them, “and I never knew your grandmother. But I did know her sister, Amelia.”

The older, who had been leaning forward casually in his chair, now leaned back and gave me an incredulous grin.

“Long lost great aunt Amelia? You don’t say! Peter, put the kettle on for the lady. Looks like there might be a story here. Wait until we get a hold of mum!”

They were Roger and Peter Simington, the two sons of Mary’s daughter, Sandra. We introduced ourselves to each other, and Peter went off to put the tea kettle on, but not before he said, “Nice of you to come by, Mrs. Nimitz. We were dearly sick of painting, anyway. Just half a room to go, thank the Lord.”

While Peter got together cups and waited for the water to boil, I asked his brother if this was the house where his grandmother had lived.

“For forty years,” he answered cheerfully. “Most of that was with my grandfather, of course. He died about eight years ago. The place has needed some work for awhile, but they liked it the way it was, and she didn’t want to change anything after he was gone.”

“And, you say she just passed on recently?” I prodded.

She had indeed. Mary Whitaker had died peacefully in her sleep, the day after her sister had been killed.

“She was a dear, our Gran’,” Roger went on conversationally, “rather like the queen mum, always there. I guess one forgets no one goes on forever.”

He eyed me speculatively. “Did you have a message for her or something from her sister?”

“Not exactly,” I admitted, “but it’s rather a long story. Perhaps we’ll wait for your brother to come back, and I’ll explain.”

To fill the time, I asked Roger if the house was being sold, and he told me it had been willed to his mother, the oldest of Mary’s children. She in turn decided to allow himself and Peter to lease it for their use.

“Pete is finishing graduate school,” the older sibling explained, “so money is a bit tight for him. For myself,” and a shadow of regret flickered over his not unhandsome face, “I’m recently divorced.”

“I’m sorry,” I said sincerely.

“Life goes on,” he shrugged, “and here, I’m not too far away from my girls, my two daughters. What about yourself, Mrs. Nimitz? It is Mrs.? Did you come over with anyone?”

I explained my marital status and traveling arrangements. I politely asked if he and Peter had any other siblings and was told there were two sisters between them, neither of who lived in Coventry. Peter returned in about fifteen minutes with a tray. On it were not only steaming mugs of tea, but hastily made sandwiches and a plate with a wedge of cake.

“We didn’t stop for lunch,” Peter explained as he handed out the mugs and set out the food. Of course they offered me a sandwich but I eyed the thick ham with misgivings and took a piece of cake instead, declining milk or sugar for my tea.

“This is good,” I complimented honestly as I sipped the tea, “and while you gentleman eat your late lunch, as we would call it in the states, I will explain what I am doing on your doorstep.”

So I did.

They were suitably interested. Eventually Roger asked me to excuse him for a moment, and tried to call his mother. He returned to say she was at the dentist, so that would have to wait. Would I continue?

“You have heard most of it. Your great aunt was a charming, interesting lady. I found myself on a quest to learn more about her, and here I am.”

I continued with a brief synopsis of the investigation of George, Anne, and myself, to inform them of how I had ended up in Coventry.

“None of us know why she didn’t keep in touch with her relatives. In fact, we didn’t know she had any. Do you know what happened?”

Peter nodded toward his older brother. “Roger is more interested in the family history that I am. All I know is Gran’ had one sister, but no one has heard a word from her in decades.”

There was a pause as Roger offered to refill our teacups. I took the opportunity to take a couple of bites of the cake. It was a little dry, but I ate it anyway.

“I don’t know much more,” Roger admitted as he took a seat again. “You wouldn’t have any photos of her, would you, Mrs. Nimitz?”

“I think you could call me Sally, if you don’t mind,” I reached into my bag.

I had brought a few select photos with me and had been guarding them carefully. Now I pulled the manila envelope out of my shoulder bag and produced them all. One was the family portrait done when Mary and Amelia had been girls, the second of Amelia as a young woman, and the third a snapshot of Amelia and Leonard done shortly after they had settled permanently in New Jersey. The last was of Amelia taken by Anne at a garden party just weeks before her demise.

The boys scrutinized them all with interest, making a random comment as, “Nice looking girl, wasn’t she?” and “She didn’t resemble Gran’ that much, do you think? Not,” Roger added loyally, “that Gran’ wasn’t a looker in her day.”

They were both interested in seeing what her husband looked like. I asked if they had known she was married, and neither recalled hearing either way. Roger was sure the boys in the early photo were the older brothers, and knew one of them had died during the war.

“Harold, his name was,” he volunteered. “I think he left a family, but his wife married a Scot and Gran’ lost touch with them after a time. I saw a photograph like this in an album as a kid, and asked about them all. Now the other brother was Gordon, and his family still lives in Staffordshire near the old farm. He’s gone, too. Of course he’d be over ninety now. We met him a couple of times as kids, don’t know if you remember, Pete. His kids were mother’s cousins, of course, and I know she gets Christmas cards from some of them still.”

So I heard bits and pieces of Amelia’s family history. But time was passing, and I thought I had taken enough of theirs.

“But you must meet our mother,” Peter insisted when I told them so. “She wouldn’t hear of you leaving Coventry without talking to her personally.”

“Certainly not,” Roger agreed courteously. He added with a bit of discernment, “and I think she may be able to tell you at least some of what you would like to know.”

I could hardly deny that I wanted to meet their mother very much. We discussed how that could be done, and it was decided I should return for tea the following afternoon. Roger thought it most appropriate we have our meeting in their grandmother’s house, and as an after thought remarked there was a great deal of memorabilia in the cellar his mother might want to look at in conjunction with our look back into the past.

When I pointed out their mother might have other plans for her Saturday, the young men discarded the notion anything would keep her away.

“Do take down the name of my hotel and room number, in case there’s a glitch,” I urged, and they did.

“Would you be offended if I brought something to add to the refreshment?”

Not at all.

With a lot of mixed feelings and emotions, I wandered around Coventry and took a very long detour back in the direction of my lodgings. It was extraordinary that Mary and Amelia had died within a day of each other. I felt a sense of loss in not having been able to meet the older sister, but at the same time elated that her family would welcome a virtual stranger just because I had known the mysterious aunt they had lost connection with so long ago. Wouldn’t George and Anne love to sit in on tomorrow’s tea party! Would Sandra Simington be as congenial as her sons had been? And most of all, would she finally be able to supply some answers to the second greatest mystery about Amelia Marsh, why she had disappeared into an English sunset never to be seen or heard from again.

Before going up to my room for the night I asked the attendant at the front desk if it was too late to sign up for breakfast. She was a complete contrast to Mrs. Oliver. With a bright smile on her plump face the young woman assured me it was no trouble at all, she would add one more to the list. Breakfast was served between seventy-thirty and nine.

I showed up between getting dressed and fixing my hair and make-up. The dining room was small, maximum seating capacity about forty, and maybe half full. I shared a table with a very elderly woman who was not interested in conversation. She did give me a weak smile before returning full attention to her eggs and beans. I munched on some toast, ate a bowl of bran flakes, and carried a second cup of coffee back to my room.

My date with the Simington family was at three-thirty. By ten I was wondering how to pass the time. At this point side trips didn’t appeal to me; my focus was back to my mission for being here. A conversation with some loved ones back home sounded good, but there would be more to tell if I waited. Besides, a quick calculation on the time difference told me no one would be up yet.

A walk? A cold steady rain was tapping at my window. Just walking back to my appointment would give me enough exposure to that.

I eyed my disheveled suitcases, the gifts not yet organized or re-packed, and the jumble of notes taken from Texas to Virginia to Britain. There was enough here to keep me busy for a couple of hours if I could put my mind to it.

I left early enough to stop somewhere to eat a salad and to browse for something to bring to the soiree. I settled on a raspberry cream cake from a bakery shop I had seen and drooled over the day before. It was a bit of a job to manage my umbrella, my bag and the cake, but the lady at the counter put some string around the box, which made it manageable. The rain was only a drizzle now, but the air was humid and cold. I was grateful for the lining in my coat, a heavy sweater, warm tights under my maxi-skirt, and warm gloves. I wasted no time getting back to Manley Place.

