

Who **MURDERED** **MR. MALONE?**



*Garden
Girls Cozy
Mysteries*

**SERIES
BOOK 1**

HOPE CALLAGHAN

Who Murdered Mr. Malone?

Garden Girls Series Book 1

Hope Callaghan

FIRST EDITION

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Chapter 1

Gloria Rutherford eased Annabelle, her 1989 Mercury Grand Marquis, into the post office parking lot. After a couple slick maneuvers, she squeezed into an empty spot. She shut off the car, grabbed her purse and pushed the door open. *Thump!* An angry scowl crossed her face. She'd done it again! These stupid parking spots were getting smaller by the day.

She wiggled her thin frame through the barely-wide-enough crack of the driver side door. After a furtive glance around the bustling parking lot, she leaned over and inspected the teeny, tiny mark Annabelle left on the car beside her. She squinted her eyes as she studied the offensive spot. With a lick of her fingertip and a quick rub, the spot vanished.

Certain that her small mishap had gone unnoticed, Gloria straightened her shoulders before heading for the front door, the scowl still firmly fixed on her face.

Gloria was in a slump. Not the I-don't-know-how-I'll-ever-get-out-of-this kind of slump. It was more of an I-have-no-purpose-in-life-anymore slump. And if she was honest with herself, what it really boiled down to was she was just plain bored.

“Well, well, well, who do we have here?” Ruth, Gloria's friend and the head postmaster of Belhaven, studied Gloria over the rim of her reading glasses.

Gloria shuffled over to the counter and dropped her purse on top as

she reached inside to pull out a stack of stamped envelopes.

She slid them across the counter towards Ruth. “Been pretty busy these days. Haven’t had much of a chance to get out and about lately.”

Ruth studied her skeptically. “Margaret was in here not more than an hour ago. Said she stopped by your place yesterday and that you were in some kind of funk.”

Gloria’s head snapped up. “Now why on earth would she say something crazy like that?” she huffed.

Ruth wasn’t about to go there. Instead she changed the subject. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. You want to get together with the girls for coffee in the morning?”

Gloria perked up, just a little. “Where? Over at Dot’s place?” Dot was one of their closest friends. One of the “girls.” She also happened to own Dot’s Kitchen, the only eating establishment in their tiny town.

“Yeah. I haven’t had a chance to talk to Lucy yet. Haven’t seen her in a couple days, either.”

Gloria sniffed. “She’s probably too busy with that new beau of hers. What was his name...”

“Bill. His name is Bill.”

Gloria waved her hand in the air dismissively. “Whatever. Well, I’ll stop by her place on my way home. Maybe she can squeeze us into her busy schedule,” she added, just a hint of sarcasm edging her voice.

Gloria finished her business inside and headed back to her car.

Ruth had pretty much hit the nail on the head. The truth was a bitter pill to swallow.

So preoccupied with her current state-of-mind and more than a little irritated at Ruth's words, Gloria was nearly oblivious to the police car and crime scene van parked out in front of the old elementary school. The flashing lights finally grabbed her attention as she slowed the car to a crawl. Someone was way out back, wandering around in the woods at the far corner of the school.

She pulled into the small parking lot and sat for a moment as she watched two uniformed police officers stretch a long roll of yellow crime scene tape around some towering pine trees near the edge of the woods.

What were the police doing back in the woods? She hesitated for a fraction of a second before hopping out of the car. She walked down to the end of the sidewalk and stopped. From her vantage point, she could see a white cloth draped over a large lump on the ground. She took another step closer. *What if there was a body under the white sheet?*

One of the two people at the bottom noticed Gloria hovering at the top of the hill. He swung around. It was Officer Joe. He gave a small wave and turned back to the job at hand. She was dying to head down there – find out what was going on but didn't have the guts.

She turned on her heel and headed back in the direction she'd just come from. With one last curious glance, she slid into her car and backed out of the lot. News spread like wildfire in their little town. It would only be a matter of hours before she would inevitably find out what was going

on.

Minutes later, Gloria pulled in next to Lucy's cozy ranch-style home. She was relieved to see the familiar bright red Mustang convertible was the only vehicle parked in the garage. *Good, Bob's not here*, she thought.

By the time she was out of her car and headed down the sidewalk, Lucy was already on the porch, meeting her halfway. "Hey Gloria. Nice to see that you're out and about. I was talking to Dot earlier and she said you seemed depressed."

Gloria stopped in her tracks. *Did everyone in the whole stinkin' town think she was depressed?*

"I'm NOT depressed," Gloria snipped.

Lucy ignored the comment. "Dot said we're all meeting in the morning for coffee at her place?"

"That's what Ruth told me," Gloria grumbled. "I thought you hadn't heard so I wanted to stop by and tell you myself."

Lucy tugged on her wild red hair and laughed. "There's nothing in this town that everyone doesn't know."

And that was the honest truth. Nothing was a secret in the small community of Belhaven, Michigan. With a grand total of maybe 990 residents on a good day, the town was so small, everyone knew everyone else's business. And not in a necessarily good way.

That's where Gloria's recent slump came in. There was no action.

No excitement. No adventure. No oomph!!

She turned to go. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning then.” She glanced around before sliding back into the driver’s seat. “Where’s Bob?”

Lucy stuck her hand on her hip. “It’s Bill. His name is Bill.” She gazed out towards the road. “He’s on his way over. It’s so nice out, we thought we’d take a spin on his motorcycle.”

Gloria shook her head. “Aren’t you afraid of getting on that contraption?”

Lucy shrugged. “You only live once.”

Lucy was absolutely right. You only live once.