The Simingtons apologized profusely for allowing me to walk the dozen blocks in the raw weather. Their call to the hotel to offer me a ride came too late to catch me. I was secretly relieved to know I wouldn’t have to call a taxi or walk back.

There were three of them now, but only Roger was a familiar face. Peter would be along later. The other two faces who stood welcoming me at the door were Sandra and her husband, Norman.

Norman had not come up before, but the boys never said Sandra was a widow so I knew he might exist. He was an older version of Roger, who could expect a bald pate by his fifties. Peter resembled his mother more in his looks, though not in physique.

Sandra was about my own height, perhaps a dozen years older, and comfortably plump. Dressed in a dark skirt, white blouse, and Kelly green sweater, she was completely gracious, consciously or not, taking over the position of house host. She was also a talker. Her husband and Roger didn't seem to mind at all, they had to be used to it. Her chatty nature could be a big plus for me. I took off my boots and was relieved of my umbrella and soggy raincoat before being escorted back to the dining room. My cake added to a nice assortment of food. Our visit began.

"Life is full of surprises!" Sandra exclaimed as she poured me a fine cup of coffee.

I fully agreed. One of them was being offered a cup of coffee at an afternoon tea in a British home. Sandra offered me a choice of tea or coffee as soon as I was settled in the same chair I had occupied the day before.

"Norman has developed a taste for coffee," my hostess explained, "and he thought you might prefer it, so we have both."

I thanked Norman, who gave me a nod and a small smile. After pouring another cup for her husband Sandra served tea for Roger and herself. While his mother took care of the beverages her son took it upon himself to offer the refreshments. The table was just small enough for Roger to pass the cakes, cheese, and small sandwiches around without having to get up. There were no mugs today, we were using delFTWARE. I wondered if it once belonged to Mary Whitaker.

Sandra continued. "When the boys told me someone from America had come with news of my mother's sister, I could hardly believe it! After all this time! But they have shared your story, Mrs. Nimitz, and told us about the photographs. You must have known Amelia."

I pulled the packet of the four pictures out of my bag and handed them to her. She scrutinized them and exclaimed, "By all that's holy, Norm! Look at these!"

Norm did so. "The oldest one, taken when she was young, is like the one you have, Sandy," he commented. "Your mother, her sister, and your mother's family."

"Did you ever meet her, Mrs. Simington?" I ventured.

"Oh yes," Sandy turned a pair of bright blue eyes back to me. "As a girl, I saw her a few times. Not too often, but I remember her. I think the last time was near the end of the war and I was about eleven. We moved here to Coventry shortly after that, as my father was hired to help with the restoration of the city. She came here to visit mother once several years later, but I wasn't home. That was the last time anyone saw her."

Before I could interject anything she leaned forward in her chair and asked me earnestly, "Is it true that she was killed, that someone took her life?"

"I'm afraid so. There's no doubt about it."

"There's something extra harsh about the violent death of someone that age," Roger mused. It was the first time he had said anything since greeting me at the door. "I don't know why it should be so, since eighty is the end of life for most of us, but there it is."

"Because it is so unnatural, perhaps," his father contributed quietly. "Old people are supposed to be able to fade away, the way Mary did. When you are younger, risks are expected."

These were refined people, I thought, nice people. Why had Amelia turned her back on them?"

"This was her husband you said," Sandra was scrutinizing that particular picture more closely. "A distinguished looking man. Do you happen to know what he looked like when he was young?"

I admitted there had been a few photographs from London in the war years, and described him as well as I could in his forties. I went on to tell them what we had learned about his childhood and his profession as an intelligence officer. As I had done before, I omitted the darker side of his work.

There was a quiet moment when I finished, as each of us munched or sipped, busy with our own thoughts. It's now or never, Sally, I said to myself.

"Mrs. Simington," I looked at her directly, and she gazed back at me as if she already suspected what was coming. "Do you know why your aunt left England for good after she married Leonard Marsh?"

"Why yes, dear, I do," she answered without hesitation. "It is because she was married already."

Roger gave a low whistle. "Shame and scandal in the family! You were holding out on us, Mother." There was a hint of amusement, and more than a hint of surprise in his comment.

Norman sat placidly sipping his brew. He knew. I leaned back in my chair and took a deep breath. Sandra watched me.

"Did you guess?" She asked.

"It had crossed my mind. For weeks I've gone over everything we have known and learned about Amelia's life. One fact I learned early was that your aunt had born a child. In the weeks to follow, not even her sister-in-law or her best friend's daughter ever heard of Leonard and Amelia having a baby, not even a stillborn. They could have, and never talked about it, but a former marriage was another explanation."

Roger looked at one, then both of his parents. "How long have you known?"

"Only for a couple of years," his mother answered him. "When your grandmother told me about it I told your father, but no one else. That was her wish."

"And now? Would you tell the story now?" I was the one who asked.

"Yes," she smiled at me gently. She had a nice face, I thought, framed by graying dark hair, and heavy eyebrows. It was no longer pretty, but it was easy to look at. "We talked about it last night after the boys came over to tell us about you. If I am to start at the beginning it is a rather long story, but if you want, I'd be glad to tell it. Almost everyone concerned is gone, now."

So we refilled our cups and Sandra Simington, Amelia's niece, took center stage.

She was only beginning when Peter arrived. He wanted to know what he had been missing, and it took a few minutes to put him in the loop. Fully informed and very interested, he poured himself a cup of tea, grabbed a large piece of the cake I had brought, and waved us on.

"It all started, really, back at the old home place in Staffordshire. Amelia's mother, my grandmother, was, as you know, second wife to Garrison Tucker. He had two boys by his first wife, and two daughters by Caroline. Stafford has long been known for its pottery and factories, you know that too, but it also had large prosperous farms and mining. Grandfather was left a nice lot of land and interests in both of those by his own father. The Tuckers were well placed. Mother was the oldest girl, and Amelia about four years younger."

Here Sandra paused and backtracked a bit. "I think I should tell you Mother only told me all of this winter before last. She was very ill with a bad bout of bronchitis, and I stayed here with her for a few days. I was looking at the picture she always kept on the mantle in the sitting room, one that is similar to the one you brought, Sally, of the family taken when they were still girls. She was tucked in her shawl and blankets in front of the fire and I said, 'Mum, did you never hear anything from your sister?' She thought about it for a bit, then decided to tell me the whole story."

Later that night back in my room I thought about how fickle life can be. If Amelia Marsh's sister had not been ill and her niece had not asked that casual question, a lot of the truth would have died with Mary.

"The girls had a very happy childhood. As I said, the family was comfortably off and my mother described my grandmother as a wonderful woman. The boys were enough older that Mary didn't know them all that well, and Amelia even less so. When they weren't at school, they were sometimes with their mother's people in Wales. After my granddad died, Gordon came back to take over the place, but that's another story. The point is, the girls had a very nice life. Their mother adored them and their father was indulgent. According to mother's memories he was especially soft on Amelia, who was the youngest child and knew how to have her way with him.

"But when my grandmother died that all changed. My mother had just gotten married the year before. That night in front of the fire she remembered it so well, and she described to me that evening in great detail. It was the last time the whole family was together for a festive occasion, her brothers were there too, and it was a very happy time. My parents loved each other for four years, and waited to marry until Dad passed his law exams. Eleven months after the wedding, when Mum was already carrying me, Caroline died suddenly. She just collapsed one day and died within hours. The doctor said it was a massive stroke.

Mother had her husband to comfort her and a baby to think of, but Amelia had no one to lean on. My grandfather was devastated, and never the same after that. He became morose and depressed. Looking back on things later, Mother realized they lost both of their parents when Caroline died. It was terrible for Amelia. She was nineteen, in the prime of her life, a very pretty girl, and her safe, happy world was gone.

Her father decided it was Amelia's place to take charge of the domestic duties at home. He wanted her to step into her mother's shoes and she wasn't prepared for that. I asked Mother why she and my Dad did not move back, and she said it was impossible at that time. Dad's mother was terminally ill and they were living with and helping to take care of her. Both Harold and Gordon came home for the funeral, then were gone again with their own lives."

Our storyteller shifted in her chair and took a couple of sips of her tea. We all waited expectantly.