On the drive back to her house, Gloria pondered the purpose of her life. She’d been doing that a lot lately. Although she was deeply involved in her church, she still had a lot of free time on her hands. Too much, in fact. With the kids grown and gone, she felt like a floundering fish. Her beloved James had passed away over a year ago. Money wasn’t a concern. James made sure of that. She just needed something worthwhile to do!

Hours later, Gloria was swaying back and forth on the old porch rocker, a cold glass of iced tea in her hand. She gazed thoughtfully at the fiery-red ball of fire as it started to set beside the faded gray barn across the street. The blues, pinks and purples painted across the sky were extra-vivid tonight.

She stared down at her wrinkled, worn hands. Her eyes closed as she whispered a little prayer. *God, please help me find purpose in my life*

again. Show me your will. Thank you, God. Amen.

She lifted her head and stared out at the last little sliver of sun as it disappeared below the open corn field. It was so peaceful out here. So calm and quiet. It was home. Even if she was all alone.

Minutes later, she rose from the porch chair and made her way back inside.

Chapter 2

The restaurant was busy. Gloria counted her blessings when she found an ample sized parking spot right out front. A quick glance around and she realized she was the last to arrive, even though she was at least ten minutes early.

As she made her way into the restaurant, she spied Ruth's hand waving from back in the corner.

Margaret scooted over to make room at the table as Gloria slid her chair in. "I heard you were down in the dumps," she said.

Gloria's face reddened. "I'm not down in the dumps or depressed or anything else!" she insisted.

The girls at the table were silent. The five of them had been friends for more years than they cared to count. And they knew Gloria well enough to know their friend was most certainly troubled by something.

Dot grabbed a fresh pot of coffee from one of the burners and poured a cup for Gloria. She dropped a fresh plate of sugary treats on the table before sitting back down.

Something about Dot dropping the plate of goodies on the table reminded Gloria of the incident at the school the day before. She swung around to face her friend, Ruth. "Did you hear anything about some kind of crime over at the old elementary school?"

Ruth's mouth dropped open. She carefully set the sticky apple

strudel on her plate. “What crime at the school?”

Apparently not. “I drove by the school on my way to Lucy’s yesterday. There was a police car and crime scene van out front,” Gloria explained.

Lucy’s hand flew to her lips. “You never mentioned it to me . . .”

Gloria shook her head. “For some reason, it slipped my mind until just now.” She went on. “I saw a large white sheet on the ground and it was covering something up. I made it as far as the end of the sidewalk before chickening out and heading back to the car.”

“You couldn’t tell what it was?” Ruth demanded.

Gloria shook her head. “No. But if I had to guess, I’d say it was probably a body.”

Margaret clutched at her stomach and pushed the half eaten raspberry twist across the table. “I just lost my appetite.”

“Did you recognize the cops?” Dot wondered.

Gloria nodded. “One of them was Officer Joe. I’m not sure how many more there were but I’m certain there were at least two people.”

“Well, that adds a little drama to our peaceful little town.” Dot looked thoughtfully around the table at her dear friends. “You know, I’ve been thinking. Sometimes this place can be so boring . . .”

Gloria couldn’t agree more. “Ain’t that the truth!” she muttered.

Lucy took a huge bite of Danish. “I’m not bored,” she murmured between chews, a thick chunk of cream cheese smeared across her upper

lip.

Ruth rolled her eyes. “We know *you’re* not bored. At least not now that you have what’s-his-name to keep you busy.”

Lucy began licking the sticky frosting from her fingers. “Bill. His name is Bill!”

Dot interrupted. “I’ve been tossing around an idea - what do you girls think about forming a club? You know – kind of like the Red Hat Society but with our own twist.”

Dot had piqued their interest. She quickly went on. “We could call it the Garden Girls Club or Garden Club Society . . .”

Gloria liked it. She liked it a lot! “Yeah! Seeing how we all have green thumbs and gardens. I think it’s the perfect name.”

The more she thought about it, the more excited she got. “We could visit people around town who can’t get out. You know, bring them fresh fruits and vegetables from our own gardens!”

Lucy grabbed a second treat. The chocolate covered donut was halfway to her mouth when she paused. “We could meet as an official group once a month and plan some cool activities during our meeting. You know, like afternoon movie matinees, luncheons, shopping . . .”

Margaret sniffed. “Well, we need to keep it exclusive. Just the five of us, right?”

Gloria shook her head. Margaret could be such a snob! Her husband recently retired as vice president of the local bank. They weren’t

rich – more like very comfortable going into retirement. They owned a lovely home overlooking Lake Terrace and Margaret had it crammed full of priceless antiques from all over the world. Stuff she'd picked up on their travels to some very exotic locales.

“Let's not even worry about that right now, Margaret. First we need to get the club formed.” Dot glanced around the table. “All in favor of starting The Garden Girls Club – raise your hand.”

All five hands shot up in the air at once. It was unanimous.

And that's how the Garden Girls Club was formed. Right then and there, they decided to log onto the restaurant's computer and research some on-line stores where they could order their one-of-a-kind hats. The group had a lot of fun picking out some crazy designs. The first official meeting would be held a week later, after all the girls had their hats in hand – or in this case – on their heads.

As Gloria slowly drove back to the farm, she was happier than she'd been in a long time. Maybe this was the answer. Helping others and having purpose again.



Gloria was up bright and early the next morning as she set a fresh cup of coffee on the table and stepped outside to grab the morning paper off the porch. She glanced down at the front page as she made her way back into the kitchen.

She reached over to pick up her coffee when the morning's

headline caught her attention:

Unidentified Man's Body Found in Nearby Belhaven

Gloria snatched her reading glasses off the table and quickly slipped them on. She sipped her coffee, completely mesmerized by the horrifying story.

Thursday afternoon, an area resident was on a morning stroll when he stumbled on the decomposing body of an unidentified man in a wooded area behind Belhaven Elementary School. Details are slowly being released but it appears the unfortunate victim was stabbed multiple times.