"Amelia did not have the temperament to give in to this new state of affairs," she continued. "It was domestic warfare. There were terrible arguments. After a couple of months she would sneak out at night to go to a dance in town or a party somewhere. Her father did not consider this suitable for a girl who should still be mourning her mother, and he often found out. Perhaps in time things would have gotten better. I know grandfather mellowed because I remember him, and he was not so terrible then. But Amelia, or Amy as Mother called her, found it unbearable. She had been the pampered youngest child for so long."

"There was a very handsome young man from a neighboring farm who showed up at some of the same social functions, and liked Amelia very much. My mother says she attracted several, but this one was very serious to have her. His name was Robert Treadwell. When he proposed marriage, she said yes. It was her way out. One night she packed a bag, met him at the railway station, and off they went to Gretna Green."

Apparently Gretna Green was where young people went to elope, as the boys both understood immediately. It was, had been for as long as anyone could remember, they explained.

Sandra sighed. "Well, just like in some of the old romantic novels, two things happened. First, her father was livid and refused to acknowledge the marriage or have anything to do with either one of them. In those days a girl was still expected to have her parents' approval, as my mother had. It was a terrible insult and social faux pas to do what Amelia had done. And second, the marriage was a disaster.

"Robert loved the farm and everything about it. They moved back in with his parents, and here was another problem. Robert's mother adored him. He was her only son and he was a mama's boy. His two sisters were already married and gone, but she had no intention of parting with him. She resented the marriage, and certainly an independent young lady she could not control. After a few months Amelia asked Robert for a home of her own, but he saw no need for it. He wasn't sensitive or sympathetic to his wife's position in his parents' home. According to what Amelia told my mother, Robert was happy to be out on the land all day, to have a hot supper at the end of it, and his wife willing and waiting for him in bed after."

Peter groaned. "Poor aunt. The party was definitely over."

"Yes, and there was no going back. Her father may have opposed the marriage, but as far as he was concerned she had made her bed, and she was going to lie in it."

I had a sudden thought. "My friend back home was told there was no church record of Amelia getting married. Was it never entered there because of the circumstances?"

"Probably not," Sandra shrugged. "In Mama's day the bride's family or the vicar usually entered marriages in the registry. It may never have happened because of the way my grandfather felt about it"

"How long did she stick it out?" Roger asked from his chair on the other side of the table.

"Six years," Sandra answered. "When her second baby died at birth she packed her bags and left for good."

"But she couldn't go home," I guessed, "She went to London."

"Yes. My mother had moved back in with Granddad by then. The war was on, she had two of us, and my father was away on active duty. Aunt had been in touch with a cousin working for the war department, or some such agency. She helped Amelia get a job and let her move in."

"The rest is not too hard to fill in," Peter stretched and scratched his head. "Aunt fell in love with a Yank, and the feeling was mutual. Robert wouldn't give her a divorce. I must say I'm not sure how they managed to circumvent and ignore a perfectly legal marriage contract, but obviously, they did."

"I might be able to fill that in," I offered. "Leonard had contacts in high places. There are some interesting holes in documents and security clearances of that time. He managed to have Amelia's marital status erased from the records. Not too many people in London knew she was already married, and those who did were willing to keep silent."

"How did Gran' feel about this?" Roger wanted to know. "She never divulged her sister's secret, never talked about it."

"She was sympathetic, as I said," Sandra answered, "but she did not approve of Amelia deserting her child."

“Her child,” I repeated stupidly.

“Oh yes,” Sandra smiled sadly. “There was one living child from that sad union, a boy. He was born a year after I was.”

“Did you ever meet him?” Roger asked this time.

“Not that I remember,” was the reply of his own mother. “Amelia thought having a baby would be wonderful and make her life better, but she hadn’t reckoned on her mother-in-law. Mrs. Treadwell took over the child as another little Robert, and even Amelia’s strong nature was no match for her. By the time he was two he was much closer to his grandmother than his own mother, and there was nothing she could do about it.”

“So she gave him up,” I said softly. “Would you know what happened to him?”

“I’m afraid that is another sad story,” Sandra reached for her cup again. We waited, and in a moment she enlightened us.

“Mother did keep up with him a bit, and asked Gordon about him from time to time, after Grandfather died and Gordon moved back. Old Mrs. Treadwell died in the early sixties, and eventually it was just the boy and his father left on the place. They kept to themselves, rather reclusive. Sydney never married, and his father never married again. Gordon said Sydney was not tall and handsome like his father, but small, nearsighted, and shy. I should add that Mother said she saw him for the last time just before our family moved here. She happened to see him at church in Stafford with his grandparents. By the time Aunt came to visit in Coventry, Sydney was almost grown, and my mother asked her if she had gone to see him. Aunt said no, there was no point. She had lost him long ago. She didn’t want to see anyone back at the old place. She had come to say goodbye, for good. She was afraid her first husband might make trouble if he knew where to find her, so she would not return to Britain again.”

“Well,” Roger mused. “It would seem she kept her word. And no letters, nothing?”

“Your Gran’ said, and I will try to quote, ‘There were some hugs between us, and we shed some tears. Amy said it would be best if she just disappeared. That way wounds wouldn’t be opened again, for anybody. I asked her how would I let her know if Dad died, or if there was an emergency. She said I should consider her dead and buried, like Dad already did.’ Gran’ hoped for several years she would change her mind and get in touch, but she never did.”

“Did your mother mention if Amelia said she was happy?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes. Amy said she was very happy. She told her sister there had been another miscarriage, and there would be no children, but otherwise, her life was good.”

I reached for the coffee server but Roger was there ahead of me. He gave me a reproving look that said I had no business serving myself. Chastised, I held out my cup and saucer and allowed him to pour.

“Could you tell us a bit more about what she was like, Mrs. Nimitz?” Surprisingly, it was Norman who asked.

I considered my description carefully, remembering my own impressions and recalling what Elaine Barclay, Claire Marsh, and the others had told me. “She was witty, charming, and social. Everyone remembered her, but only a few knew her very well. For the most part she was happily married to Leonard Marsh for about forty years. Personally I knew her only when she was elderly. She was still very sharp, very interested in other people. She was still very British, too, which held a certain fascination. In her later life she made a commitment to the Christian faith.”

“Did she now!” Sandra exclaimed, obviously pleased. “That’s good.”

“You have answered a lot of questions for me, for us,” I told Sandra sincerely. “I can’t thank you enough for that.”

“But you have done the same for me!” my hostess modestly deferred my gratitude. “I have always wondered what became of her.” She paused. “I’m truly sorry Mother didn’t get to meet you, but perhaps it is better this way. It would have upset her dreadfully to hear how she died.”

“I may have felt the need to omit that part in your mother’s presence,” I said truthfully, “but it’s a mute point now. I am sorry for your loss of her, and that I missed meeting her.”

Peter mentioned the odd coincidence of the sisters dying just a day apart. He was also the one to ask me what I intended to do next.

For a moment I considered his question, although subconsciously I had already decided. Before going home, I needed to go to Staffordshire.

Chapter Twenty-One

Half an hour later Roger Simington drove me back to my lodgings. Before he did so a trip to the original Tucker family home site was discussed at length, and it was decided by the family I should not take the train. My objections were completely overruled. I would be privately chauffeured.

“It will be so much simpler, don’t you see?” Sandra explained to me as though I were her student. “You would need transportation from the train. Even if we try to give you directions it would take you so much longer to do this on your own.”

Since the oldest of Sandra and Norman’s daughters was coming to visit on Sunday afternoon with her own family, they, with regret, had to defer to one of the sons. Roger gallantly volunteered, as Peter had a date he couldn’t break. When I expressed my dismay at taking up Roger’s Sunday, Roger was either a very good liar or he really wanted to take me. Not my Sunday with the girls, he said.

Amelia Marsh’s niece did not ask, but I offered her the envelope with the photographs. She protested, but I did some insisting of my own and it was obvious she was pleased to have them. She held out a hand to me as Peter fetched my coat, and I shook it warmly. Norman did the same.

Do you think you want to meet Amelia’s son, then?” Sandra guessed.

“If he’s still alive, I do indeed.”

“Yes, I think he is. My youngest brother lives that way, not so very far from the Treadwell farm. That’s where you should start tomorrow, Roger.”