Police are not releasing any further information pending investigation and positive identification.

Gloria dropped down in the kitchen chair with a heavy thud. So it *was* a body underneath the sheet the other day.

This ought to get the whole town buzzing. No one ever died in Belhaven. Well, that wasn't necessarily true. Lots of people from Belhaven died. After all, more than half the population was past retirement age. But murdered? Gloria couldn't recall a murder ever taking place in their sleepy little village.

Her chair scraped against the hard linoleum floor as she got up and made her way over to the coffee pot for another shot of caffeine. Not surprisingly, her house phone began to ring. News traveled fast. Gloria didn't have caller id so it was always a surprise as to who was on the other

end of the line. “Hello?”

It was Ruth. She didn’t waste a second on pleasantries. “Did you hear about the murder? You were right. You did see a body out behind the school!”

Gloria took a sip of coffee. “I was just reading about it in this morning’s paper. It’s unbelievable.”

Ruth lowered her voice. Just a little. “The whole town is talking about it. Every single person that’s been in here this morning is really shook up. They’re talking crazy stuff. At this rate, the town will be full of gun toting vigilantes with attack dogs!”

“I don’t think I’ll go that far but it is a bit frightening. To think that there’s a killer in our midst.” To Gloria, the thought was scary but it was also exciting.

Gloria went on. “Well, it will certainly give us something to discuss at our first Garden Girls Club meeting.”

Gloria was curious. “Has Officer Joe been in yet today?” Officer Joe Nelson was Belhaven’s official police officer. He wasn’t actually Belhaven’s officer per se but a Montbay County Sheriff that patrolled their little town. The last police excitement they had was months ago when a drunk driver crashed his pick-up truck into the front of the local tavern.

“No. Haven’t seen him yet but you can be sure I’ll be asking him some questions.” Ruth had the perfect job at the post office. She spent a lot of her time sticking her nose into everyone else’s business and if anyone could get insider information on the town’s first murder, it would

be Ruth.

“Listen, I gotta go. Joe just walked in!” With that, the line went dead.

Gloria headed to the bathroom to take a shower. She made it all the way to the bathroom door when she turned around and retraced her steps. *There was a killer on the loose. What was she thinking?* She shuffled to the porch door, quickly closing it and snapping the lock in place – just in case. Gloria couldn’t remember the last time she’d actually locked her doors. As a matter of fact, she wasn’t even sure where the keys were.

Chapter 3

The first meeting of Garden Girls Club was a huge success! They spent several long minutes admiring each other's fabulous green hats. The hands-down favorite in the group was Lucy's. It was a Forest Green saucer hat made of wool felt. Three colorful Peacock feathers circled the top with a fourth feather poking out of the side and straight up in the air like an antenna.

Dot pulled a brown clipboard from the floral knitting bag that was sitting beside her on the floor. She was ready to get down to business. "Have any of you given thought to what you want to donate from your garden and who we should visit first?"

Ruth nodded her head. "Since I know almost everyone in town and who's shut in, I've already come up with two. Dale Simpson had knee surgery last Monday and he's still stuck at home. The second would be Maude Smith. She just got over the flu and she's still too frail to get out. Her daughter's been bringing dinner by her house for almost a week now."

The group of five agreed to meet up Sunday after church with their bags of fruits and vegetables and visit their first two homebound.

With that settled, they moved on to other important matters. Gloria turned to Ruth. "Were you able to find anything else out about the dead man they found back behind the school?"

A quiet hush settled over the table. They were all ears, waiting to see if Ruth was able to get more information out of Officer Joe.

Ruth shook her head sadly. “No. I couldn’t get anything out of him. I tried every angle but he clammed up every time I tried to talk about it.”

Margaret drummed her short stumpy fingers on the table in front of her. “Yeah, my guess is it’s some guy that hooked up with a married woman and her husband found out about it.”

Gloria shook her head in disgust. “That’s a terrible thing to say. We don’t know anything about this man!”

It was an open and shut case in Margaret’s mind. “Yeah, well. That’s my theory on the whole thing,” she decided.

Ruth crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair thoughtfully. “We should take a run over there. Check out the scene of the crime and all that.”

Lucy moved the large chunk of cinnamon donut she’d just popped in her mouth, giving her a chipmunk cheek. “Thath a terrible ideo.”

Gloria was up for it. Sounded pretty exciting. After all, it’s not like the body was still there or anything. “Let’s take a vote. Who’s in favor of taking a trip out to the crime scene?”

Three of the five raised their hands. “You’re outnumbered.” Gloria looked at Lucy and Dot. The two scaredy cats in the group. “But you can stay here if you’re too afraid.”

Dot stiffened her back. Dorothy Jenkins was *not* a scaredy cat! “I am not afraid so you can count me in,” she said.

Gloria was surprised at Lucy's hesitance. She was normally the most adventurous of the bunch. "Lucy, you're usually the first one up for any kind of adventure. What's wrong?"

Lucy shivered as she shoved the rest of the donut in her mouth and looked around the table. "It's just something about dead bodies, especially murdered dead bodies that gives me the willies." Everyone was staring at her. Her shoulders slumped in resignation. "I guess I'll go, too," she mumbled reluctantly.

The group cleared the table and headed to Ruth's minivan. Two blocks later, they were sitting in the empty elementary school parking lot, staring in the direction of the woods out back.

Ruth swallowed hard. Somehow it looked sinister now, even in broad daylight. Just the thought of a killer, only days earlier walking the streets of their little town, dragging dead bodies off into the woods, made her shiver....

Gloria could see some of them were having second thoughts. Determined not to let them change their minds, she grabbed the handle of the door and slid it open. She hopped out before anyone could utter a single solitary protest.

Margaret slid out right behind Gloria as the rest of the group followed behind.

The Saturday afternoon sun warmed the air. It seemed a little less ominous now that they were actually outdoors.

The women huddled in a small cluster beside the van as they gazed

warily in the direction of the woods. Gloria sighed. It was apparent that she was going to have to be the one to take the lead.

With a firm resolve, she made her way over to the sidewalk. Her sturdy shoes clicking loudly on the cement sidewalk as she walked. Hopefully the killer wasn't nearby. Her feet were making a whole lotta noise. She glanced down at the noisemakers. *She should have picked a better shoe to wear when investigating the scene of a crime. No matter now. The troops were starting to follow and she didn't want them to have any excuse not to press on,* she thought.

When they reached the bottom of the hill, her resolve vanished into thin air as a shiver of fear inched down Gloria's spine. The woods looked a lot different down here than from up there.

Gloria hadn't been back here since her kids were young. She vaguely remembered the tall pine trees that dotted the land. Behind it was a small stream near the back of the school property. Years ago, her sons, Eddie and Ben, would come back here in the winter after the creek froze so they could go ice skating. Those were the good ole days. When it was safe to let your kids go out alone. Before dead bodies started turning up in the woods.

Gloria paused but only because she wasn't quite sure of the exact location of where the body had been discovered. Ruth took a step forward as she came up beside Gloria. "I did hear someone say the body was found no more than 20 feet into the woods, directly behind the double doors on the back side of the school."

Gloria looked up at the school. She took a few steps sideways until she was in line with the doors at the top of the hill. Before she could change her mind, she forced herself to move forward and into the woods. Pine needles crunched under the weight of her shoes as she stealthily made her way to the edge of the forest. The rest of the group slowly followed her lead.

When Gloria got to where she guesstimated was 20 feet, she stopped. The ground beneath her feet grew soft and mushy. At first, nothing looked out of place. She studied the area for several moments. She was just about to give up when she noticed a teeny, tiny shred of yellow police tape clinging to a nearby tree. She walked over and peeled it off the tree bark. The rest of the group was hovering nearby. “This is it,” she announced.

The other four shuffled over to take a peek around Gloria’s shoulder. Gloria bent down to inspect the ground nearby. Mere inches from where they were standing was a huge, red splotch coating the earth. “Looks like blood.”

Lucy swallowed nervously as she took a step back. “This is creeping me out!”

As Lucy backed away, Margaret moved forward. She knelt down to get a closer look. “Yep,” she confirmed. “That’s definitely someone’s blood.” She rose to her feet as they all stared down at the angry spot.

“So now what do we do?” Dot, the ever-sensible, one asked.

“You don’t think the killer is watching us right now, do you?”

Gloria peered into the woods. “I mean, every crime show I ever watched on TV has the killer going back to the scene of the crime.”

“That’s a comforting thought.” Ruth turned to go. “I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m ready to get out of here!”

The group quickly followed Ruth’s lead.

Gloria was the last to leave. She took one final look around before heading back out of the woods and into the clearing. She looked down at her shoes. They were caked with gooey mud. She shook her head in disgust. *Wouldn’t you know it’s one of my favorite pair!*

Just then, something caught her eye. Something shiny and it was wedged halfway under a nearby rock. She bent down to get a closer look.

It was a piece of jewelry. Gloria lifted the rock and plucked the charm from the damp earth. She turned it over in her hand. Judging by the shininess and the fact that it wasn’t all dirty and corroded meant it hadn’t been there very long. Maybe only a few days or so. Quite possibly left here the same day the killer dumped the body right next to it.

She rolled the small charm between her fingers as she examined the pattern up close.

“Hey! Are you coming with us or are we just gonna leave you here?” Ruth demanded.

Gloria jerked her head up. The girls were standing just outside the woods, huddled together in a small circle as they stared back at her.

What if the killer noticed the charm was missing and decided to

come back and get it? Gloria shoved the little trinket in her pocket and hurried to catch up with her friends.

Margaret motioned toward the woods. “What were you doing back there?”

“Just scraping some mud off my favorite shoes,” she half-fibbed.

After they got back in Ruth’s van, Gloria did something strange. Something she never would’ve done before this very second. “Can you lock the van doors?” she asked Ruth.

Ruth raised her eyebrows as she clicked the locks down. “What’s that all about?”

Gloria shook her head without answering. She wasn’t sure yet what she wanted to do about her find. Whether she should tell the group about it. She decided to mull it over first.

Back at the restaurant, Gloria made her way to Annabelle. Lucy’s Mustang was parked right next to her. She looked at Gloria sideways. “Did you find something back there in the woods?”

Gloria glanced around to make sure the others were out of earshot. “You have a minute to come back to my house?” she asked. “I have something to show you.”

Lucy nodded. “Sure, sure. Yeah, I’ll follow you home.”

Out of the small group of friends, Gloria was closest to Lucy. They had known each other for decades. Their children grew up together and before their husbands died, the guys would spend nearly every

weekend in the winter ice fishing on Lake Terrace in a ramshackle old shanty they dragged out there every year after the lake froze.

While James and Lucy's husband, Gary, were gone all day, the girls would spend the afternoon shopping and having lunch in the city. Gloria liked the other three just fine. It's just that she had a special bond with Lucy.

When the girls got to the house, they made their way into Gloria's cozy kitchen. After James's death, Gloria decided she needed to brighten the place up. She and Lucy spent an entire afternoon painting the large country kitchen a light yellow. Buttercup to be exact. Yellow was Gloria's absolute favorite. It was such a happy color.