Roger agreed.

On the short drive back to my lodgings we agreed Roger would come back for me at eleven on Sunday morning. After he pulled up in front of the entrance and I got out, I stepped inside, but a moment after he left I went out again. It was dark, but I knew my way about well enough to find a small grocery store to purchase a salad and a roll. It was getting colder but it was a short walk back. The precipitation had ended. There was more vehicle and foot traffic tonight, perhaps because it was Saturday. I wondered if the Simington boys had social plans for the evening. For myself, I didn’t feel like socializing anymore at all, or eating either, but my appetite might come back before bedtime.

It wasn’t only the generous refreshments at the afternoon tea that had left me without an urge for an evening meal. There was a vague uneasiness at the back of my mind; the kind of feeling you have when something is wrong but you cannot verbalize it. Rather than analyze it, or have someone else do it for me, I didn’t make my phone calls. For a couple of hours I roamed the large main floor sitting room, looking at the books on the bookshelves and the pictures on the walls. I settled in a chair and lost myself for a time in a book on English and Welch castles. There were several other people milling about, and the ever pokerfaced Mrs. Oliver was at the front desk. I barely noticed. When a shadow crossed my path sometime later, I looked up. It was a surprise to see Mrs. Oliver looking down at me.

“Do you want to have breakfast in the dining room in the morning, Mrs. Nimitz?” she asked evenly.

I declined, with thanks, and she went away. I looked at my watch. It was almost eight o’clock, too early for bed. Fetching the faithful raincoat and boots, I ventured outdoors again. Restaurants and nightspots were open, and a few of the grocers. The rest of the stores were closed. I stopped at a small spot that would have constituted a diner back in Indiana and ordered a hot chocolate. Sitting on a stool facing the street, I sipped it and idly watched the pedestrians who passed by. I smiled at a rosy-cheeked little girl, who smiled back. She clung to the hand of a teenage boy who didn’t notice our exchange. I hoped he was her older brother and not a very young father. A very elderly man with stooped posture and a large nose noticed me. He tipped his hat in an old fashioned very gallant gesture that earned him a smile, too. Smiling wasn’t coming naturally this evening; I had to make the effort. After finishing my chocolate and wandering aimlessly down a few side streets, I got cold and went back to the hotel.

It had already occurred to me the coffee I had partaken of so liberally might not be decaffeinated. It would be midnight before sleep came as it was, but my mood was partly to blame.

My alarm clock, set for eight, woke me out of a sound sleep; the kind one has after being awake for hours. I dressed carefully and left the building to find a machine to exchange some dollars for pounds, and to have a

light breakfast. The food purchased the night before had only been nibbled on. I slipped the remains into a large trash bin sitting in the corridor. It was sitting outside of an open door where a housekeeper was putting clean sheets on a bed. She saw me, nodded her approval at my disposal, and asked if I would like my room made up. I said yes, but there was no rush, I would be out all day. She nodded again, pleased at my response.

The sun peeking through partly cloudy skies, brisk morning air, and a cheerful breakfast atmosphere lifted my spirits. I walked several minutes in a northern direction to a rather posh hotel, walked confidently through the lobby to their café, and had a decidedly American style breakfast of toasted bagel and fruit, coffee and water. Engrossed in my book again, I made no polite conversation but enjoyed the bustle going on in the background.

Not bothering to go back to my room, I waited for Roger in the lounge of my own hotel. He arrived promptly, dressed casually in jeans, heavy shoes, and a heavy quilted vest over a red plaid flannel shirt. To my eye he looked more like a Maine woodsman than an English gentleman, although the look suited him just fine. His manners as impeccable as ever, he inquired as to how I was feeling, told me how nice I looked, and opened the passenger door of his silver Fiat for me. It was parked illegally just where he had let me out the evening before, but there was no parking ticket on the windshield.

I wondered if Roger was just a very nice person, a very curious one, or had been looking forward to a boring Sunday before I came along and offered something a little better. I never did find out. As we pulled away from the curb and into light traffic, I again expressed my appreciation and was politely rebuffed for mentioning it.

"It isn't very far to my uncle's," he told me as we left Coventry behind a little later, "but I thought you might like to travel a few of the country roads better. That will only take a little longer, getting us there about twelve-thirty." He added his mother had phoned his uncle the night before, and we were expected.

"He's a game ole chap," Roger added with a grin, "not old, really, but never married, and rather a fussy old thing. He has a girlfriend in Buxton, has for years, but too set in his ways to share all of his life and lodging."

"The youngest of your mother's brothers?" I guessed.

This was so. There were two others, both married with progeny, neither living in the proximity of Stafford. Only David, as his named turned out to be, lived anywhere near where his grandmother had been raised.

I inquired politely about other family members. For a brief time my companion described his sisters, Jennifer and Caroline, both married, one with children, one expecting her first. I discovered the names of Roger's daughters, and their ages, eleven and seven. I found out Roger was a couple of years older than I had guessed on first sight. In return I shared lightly about my own family. Roger continued his habit of doing and saying the right thing by expressing surprise that I had a grandson. I looked much too young for that, he said with a straight face.

After that Roger slipped into the tour guide mode. That was also enjoyable and he did it well. This part of England is not so heavily traveled by the tourists, he told me, but had its own charm and a great deal of history, too. Not at its best in November, of course. He suggested on the way back we stop at the cathedral in Litchfield, which sounded good to me. For now we had a bit of a schedule to keep, so we passed on by. The two lane roads we drove down were clear of ice and snow, but there was plenty of water and a few patches of snow along the roadside and in the field. I remarked that the English seemed to love their stone fences and my companion laughed heartily.

"That would be an understatement."

David Whitaker lived in a picturesque cottage on the outskirts of Tideswell. The place must have been breathtaking in the spring and summer. Dormant vines and bushes were in profusion everywhere. Even my untrained eye could see the casual careless look of all the heavy landscaping had, in fact, been carefully planned with stunning results.

Roger saw my admiration and enlightened me. "Uncle is a botanist. He teaches it and lives it. Wealthy people pay him well to plan their gardens for them."

"I can see why they do," I said, awed.

The artist himself was emerging from the front door.

"Roger, my dear fellow," he greeted in true English fashion, affectionately clasping his nephew on the shoulder, at the same time turning a polite face in my direction. He introduced himself and held out his hand.

I accepted it and thanked him for seeing me.

He grimaced, "Don't thank me too soon, dear lady," he said. "I am going to be a very poor host, I'm afraid. But come in out of the chill."

We followed him carefully up the cobblestones; they looked slippery. He held open his front door, and we passed through into a narrow, old-fashioned entryway, and were guided into a small but cozy room that I labeled the library. There was a fire lit and we were urged to take two chairs close to it. There was a tea service on a table next to his desk, and he poured three cups without asking if we wanted any. I did, and Roger made no comment but merely accepted his cup. Uncle then passed the cream and sugar, which I declined but Roger accepted and used liberally.

"Now then," our host continued, and we both knew he was explaining what he had said upon our arrival. "Very clumsy of me, but there it is. I have to be in Buxton for lunch in an hour. Can't get out of it, I'm afraid. We have half an hour before I need to leave. It's business; they called me last night."

"Well, then," Roger took the lead, "that's a good amount of time to ask you if you know anything about Sydney Treadwell. I know Mother called you about it."

"She did, Rog, she did," David agreed, "and I made a few calls myself, which will help you, I think. Dear boy, I would not have let you drive up here for nothing."

"Glad to hear it," Roger said.

"The Treadwell farm is about twenty kilometers northwest of here and still occupied, as far as my contacts know, by Sydney Treadwell. A long lost cousin, what do you know! I know where it is, I've driven by the place, and I wrote down the directions for you. The road can be rough after ice and snow, but you should be fine today."

"Have you ever met Sydney Treadwell?" I asked.

"May have," David allowed. "If I saw the fellow I might recognize him. He is not an acquaintance."

"From what Gran told Mother," Roger commented, "I doubt Sydney kept the same friends you do."

"Yes, sounds like a reclusive type," David agreed placidly. He sipped his tea thoughtfully for a moment, and then set the cup and saucer down with a thud.

"Really, Mrs. Nimitz, I hope you do accept my apology for not being a proper host."

I smiled into his bright blue eyes. He was just a couple of inches taller than myself, with a pleasantly lined face and a habit of pursing his lips. Unlike his nephews and his brother-in-law he tended toward plumpness, and his brown tweed jacket pulled a bit at the midriff. It may or may not have occurred to Roger, but I was sure Uncle David wasn't much older than I was.

"You have my apology for coming here on such short notice. It was very good of you to see me, and to do my investigating for me."

"Well, perhaps some of it," he admitted cheerfully. "You don't know if he's there."

"No," Roger agreed, "but Sunday should be a good time to find out."

He took the directions and we finished our tea. Fifteen minutes later, after more polite gestures between David Whitaker and myself, which included an urging on his part that I return to Tideswell someday and allow him to make amends. We left.

"It would be rude to show up just at lunchtime," Roger told me, as I was escorted into a tavern along the roadway. To me the place looked like William Shakespeare might have stopped in for an ale. When I asked, Roger said the original frame was at least three hundred years old. In Britain, he added, I could expect most buildings to have been around for a while.

"Three hundred years is new here," he grinned.

The interior was more modern, but the whole effect inside and out enchanted me. Roger ordered a large roast beef sandwich and a drink for himself. He wasn't happy when I ordered only toast and another cup of tea.

"My breakfast was late. I'm not hungry yet," I tried to pacify him.

Roger was a fast eater and we didn't linger. The directions to the home of Amelia Marsh's son were completely accurate. As we approached the property I was suddenly nervous. Over two months had gone by since Amelia's death, and here at last was a direct descendant, her own flesh and blood. What would I say to him?

The place looked as it must have for the past hundred years. Even Roger remarked upon it as we stepped out of his vehicle, and I certainly concurred. It was in sad need of some renovation, but reminded me of some episodes I had seen of a televised version of English veterinarian James Herriot making his rounds in the countryside of the forties. We pulled up directly in front of the stone house, where no effort had gone into any paving. I was very thankful for my boots. The barn structures were only partially visible, most of them to the rear of the house. Two very old dogs came around to note our arrival, but made no fuss. When Roger crooned to them they came forward slowly and sniffed his fingers.

No one or anything else seemed impressed by visitors. After a moment of hesitation I strode up to the wooden door and knocked loudly. I prayed someone would be at home. Someone was, but it was not Sydney.

The door was opened by an older woman. We looked back at a gray haired, stout lady, dressed in a Sunday black dress. Roger had left the dogs to stand behind me and he spoke first.

“Please excuse us for bothering you, madam,” he said, “but we are looking for the man we were told owns this farm. Would that be a Sydney Treadwell?”

“Why yes, it would,” she said readily, looking at us now in obvious surprise, “but you must not know how it is with him.”

“No, we wouldn’t,” Roger agreed. “We’ve never met him, either one of us.”

I kept silent while he briefly explained that we had news of his mother, who we had reason to believe he had not seen since he was a child.

“And, if it is not too impolite to ask, who might you be, madam?”

“I’m one of the few relatives he has left,” the lady answered, which put to rest my idea Sydney might have gotten married after all. She looked at each of us again and made up her mind. “I don’t see why you shouldn’t come in.”

We wiped our feet carefully on the mat inside the door.

“We won’t take much of your time,” Roger continued as spokesperson. “You see, this lady has come all the way from the United States. She would like to talk to Mr. Treadwell if she could. Do you expect him back soon?”

“I doubt it, dear,” the lady said with a sad smile.

We looked at each other, at a loss. She led the way into the living room, or parlor, which was shabby and old fashioned, but clean, and motioned for us to take a seat. We waited for the lady to explain about Sydney but she didn’t. She merely sat quietly with her hands in her lap and looked back at us.

“How are you related to Mr. Treadwell?” I asked finally, wanting to end the impasse.

“His cousin,” She replied readily.

I thought for a moment. “You must be a daughter of a sister of his father,” I guessed.

She smiled. “That’s right. He had two older sisters. Syd has several cousins, but I’m about the only one he sees. I’m widowed and live in Stafford, so he asked me to come and watch the place.”

“He’s away, then?” I encouraged her.

“Well, he was. He’s back now but too ill to stay here anymore”

Roger sat forward in the old fashioned chair. “Mrs. ...?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she tittered, “I haven’t introduced myself. It’s Mrs. Sweeny. And who might you be?”

We came forth with our own names and she nodded to each of us in turn.

“Mrs. Sweeny,” Roger continued, “could you tell us about your cousin, please, and if we could see him, wherever he is.”

We didn’t stay long after she explained. After a hasty goodbye we raced toward a small nursing home in Castleton. I was very glad indeed not to be alone.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was a small facility. I thought absently there could not have been more than half a dozen people being taken care of here. Most of them had come to die. There were two health care workers visible, and the one we approached upon arrival led us readily to the bedside of the man we had come to see.

“You have company, Sydney,” she said softly. “Do you feel up to it?”

I will never forget him. He was lying on his side in a hospital bed, one that would have been considered archaic in the hospital in Hanley. It was small, but he looked even smaller in it, and he looked much older than I knew him to be. He rolled over slowly, mild puzzlement showing on his pale face.

“Who might you be?” he asked in a hoarse voice, scanning both of our faces, squinting his eyes.

Try as I might, I didn’t know how to begin. In my hesitancy Roger rescued me. He leaned forward, offering his hand, and said, “We haven’t met, sir, but it seems we’re cousins.”

“Cousins?” The wizened little man shook his head. “Most of my cousins are female, and the one that isn’t, well, you couldn’t be him.”

“My name is Roger Simington, but my grandmother was Mary Tucker before she married, the older sister to your mother.”

If anything, the invalid became even paler. His hands trembled as he lifted himself up in his bed. It seemed to take a long time.

“And who are you?” he asked me, finally.

“My name is Sally Nimitz,” I answered softly, looking him full in the face. “I am from the United States, from Hanley, Indiana. I was living next door to your mother when she died.”

There is no way to describe his reaction. He said nothing at first. How could one see sadness, anger, and despair, all in just a few seconds? But that is what I saw. I could not take my eyes off of him, although I wanted to, his pain was so evident.

“Mother?” he said finally. “What mother? She left me when I was little.”

“Yes,” I allowed, “I’m afraid she did. Your grandmother was a very strong, domineering woman, and she took the role of your mother.”

Sydney did not reply. Roger found two empty chairs. We both sat down at the bedside.

Then Sydney spoke again. “Who told you that?”

“Just before she died, your aunt Mary told her daughter Sandra all about why your mother left her family during the war. Sandra is Roger’s mother.”

The little man shifted his gaze from me to Roger, and then left us both to stare vacantly out of a nearby window.

“It wasn’t the same,” he said. We all knew he was referring to his grandmother taking the maternal role.

“Did you remember your real mother at all?” I asked.

He reached unsteadily for the glass of water sitting on a table on the other side of his bed, his hands so shaky I was tempted to help him. He spilled only a couple of drops as he brought the glass to his lips and drank, managing to put it back without dropping it. We waited. I wondered if he would ask us to leave, and what I would do if he did.

“Not very well,” he answered me at last. “I was seven the last time I saw her, and the last time she sent me anything I was ten.” The bitterness in his voice was unmistakable. Who could blame him?

“Were you seven when you saw her last?” There was no stopping now. “Mr. Treadwell, I think you were in America in September. Did you see her then?”

He looked at me again, tears welling in his eyes. “Yes,” he choked, “I saw her.”

Harsh sobs racked his thin frame and the nurse came hurrying over, looking at us reprovingly.

“Is this necessary?” she demanded. “You can see this gentleman is very ill.”

If she had looked closely, she could have seen we looked rather ill ourselves. I heard Roger gasp next to me, and utter an expletive under his breath.

“No!” Sydney’s weak voice surprised us all in its determination, and three pairs of eyes turned to him.

“Leave us, nurse. I must talk to these people.”

She obeyed.

“You want to tell us about it?” I asked him gently. “I think the truth must come out.” I almost added that it would hardly matter to him now, but did not. He certainly knew it.

“How did you find me?” Amelia’s son asked as a starting point, his voice a little stronger.