Puddles jumped up on Lucy's lap as soon as she sat down at the kitchen table. She nibbled on Lucy's elbow to say hello. Lucy petted the affectionate fur ball as she studied her friend. Something was definitely up.

Gloria poured two glasses of iced tea and uncovered a plate of freshly baked peanut butter cookies to appeal to Lucy's sweet tooth. "Oh, your famous peanut butter cookies. My favorite . . ." Lucy took a huge bite of cookie before eyeing Gloria suspiciously.

"You found something out in the woods, didn't you?"

Gloria took a sip of tea and nodded. "Promise to keep this just between the two of us for now?"

Lucy's head bobbed up and down, her mouth full of cookie.

Gloria reached into her pants pocket and pulled out the small

charm. She laid it on the table in front of Lucy.

Lucy grabbed the reading glasses from her purse, slipped them on and picked up the charm for a closer inspection. She turned it over in her hand as she studied the small, shiny trinket.

“That’s a really unique charm.” She looked up at Gloria. “You think it might belong to the killer or whoever dumped the body?”

Gloria shrugged. “That’s what I was kind of thinking. I found it right next to the blood stain. It was wedged under a rock,” she explained. “The cops must’ve missed it during their investigation.”

She took the charm from Lucy. “See how clean it is? It hasn’t been lying on that dirty ground very long. If it doesn’t belong to one of the investigators, it must belong to the killer,” she reasoned.

She stared out the window, deep in thought. “I wonder if there’s any way we can find out who was out at the crime scene. Like if there was a female investigator assigned to the case,” she wondered out loud.

Lucy reached for cookie #2. “I bet Ruth could find out.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right but I don’t want to tell Ruth about the charm.”

Lucy grinned, her cheek bulging with the freshly baked goods. “Oh, I can handle Ruth. If you tell her there’s no way she can find something out, she makes it her personal mission to do exactly that.”

Gloria smiled at her friend. She was right. Ruth would go out of her way to prove you wrong, especially when it involved nosing around in

someone else's business.

Lucy glanced up at the kitchen clock. "I gotta get going. Bill's coming over soon." She grabbed one last cookie and her purse before heading to the door. "We're going skeet shooting."

Gloria looked at her doubtfully. "Have you ever shot a gun before?"

Lucy shook her head. "Uh-uh. But it sure sounds like fun!"

Gloria watched Lucy's red Mustang race down the driveway. She shook her head as she smiled at her crazy friend. *She's definitely hit her midlife crisis.*

Chapter 4

Gloria eased Annabelle into the church parking lot on Sunday morning. She made it a habit to try and get there at least half an hour early to beat the crowds but this morning the lot was already jam packed.

Belhaven Church of God was the only church in town and more than half the residents were members. Some treated Sunday morning service as strictly a social event but not Gloria. She loved the Lord with all her heart. God had brought her through some very rough times, especially since James's death. She took comfort in knowing that one day she would not only be with her Lord and Savior, she would be reunited with her husband of almost 40 years. And she was looking forward to that moment – more so with every passing day.

Gloria scanned the packed sanctuary looking for an empty seat. She suddenly caught Dot's hand waving wildly from one of the pews. As Gloria made her way over to her friend, Steve, the town's confirmed bachelor, stepped into her path.

“Good morning Gloria. You look stunning today,” he complimented.

Gloria scrunched her nose in annoyance, forced a fake smile and uttered a perfunctory “Thank you.” She did not plan on giving him one iota of encouragement.

The man was a known womanizer and she wanted nothing to do with him. He hadn't lived in Belhaven more than six months now and had dated at least that many lonely widowed women, bouncing from one to the

next, leaving a trail of broken hearts in his wake.

“If you’ll excuse me . . .” Gloria sidestepped Slick Steve and scooted into the open spot next to Dot.

Dot nodded in the direction of a forlorn-faced Steve. “Why don’t you give him a chance?” she asked.

“Because he’s a known womanizer,” Gloria hissed. “And I’m not the least bit interested,” she sniffed.

Dot shook her head. No sense in arguing with Gloria. Once she had something set in her mind, there was no changing it.

Pastor Nate’s message this morning was like a direct message from God. As if it was written for the Garden Girls Club and their new mission to help others. The pastor’s key verse was perfect:

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Hebrews 13:16 ESV

Ruth and Lucy were waiting for Dot and Gloria outside the sanctuary after the service. “Where’s Margaret?”

As usual, Ruth had the scoop. “She’s not feeling too good this morning. Thinks she ate some bad Mexican food last night.”

“What about Don?” Don was Margaret’s husband.

“Off golfing for the day with his buddies,” Ruth sniffed.

“Maybe I should run by her place with some Chicken Noodle soup later,” Gloria offered. Margaret could be a real pain in the rear, but she certainly couldn’t bear the thought of her friend alone and suffering. “So I

guess it's just the four of us going to visit Dale and Maude."

Ruth nodded. "Yeah, we don't want to disappoint them. They're expecting us."

The four of them spent the rest of the afternoon visiting the two shut-ins. By the time the visits were over, they were feeling pretty proud of themselves. Both Dale and Maude's faces lit up when the girls arrived. They each had tea and cookies ready and waiting.

The visits also gave the women a chance to reflect on their own lives and how thankful they were for their good health. Maybe someday if they were stuck at home, someone would take the time to visit with them, too.

Ruth started the van and headed back to the girls' cars to drop them off. On the way, they passed the old Johnson mansion. Well, it wasn't really a mansion. Just an ancient, rambling house that was perched on top of a steep hill that led down to Lake Terrace. Back in the day, it must've been a real beauty. The plantation style home was impressive, even in its current state of disrepair. The large columns in the front supported a double deck that ran the length of the house. A black, wrought iron railing connected the columns and several sets of French doors opened up to the outdoors.

Years ago, Gloria's mother told her a reclusive elderly couple lived in the big, old place. They were the town hermits, venturing out only every once in a blue moon. They never even went out to shop for groceries. Instead, they had the small town grocer on the corner of Main

Street deliver food once a week. Every Tuesday morning like clockwork he would leave the boxes and bags of groceries on the front step, never once meeting them in person.

Gloria vaguely remembered seeing them one time when she was young. She happened to be walking by on her way to visit a friend that lived down by the lake.

She caught a glimpse of them through the tall, chain link fence that completely surrounded the house. The woman was already in the car, a shiny four-door Lincoln sedan, by the time Gloria noticed them.

The old man was slowly making his way around the back of the car, creeping along at a snail's pace, his wooden cane clicking eerily on the hard gravel as he walked. He must've noticed Gloria standing there watching him because he stopped in his tracks and looked right at her. Gloria shuddered even now as she remembered his piercing blue eyes staring at her through the fence. Gloria's shaky little legs took off as she flew down the hill, putting as much distance between her and the scary old man as possible.

Gloria was a teenager when they died. No one ever came to claim the place. It was sad to see such a stately home become so neglected.

“Oh. Hey, Lucy, remember the other day when you were asking me if there were any women detectives at the murder site investigating last week?” Ruth smiled in the rearview mirror. “Yeah. I was able to find out that the only two cops at the scene were Joe and a Detective Larry McClellan.”

Gloria chewed her bottom lip, deep in thought. *So the charm didn't belong to anyone investigating the scene.*

Gloria absentmindedly said goodbye to her friends and made her way over to Annabelle. She planned on researching the charm online but just hadn't gotten around to it yet. This evening would give her plenty of time to check it out.



Gloria fired up her computer, checked her emails and quickly got down to business. She set the small charm on the desk beside her.

Gold, Ruby and Pearl Heart-shaped Locket. Gloria clicked “search” and held her breath. Picture after picture of heart-shaped lockets popped up on the screen. After an hour of looking at all the different pieces, she sighed in frustration. Not a single one of them was even close to the one sitting on her desk.

She rubbed a weary hand across her forehead as she stared down at the mysterious jewelry. *How on earth will I ever be able to find the owner of this charm?*

She reached over and grabbed the Penny Saver newspaper from the corner of her desk. *If I can't find a killer, at least I can start on my grocery list,* she decided.

As she reached for the inserts, something on the cover caught her eye. It was an ad for an antique store in a nearby town. *Hmmm. You*

don't think whoever it was bought the charm at a local store . . .

Just then, Puddles jumped up on her lap and started rubbing his head in her hand. She scratched the fluffy critter's head as she pondered the idea. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Her heart fluttered at the thought of doing real detective work.

She turned back to her keyboard. "*Antique stores in Green Springs.*" She clicked "enter" and watched as four separate stores popped up on the screen. She grabbed a piece of paper and pen and carefully wrote each name down.

Gloria set Puddles on the floor and made her way to the kitchen, satisfied that she was finally onto something – quite possibly a killer.

The next morning, Gloria was standing in the post office bright and early, waiting for Ruth to finish up with a customer. She tapped her foot on the cement floor as Ruth proceeded to gossip for a good five minutes with the person ahead of her.

Gloria cleared her throat. "*Ahem.*"

Ruth gave her the evil eye as she wrapped up her current conversation.

After the lobby was empty, Ruth turned to Gloria. "In an awful big hurry this morning, aren't we?" she snapped.

Gloria answered the question with one of her own. "Have you heard if they've identified the body they found in the woods yet?"

Ruth's eyes gleamed in triumph. The town's Ms. Busybody knew

something. “As a matter of fact, I do,” she said. “Joe was in here not too long ago.”

“And?”

“The dead man was from Green Springs.” Ruth shook her head sympathetically. “Such a sad situation. He left a young wife behind.” *Tsk Tsk.*

Gloria was growing impatient. “Did you happen to find out his name?”

“Malone. Daniel Malone.” Ruth waved an arm in the air. “Some kind of local businessman. Filthy rich from what I was told.”

“Such a sad situation,” she repeated. “I’m not sure if he had any children.”

Ruth pulled her reading glasses off her plump, round face and began chewing on the end. “The funeral is at 2:00 on Tuesday. It’s going to be a big deal what with him being an area businessman and all.”

Gloria was halfway to the door but Ruth wasn’t done yet. “Hey, where you going?”

“Gotta run. I have a bunch of other errands to take care of today,” Gloria called out on her way out the door.

“But what about lunch?”

It was too late. Gloria was long gone.

Back in her car, Gloria started the engine and then paused. She could go to the funeral on Tuesday and then run by the antique shops to

see if anyone recognized the charm.

On her way home, she made a last minute decision to stop by Lucy's house. As she coasted into the drive, she could see Lucy was hard at work in her lush, green garden.

Gloria hopped out of her car, a noticeable spring in her step. Lucy eyed her friend suspiciously as she skipped over to the tomatoes. "I think I'm onto something."

Lucy stuck a gloved hand to her forehead as she shaded her eyes. "Huh?"

Gloria sighed in exasperation. "You know. The charm."

Lucy took off her gardening gloves and tiptoed past the strawberry plants as she made her way over to Gloria.

Lucy wasn't nearly as fascinated with the charm as Gloria was. But it was nice to see her best friend showing an interest in something, even if it was a murder.

"I did some research on line. It's an antique. Pretty much a one-of-a-kind." She paused for a moment. "Ruth told me the dead man's name is Daniel Malone and he's some kind of businessman from Green Springs."

Lucy shook her head as she dropped her gloves on a nearby bench. "Poor thing."

"I'm going to his funeral Tuesday," Gloria blurted out.

Lucy shook her head. "How's that going to help solve the

murder?”