I explained briefly. I wanted to ask him how he had found his mother, but that could wait. Sydney Treadwell had the floor and would tell his story his way.

“It didn’t matter so much when I was little,” he began after staring at the ceiling for a full moment after I had finished. “It is true; my grandmother raised me as her own. I never knew why my mum left. No one ever spoke of it; no one would ever talk about it, except Dad said she found someone else. I wondered sometimes, at night, alone in my room. I thought it hadn’t been my fault, but I wasn’t sure, you know.”

He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, and probably to collect his thoughts. Roger was silent in the chair next to me. I was vaguely aware of voices and movement around us, all of it totally unimportant.

“Grand dad passed away first, then a few years later, my Grandmother. Now it was just me and Dad, and the farm kept us going all the time. I liked it pretty well. I almost married, once, and we kept seeing each other for years, but it just never happened.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if Sydney’s strong-willed grandmother had had something to do with the failure of his love life. But Sydney was going on.

“Then Dad died. I was over forty. Alone in the house after the chores were done, I got to thinking about her more. There wasn’t anything else for me, really, so I started checking, seeing if I could find her.”

This time when he reached for the water I reached the glass ahead of him and helped. He didn’t resist. The nurse who had approached us earlier came back. She must have decided we were friends, not enemies. She asked courteously if we would like something to drink. Water, if not too much trouble, was my response, and Roger concurred. She left to fetch it and Sydney went on.

“It took me years. The farm, a pint in the pub now and then, maybe church on Sunday, and looking for her. That was most of my life. But in the end,” and there was a triumphant note in the weak voice, “I did.” He reflected on that for a second before continuing his story. “Then I wondered what to do about it, and I finally decided, ‘Syd, ole’ boy, you haven’t been anywhere. Why not go to America? So for a couple of years I planned it. I sold most of the stock and saved my money.” He had been looking at the ceiling again, but now he shifted his eyes back to us. “Then do you know what happened?”

We confessed we did not. Our water glasses came, and the nurse left again.

He smiled sadly. “I found out I had this cancer. A small tumor in my chest, the doctor says. If I have it operated on right away I might be cured. So, I do, and I get better all right. I feel fine and they think it’s all gone, but one never knows. Besides, she must be about eighty now, too. I decide it’s time to make that trip to America.”

He turned away from us again. We sipped our water and waited. We knew he would go on.

“It was rather nice, the plane ride, the nice hotel in New York. Rather scary, too, but it was all arranged, you see, and went rather well.” He turned back and added with pride, “I am a good driver, you know. Was, that is. Didn’t dare try it in New York, but when I got to Indianapolis, I rented a car there. No trouble at all for me with the steering wheel on the other side.”

“Remarkable, sir,” Roger said, softly.

Sydney gave him another sad smile in response, acknowledging the praise. But his story had to go on and there was nothing else to be proud of.

The tears were coming back to Sydney’s eyes but he kept talking. This was the first time he had told anyone, I was sure of it. The burden must have been horrible.

“I called her,” he said, “from Indianapolis, and asked to see her. She was shocked, no doubt about that. But who wouldn’t be?” He panted a few times, and went agonizingly on. “She said she would return my call. She said she wasn’t sure we should see each other.” Now his weak voice was angry in remembrance. “I told her I couldn’t believe it. I came thousands of miles to see my own mum and she wasn’t sure we should meet?”

The anger took much of his strength, and he rested. We simply waited some more.

“After that she did agree to see me. She gave me directions, and told me to come on Wednesday afternoon at four o’clock. That gave me two days to wait. I took in the sights a little bit, but by Wednesday I couldn’t wait anymore. I started out early, and got there about noontime. I wasn’t sure exactly, where her place was, and like I say I was way early, so I parked my car by a park and got out to walk.”

That’s where you parked your car, I thought, and no one ever noticed. No one ever saw a small elderly man in a black suit walking about, no one except Mr. Reiman.

Sydney Treadwell’s voice was even weaker and getting hoarse. He arched his head on the pillow and stared at the ceiling but certainly it was not the ceiling he was seeing.

“I found the place and walked up and rang the bell. She opened the door and looked at me.” The poor man was gasping and I was alarmed for him, and yet afraid the nurse would come back and throw us out. Without realizing it I had started to get up, but Roger put a firm hand on my shoulder, and I sank back down.

“She looked me up and down,” Sydney whispered, “and then she said, ‘I guess you’d better come in.’ She looked so disappointed! All my life I thought if I ever saw my mum again she would put her arms around me. And all she could say was, ‘I guess you’d better come in.’”

He didn’t look as though he could go any further, but I knew we had to hear the rest.

“Is that why you hit her?” it was the most difficult sentence I ever said.

The little bed was shaking with his sobs, but he nodded. “I didn’t mean to,” he whimpered. “I was just so angry. She went to the kitchen to make us some tea, and I heard her sigh, as my dad would when someone had come to visit he didn’t want around.” The sobs subsided a bit as he added, “Once I brought my cane down on her head, I must have gone mad. I know I hit her more than one time.”

The nurse was back now, and looked at us all, not knowing quite what to make of the scenario before her. She asked her patient if he needed anything and he replied, “Not yet, nurse, just another minute or two. Bring something for the pain, please.”

There was another pause. Roger helped with the water glass this time.

“Did you take the Bible, and her daily planner?” I asked after Sydney had another sip.

“Yes. When I realized what I had done, I sat down for a minute to try and think what to do. I must have been in shock. I couldn’t have stayed there much longer but before I left I saw my name in her planner on a little stand, and there was her Bible on the divan.”

He tried to reach into a drawer at his bedside, and seeing his difficulty Roger helped again. He opened the drawer, and pulled out the aged photograph sitting on the top. He handed it to Sydney, who held it out to me. It was of Amelia and her son as a toddler.

“She kept it in her Bible,” he said brokenly, his skin the color of ashes.

This time I called the nurse.

“You need something stronger than tea,” Roger said firmly, pulling his car up in front of a pub with a sign dangling above the door labeling it The Silver Fox. “Besides,” he added, “so do I.”

“I haven’t had anything much to eat,” I protested very feebly. “It will knock me on my derriere.”

“That might not be so bad,” he opined, “but they have food here.”

It was late in the afternoon. The nurse had given Sydney a strong pain medication. As he dozed off to sleep he asked us what we were going to do.

“Don’t worry, old man,” Roger had patted his arm. “It will all be alright. I imagine you will get a visit from the authorities, but it was an accident, don’t you know?”

Whether he had wanted to believe it, or he did, Sydney nodded, and closed his eyes. I turned around to walk away, but saw his trembling hand reach out to me, and I took it. “Sorry,” he murmured, “so sorry.”

“Yes,” I whispered back, “I know. She was too.” I gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

I was sipping the drink Roger had ordered for me, trying to keep the room in focus and listening to Roger mutter, “Poor old sod,” when a serving girl brought us each a plate of chicken, potatoes, and mixed vegetables.

It looked good, but I thought Roger could have ordered one plate between us unless he had a voracious appetite. He didn’t. He picked at his food as I did mine, taking long draughts of his ale.

“I’m sorry to bring this trouble,” I said to him after half of my drink was gone. “Perhaps it would have been better not to know.”

He looked at me in obvious surprise. “Dear lady,” he said, “the truth is almost always better, don’t you think?” He rubbed his forehead and added, “I don’t think he’s the worse for confessing it, do you? Maybe he’ll die with a little more peace. I asked the head nurse on duty to call his vicar.”

I had gone straight to the car after Sydney let go of my hand. I sat in the passenger seat in a sort of shock myself. Roger was made of sterner stuff. He lingered.

“That’s who you talked to while I was waiting in the car?”

He nodded. “I asked her what she knew about him, and his illness. She said he’s been there about two weeks, checked in by his doctor now that he’s terminal.”

“I guess they didn’t get all of the tumor after all,” I observed.

“Yes, well, funny about that. She said he went back to his doctor about six weeks ago, and there was hope for him then. They recommended chemotherapy and he refused. She said she doesn’t think he wants to live.”

I looked at him quizzically, and he added ruefully, “Perhaps understandable.”