“Killers always go to the funeral,” Gloria reasoned. “At least that’s what they do on TV.”

“I think you need to stop watching all those CSI episodes is what I think.”

“But what if I figure out who the killer is?” Gloria insisted.

Lucy was skeptical. “Just by going to the funeral you can figure out who the killer is?” she asked.

Gloria shook her head. “No – no.” She went on. “After the funeral, I’m going to the antique stores and pawn shops in Green Springs. I was thinking maybe the killer bought the charm at one of those stores.”

Lucy still wasn’t convinced, although that made more sense than trying to figure out who the killer was just by going to the victim’s funeral.

Gloria could see she wasn’t following the logic. “It’s such a unique charm. If you were a store owner or even just an employee, wouldn’t you remember who you sold it to?”

Lucy wiped a sweaty palm on the leg of her dingy old khakis. “Well, maybe.” She picked up the garden hose and began spraying her thirsty plants. “Yeah, I suppose I would,” she decided.

“So you wanna go with me Tuesday?” Gloria held her breath. She didn’t want to go by herself and since Lucy was the only one who knew about the charm . . .

Lucy thought about it for a brief moment before nodding her head.

“Yeah. I’ll go. I can see this means a lot to you.”

She stopped spraying for a brief moment as she turned back to her friend. “But I need to be back before 6,” she warned. “Bill’s taking me squirrel hunting.”

Gloria shook her head in disbelief. “You’re doing what?”

“You know, squirrel hunting.” As if that was an everyday occurrence. Squirrel hunting.

“Better you than me.” Gloria decided it was time to change the subject. “I still haven’t told anyone else about the charm.”

Lucy shut off the hose. “Yeah, your secret’s safe with me. I haven’t breathed a word to anyone. Not even to Bill.”

Mission accomplished, Gloria hopped back in her car and rolled down the window. She clicked the A/C to the off position. Fall was right around the corner and she had every intention of enjoying the beautiful weather as much as possible before winter set in.

Puddles was waiting for her at the door. To some, it might be just a cat, but to Gloria he was much more than that. He was her closest companion. Her confidant. She could talk to him about anything and he wouldn’t argue or fuss. The cat adored her as much as she adored him.

She opened a can of tuna and set it on the floor. Puddles rubbed her ankles in appreciation before sauntering over to wolf down his treat.

Just then, her phone rang. She stood there for a moment as she considered not answering it. *I really need to get caller id.*

She was glad she picked up. It was her daughter, Jill. “Hi Mom. How was your day?”

“Oh, not too bad. Just running some errands. I dropped by Lucy’s a little while ago to visit and now I’m home for the night.”

Jill worried about her mom living alone. She tried over and over to convince her to move closer. There was a nice little retirement community not far away from her house. Her Aunt Liz, Gloria’s older sister, lived there. It would be the perfect place for her. She just didn’t like the idea of her mom living alone in that rambling farmhouse out in the middle of nowhere with no neighbors close by.

Concern filled her daughter’s voice. “I heard they found a body in the woods behind the elementary school the other day.”

Gloria gazed out at the big red barn and slowly shook her head. “Yeah. Such a sad situation,” she said. “I just found out today he was from Green Springs. His name was Daniel Malone.”

“You need to be more cautious and start locking your doors,” Jill fretted.

“I have been, my dear. At least when I’m home. I haven’t been able to when I leave because I can’t remember where the heck the keys are.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m calling. Greg and I are going to stop by one night this week and put new locks on all the doors.” Greg was Jill’s husband.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I’ll be fine.”

Jill was adamant. “No. We’ll be over later this week to put them on. No ifs, ands or buts!”

Her daughter was using “that tone.” It was no use trying to argue, so she just gave in. “OK, just let me know ahead of time to make sure I’ll be here.”

“Hey, you two knock it off! Right now!” Jill started yelling into the phone. “Look Mom, I gotta go. The boys are getting ready to kill each other.”

Gloria smiled. Jill had her hands full with those two rambunctious youngsters. Every time they came for a visit, they wore Gloria out. It took a whole week just to recuperate.

“Give those handsome fellas a smooch from Gram.”

“OK. Bye.” Just as she was hanging up, she could hear Jill still yelling. “Let go of his neck! He’s turning purple!”

They sure were a couple of little terrors. It was rare for Jill to ask Gloria to babysit. Or if she did, it was only for a couple hours. The last time they were over, they tried to flush poor Puddles down the toilet. She shook her head as she remembered that day. The poor cat was terrified of running water for a whole month after the incident.

Gloria’s stomach started to grumble. *Now what to have for dinner?* She opened the freezer and peered inside at the tall stack of frozen dinners. None of them looked the least bit appealing.

She opened the refrigerator. Maybe there were some leftovers, she thought hopefully. But there was nothing in there except half a carton of

eggs, a quart of milk that was about to expire and a block of sharp cheddar cheese.

She sighed as she pulled the eggs and milk from the shelf.

Scrambled eggs it is.

After dinner, Gloria tidied the kitchen and turned off the light. On her way out, she remembered to lock the back door. After all, the killer hadn't been caught. At least not yet.

Chapter 5

The killer grabbed the morning newspaper from the end of the driveway and glanced at the front page, heart pounding as they skimmed the headlines. It didn't take long to find the story that inevitably made the front page of the local paper.

“Body of man found in Belhaven woods has been positively identified.” There was a small profile picture of Daniel Malone directly above the article.

“Montbay County Sheriff’s Department has positively identified the body of a man found stabbed to death behind the elementary school in nearby Belhaven.”

Forty year-old local businessman, Daniel Malone, from Green Springs, Michigan was found stabbed to death in the woods behind the Belhaven Elementary School. Police believe he was killed prior to his body being dumped in the woods. At this time, no suspects have been named.