We both tried to eat for a bit, making a little dent in our food. I emphatically refused the offer of a second whiskey, to Roger’s amusement.

“What do we do about this now?” I wanted Roger’s opinion. “Certainly I should notify the local law enforcement agency?”

Roger said he had been thinking about that, and wanted to think about it some more. For now we should go back to Coventry. The old boy wasn’t going anywhere, was he? Both of us had heard his confession. By now his vicar may have heard it, too.

Our drive back was quiet. Neither one of us mentioned stopping to see the cathedral in Litchfield. We were both preoccupied with our private thoughts.

Once he asked me, “Don’t you Americans have a holiday about this time of year? Thanksgiving, isn’t it?”

“It’s next Thursday.”

“When are you booked to go home?”

“Tuesday, very early in the morning.” I wondered if I would make it home in time for Thanksgiving. I wondered what the police were like in Britain.

It was very dark when Roger delivered me to my lodgings. The two streetlights nearby emitted a soft glow, but there were no stars, no moon visible. Roger parked the car legally and stopped the engine. He turned to face me.

“Sally, I think you should go home on Tuesday.”

“Really? Will I be allowed?”

He grinned. He was really charming and had been wonderful. If I were ten years younger

“You’ll be allowed, because I’m not going to report this until Tuesday morning.” He held up a hand to stop me from protesting.

“Listen. I know two chaps on the force here, and I’ll go to them in innocence, telling them I heard an extraordinary story on Sunday, and just had the chance to follow up. I’ll tell it exactly as it happened. An American lady comes to follow the family history of her deceased neighbor, etc. etc. I heard just what you did, and you’ll be safely on your way home when the story is being told. Chances are, they’ll get back to your police in Indiana and find out all the facts on that end from them.”

I thought about it for a full minute, and went for it. We spent over five more minutes saying goodbye. I told him to give his family my very best, and thank them again for all their hospitality. I could not help but say again how sorry I was to bring this tragedy to their doorstep and again Roger brushed aside my apology.

“Dear Sally,” he said, with a warm, sad smile, “Amelia and Sydney are family. You have given us answers we never would have had, and maybe we can give that poor man a bit of comfort before he dies.”

“I was afraid of this when your mother confirmed Amelia had a son,” I confessed. “I couldn’t imagine how he got himself there, but it all added up.”

“I’ve been wondering how he got himself home,” Roger said. “And speaking of that, can you get yourself back to London and the airport alright?”

“I got myself here just fine,” I said tartly, feeling like I was talking to George, but added in a more modified tone, “but thank you for asking. And thank you for everything you have done today. Without you at my side this ordeal would have been even worse.”

“Just want to give a good impression of the Brits,” he grinned modestly, and jumped out to open my door for me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was Judy and Everett who waited for me when I got off the plane in Indianapolis on Tuesday evening. They had left Joel with his maternal grandmother, which was a relief. I was too exhausted to be much good to him. When Ev put his arms around me I burst into tears, which could have frightened my grandson, who thought Grandma Sally was able to cope with any situation.

“Been through it have you, Mom?” he said gently. “Come on.”

After hugging Judy in turn, I gratefully let them take me in tow. There had been no opportunity on the trip home to rest, or for that matter, even to think. My seat had been right behind a young mother traveling with two toddlers. It was a nightmare for her, the children, and everyone sitting within three rows front and back. After two hours of sobs, tears, threats, and chaos, I made the decision to intervene. All there was to lose was a little dignity if she snubbed me. Unbuckling my seatbelt I stepped into the aisle and introduced myself.

After giving all of my credentials as a woman, grandmother, and nurse, the woman accepted my offer to assist with the children. I picked up the three-year-old boy and to his astonishment, sat in his seat and plopped him on my lap. I told him stories, sang to him, and gently tickled him. It worked. He responded positively to the direct attention and an hour later took a long nap. With her older brother settled, the fourteen-month-old sister soon did the same. I could not rest with the child's weight on my lap, so spent the next three hours sporadically attempting conversation with their mother, with moderate success. She was an American. I judged her to be in her early thirties, tall and thin. Except for stringy brown hair and a permanent frown on her face, she was attractive. She seemed to be trying to figure out whether or not to be grateful or resentful, and never did. We talked superficially about children, husbands, and traveling. She never explained how she ended up on an international flight alone with her pre-school children, but did say they would be met in New York by the paternal grandparents.

From New York to Indianapolis I was too numb and tired to sleep, read, or do anything, which meant there had been no good slumber for me since I met Sydney Treadwell, and not so much the night before that. Sunday night, my last full night in Coventry, I kept having nightmares. Roger, Sydney and myself were together at the Silver Fox. We were drinking whiskey sodas and getting drunk, when Amelia would arrive and start hitting Sydney on the head with an umbrella. After waking up and going back to sleep there would be variations of that theme. Sometimes Claire Marsh or Anne Carey would show up, but you get the idea.

After Roger escorted me to the door I made just one telephone call, leaving a message on George's answering machine and asking him to get in touch with everyone else who was waiting to hear from me. I told him I would explain everything when I arrived home. Choosing George was intentional. I knew he was going to visit his son Robin that day, so he wouldn't be home to answer the phone.

Seeing my meltdown, Everett said we would go directly back to Hanley and get me home. But once the luggage was collected and I was sitting in the back of the extended cab of their pickup truck, I found some reserve energy from somewhere, and realized how hungry I was. When I insisted we stop for something to eat they didn't object too strenuously. Both of them were also hungry, and anticipating some conversation over the food to satisfy their curiosity about the results of my travels.

"A juicy hamburger!" I drooled. "Pick somewhere that has good hamburgers."

Ev grinned and Judy laughed.

"But also," I further instructed, "please somewhere we get waited on, but that's still pretty casual. I'm a mess."

We put Amelia Marsh to rest at last on December 28th, George, Anne, and I. In the weeks after I got home the three of us tied up some loose ends. After sleeping through Thanksgiving I also went back to work.

I waited for the local police to call me. The federal authorities were contacted by British law enforcement. Roger went to see them just as he said he would. They in turn called the Hanley department. David White was suitably impressed.

Sydney was interviewed twice before he slipped into a coma, and died two weeks later. Most of the mysteries were explained. The murder weapon was never found. Sydney only remembered tossing his cane out of the window of his rented car somewhere in the drive back to Indianapolis. Because he had the presence of mind to have the vehicle thoroughly cleaned and almost three months had passed before same car was located and examined, there was nothing there to convict him. But a deathbed confession still holds firm, and all of the details Amelia's son gave of his trip held up under investigation.

I begged the police to find a way to inform the public the crime had been solved without dragging the tragedy of matricide through the press. They asked me to figure something out and if they approved, would release my statement to the newspaper. In early December, on page three, a two-column story stated the murderer of Amelia Marsh had been found. Tragically the killer was a relative who had come for an unexpected visit, but was suffering from metastatic carcinoma. The violent attack was a result of the man's confusion and

illness, being so far away from his home and from treatment. There were quotations from the British police, who had been called to the deathbed of a Mr. Sydney Treadwell in Staffordshire, England.

“Mr. Treadwell, just days before his death, but seeming coherent, named the date of Mrs. Marsh’s death as the date of his visit,” and “the elderly gentleman related details of the attack in such a manner that gave little doubt as to his part in it,” were two of the quotes. The article also stated Mr. Treadwell had in his possession Mrs. Marsh’s favorite Bible and her daily planner.

The article did not mention how the visitor was related to Amelia, and everyone assumed it was a more distant relative, perhaps a cousin. Anne said there was quite a reaction among Amelia’s old friends and the parishioners of the church. She said everyone was shocked but also relieved. It was the same in our neighborhood. Barry, who was giving up his job in the office as of the first of February, called me hours after the story came out.

“This is great,” he said sincerely, his voice as loud as ever. “Now we won’t have this thing hanging over our head. Maybe that unit will sell now.”

I congratulated him on his upcoming marriage and the new job waiting in California. Could his replacement possibly be as amenable as Barry? He would be missed.

Anne and I sent copies of the newspaper article, along with a personal note, to both the Barclays in Texas and to Claire Marsh. We would receive a prompt reply from Ross and Elaine, but there would be no response from Richmond, Virginia, which did not surprise me. I also wrote a short letter to Ed and Ellen Thayer, inclusive of Dolly, of course.

My co-workers warmly welcomed me back. It was touching, even if I knew they wanted me to help cover staffing over Christmas weekend, which I did. Three of them, including Emma, spoke to me about the article in the paper. We were all in agreement; it was a huge relief to know the county did not have a killer on the loose. Almost everyone wanted to know where I had been and if it was an enjoyable vacation.

“Out east,” I said vaguely, “tracking my old neighbor’s past history. It was very interesting.”

That seemed to satisfy them, although Emma gave me a long, speculative stare. I looked back at her innocently and she said nothing.

So by Christmas the whole affair was settled. It was Anne who suggested a supper with the three of us, George, herself, and yours truly. She also named the place, the historic hotel across from Barbara’s gift shop, and made a reservation.

“It shouldn’t be that busy just days after Christmas,” she pointed out, “and they have beautiful seasonal decorations. They’ll still be up.”

It was busy, and posh with holiday elegance. George and I had never been there. The dining room was all atmosphere, with walnut paneling, white linen table cloths, high ceilings, and a gorgeous chandelier, set off with the generous red and gold of poinsettias, brocade ribbons, holiday twinkle lights, and decorated candles. A woman with perfectly dressed silver hair and wearing a black velvet gown sat at the piano in the lobby playing Christmas carols. Anne gave me a little grin that said, aren’t you glad we dressed up tonight? I understood and nodded with a happy little smirk of my own.

George, looking distinguished in a dark sports jacket, offered each of us an arm as we followed the maitre’d to our table. Anne was wearing a brown and orange plaid wool dress, with simple lines that flattered her very lean figure, and brown low heel pumps to match. She had even donned a bit of coral lipstick.

George’s approving look when he came to my door to fetch me said I didn’t look too shabby, either. I wore a long black skirt, black hose, and black pumps, set off by a sapphire blue silk blouse. There was just enough plunge to the neckline for style without worrying about bending over, and the tight sleeves ended at the elbows. I wore a matching set of pearl earrings, necklace, and a bracelet. They were a gift from Michael on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

By unspoken but mutual consent, conversation over dinner was about each other and the holidays. My Christmas celebration, delayed because of my work schedule, was going to take place over New Years. My companions were interested to hear both of my children would arrive on Saturday, and Janelle was bringing Robert.

“Do you have room for all of them?” Anne wanted to know.

“My son and his family will stay in the guest room, Janelle has the pullout couch in the living room, and Robert is being put up in a room right here,” I informed her.

She chuckled, delighted. "An old fashioned girl," she said. "Good for you!"

The house will still be bursting at the seams on Saturday night," I went on. "I invited my brothers and their wives to join us for a buffet, and the group grew to include two nieces and their families. It will be a circus, but I'm looking forward to it."

I was especially looking forward to seeing Joel. There were phone conversations since my return from England, but I hadn't seen him since October. His gifts were waiting under my tree. To watch a three-and-a-half-year-old open Christmas presents was something to really anticipate.

"Life goes on," George said quietly, looking directly at me.

"Yes, it does." After meeting his gaze I reached into my handbag and pulled out a letter. "This came the day before Christmas. I saved it to show you both tonight."

I handed it to Anne first. She waited to open it while our waiter took our plates and offered dessert. The dinner fare had been generous so even George declined, but in the spirit of the occasion and the season we all took an after dinner drink.

Anne read it through, handed it to George, and while he read it in turn asked me, "Sally, I think you suspected it was someone from England right along. Why?"

"Didn't you?"

She shook her head. "I really did not know what to think. It was all so confusing."

The waiter returned with two glasses of white wine and a whiskey and soda. George looked up to hear my reply.

"Everything pointed to Mrs. Marsh knowing the person who hit her over the head," I began, after taking a sip. "She opened the door to him. The assailant took only personal things. But no situation or individual in her current life provided any sort of explanation. The more we delved into her past, the more likely it seemed to me our answer was there. Her husband's history and occupation certainly brought up the possibility of someone who hated her because of something he had done, but I always wondered why she was so secretive about her past. So I kept looking further and further back."

George bent his head to finish the letter. Anne wiped her mouth daintily with her napkin and sighed. She had wept incredulously on the day I shared everything about my overseas visit, beginning in London and ending with the nursing home in Castleton. Now she was composed and serene.

"Do you remember what the pastor said at Amelia's funeral?" She asked me. "Remember he said Amelia had come to him at one time and said there was something in her past she was deeply sorry for. Do you think she was sorry for deserting her child?"

"I think so," was my opinion. "We can't be completely sure, but that's my guess. She may have regretted the rebellious behavior after her mother's death that caused all the trouble in the first place. I will never have a definite answer to why she wanted to see me the day she died. My guess is she wanted an impartial third party for what was bound to be a very awkward reunion."

George handed me the letter back. "Very nice," was his comment, and as I folded it and returned it to my purse he added drolly, "'dear Sally.'"

"He's very nice," I said, hoping I didn't sound defensive. "It was thoughtful of him to add a paragraph to his mother's letter. It was very thoughtful of both of them to write and tell us about what happened from their end after I left."

Roger accompanied a police sergeant to the nursing home to interview Sydney the first time. He made another trip with his parents shortly after that, and Sandra went back alone the day before Sydney slipped into his coma. Their presence and comfort was accepted.

"They sound like wonderful people," this from Anne, in her soothing schoolmarm manner.

"They all are." I sighed deeply. "You know, it would be a great trip to go back there someday. You should both come with me. We are invited." But not too soon, I thought.

George gave me another quizzical look. "Not too many people know this whole thing would not have been resolved if it wasn't for you."

"Everyone who matters, they know. But let's keep the record straight. I didn't do this on my own. The truth wouldn't have come out if it hadn't been for all three of us."

I raised my wine glass. "Here's to all of the people who played a major part in the life and times of Amelia Marsh. To Leonard, Sydney, and Mary Whitaker, to the Fisks, the Rosses, Claire Marsh, and all the others."

Anne raised her glass and said, "Hear, hear!"

George agreeably joined the toast. Anne set her glass down and reached into her own handbag, but not before I saw a conspiratorial look pass between the two of them.

"What's this?" I asked severely.

"Just a little Christmas present from the two of us." Anne handed me a small square box wrapped in gold foil, dressed with a wide bright green ribbon.

"No one said anything about presents," I objected ungratefully.

"No," George admitted, "but those blueberry scones you brought me were good, especially dipped in coffee. I took the strawberry ones out of the freezer this morning."

"And I love the little tea caddy you brought me," Anne supported his reasoning. "Besides, this is not exactly a Christmas present. Open it and you'll see."

Obedying, I slowly untied the pretty ribbon, broke the scotch tape, and took off the lid. Reaching into the white tissue, I pulled out an old fashioned Victorian Christmas decoration, drawing in my breath in pleasure as I did so. About four inches high, it was a transparent bulb with two tiny children inside, holding hands and dancing. They were two little girls in white dresses with colored sashes. They had flushed faces and bright cheeks, laughing in pleasure. One had dark hair, the other was blonde, and every detail was there, from their hairstyles to their tiny shoes.

"But where did you find this?" I gasped.

Anne smiled smugly. "It came from the auction."

"You went after all?"

"No, but Gerry did. You might remember her if you saw her again, she was at Amelia's funeral and said a few words there. She's president of the Soroptomist club. I asked her to see if she could bid on the boot hooks you admired so much, but the price went way up on those. The Christmas decorations were there for bid in silent auction, and she put a price on this, thinking it would be a good memento."

"She has wonderful taste," I said, holding up the ball and twirling it around. "But you should keep it for yourself!"

"Not to worry," Anne was looking very pleased with herself, and George looked benevolently at both of us, tolerant of the female species. "With the money I gave her she was able to buy an ornament for me, too. It's on my tree. I'll show it to you before I take it down."

"It will always remind me of Amelia and Mary. I accept your gift in the spirit in which it was given. Thank you both." I laid it gently back in the box, tears welling unasked for in my eyes.

This time George offered the toast. "To Amelia Marsh," he said. Anne and I raised our glasses again. "I never knew her, but may she rest in peace at last."

###

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