If you have any information on Mr. Malone’s whereabouts the night of Friday, September 26th, please contact the Montbay County Sheriff Department.”

A grim smile spread across the killer’s pursed lips. *And the Montbay County Sheriff’s Department will never have a suspect in the murder of one Daniel Malone.*

The killer frowned as a thought popped into their mind. A loose

end that needed to be taken care of as soon as possible. It was time to take a quick trip to the scene of the crime.

Chapter 6

When Tuesday morning rolled around, Gloria was up early. She couldn't wait to get up and get the show on the road. Today was the day when she would quite possibly come face-to-face with a cold-blooded killer. Admittedly, she wouldn't know them when she saw them but she was certain that person would be at Daniel Malone's funeral.

On her way out the door, she called Lucy to make sure she was ready to go.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm ready." She sounded doubtful. "Are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, what if someone wants to know who we are?"

Gloria shook her head at the phone. "It's not like we're crashing a wedding or something. We're just paying our respects," she reasoned.

"Lots of people go to the funerals of people they don't know," she added. "I'm sure there will even be reporters there and they never knew Daniel Malone."

Well, that did make some sense to Lucy. As long as they weren't going to stand out like sore thumbs or anything.

Gloria swung into Lucy's driveway and laid on the horn. She was anxious to get the first phase of her investigation under way.

Seconds later, Annabelle was back on the road making good time. Lucy gazed out the window as they drove down Main Street Belhaven. *What on earth did I get myself into?*

But she didn't have the heart to complain to Gloria. She seemed so

excited. “You brought the charm with you?”

Gloria patted the purse sitting beside her on the seat. “Yep. In here.”

Gloria pulled Annabelle into an empty parking space in the back of the funeral home parking lot. The place was already jam-packed. Gloria looked around. It was her turn to have second thoughts. “Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea.”

Lucy shook her head as she grabbed her friend’s hand. Now that they were here, they were going in! “Too late now. We’re committed.”

Inside the front entrance was a small guest book. Lucy walked over to the table and picked up the pen.

“What are you doing?” Gloria hissed in a whisper voice.

Lucy glanced up in surprise, pen poised in her hand. “Signing the guest book.”

Gloria looked around before pulling Lucy near her and cupping her hand to her ear. “What if the killer looks at the guest book and notices an unfamiliar name?”

That seemed just a tad bit too farfetched to Lucy, but she wasn’t going to argue with Gloria. This was her adventure. Instead, she carefully set the pen back down and started in the direction of the main parlor.

They spotted the deceased’s open casket front and center. Unsure of what to do next, Gloria stood silently next to Lucy. Haunting organ music filled the air.

Click. Gloria jerked her head around to look at Lucy. She was holding her right earring between her thumb and forefinger. Lucy smiled and tapped the front of the earring with a bright red fingernail. Gloria scrunched her eyes together as she studied the earring. It was shaped like a heart but when you got up close, the design looked like a mini camera.

“What on earth is that?” Gloria whispered in a low voice.

Lucy grabbed Gloria’s arm and pulled her to the side. “It’s a camera.”

Lucy reached up and pinched the earring. *Click.* “I just took a picture of you.”

Gloria glanced around hoping no one was paying attention to them. On the one hand, it was brilliant. It would give Gloria a chance to study the mourners later. But on the other hand, it was a tad bit over the top, even for Gloria.

The girls hesitated for a fraction of a second before making their way toward the front of the funeral home and the casket. After all, it would seem pretty odd to go to a funeral and not pay respects to the departed.

Lucy shuddered as they got closer to the corpse. She was not a lover of funerals or dead bodies and she was especially not looking forward to seeing up close the body of someone that had been murdered. She looked around the room. What if his unhappy spirit was haunting the place?

Gloria felt Lucy hesitate. She pressed a hand on the small of her

back and nudged her along. “Keep moving.”

Moments later they were staring down at the face of the young dead man. Well, young to them. Forty was so twenty years ago.

Click. Lucy was at it again. Gloria gave her a stern scowl before taking a step forward to study his face. His expression was peaceful and serene. *Not a bad looking fellow*, Gloria thought to herself. What would make someone want to kill him? What could someone – anyone - possibly do that made another person so angry that they stabbed you to death? Or was it premeditated? Maybe Mr. Malone was worth more dead than alive.

Gloria swallowed hard and turned away. She whispered a small prayer for his soul as she made her way past the casket.

The sight of the dead man shook her up more than she cared to admit. So much so that she almost forgot her main objective was to get a good look at the grieving, especially his young wife. Gloria spied a petite woman nearby. She was standing in the corner, talking to an older gentleman. The man was patting her hand in an attempt to comfort her.

Gloria studied the woman. She was young and attractive with long blonde hair and bright blue eyes. She was wearing the customary black dress suit. Gloria eyed it critically. The cut was expensive. It looked like Armani. She glanced down at her ring finger. A large diamond glittered brightly from the delicate little hand the older gentleman was holding. Yes, it was obvious these people had money.

Maybe the widow was set to collect on a large life insurance policy or she had him taken out so she could inherit all his money...or maybe she

had a boyfriend.

“We need to find a seat,” Lucy whispered in a low voice, pulling Gloria from her reverie. She was right. It wouldn’t do to be gawking at the bereaving widow.

Gloria was determined to find the perfect spot where she could observe the grieving parties. She spied two empty seats, front and center. She grabbed Lucy’s hand and dragged her down the narrow aisle. Once they were seated, she went back to studying the mourners.

There were a few interesting characters that needed closer attention. One of them was a large, portly woman who was sobbing into a red silk handkerchief. Beside her was a heavysset man with his arm around her shoulders, his head bent close to her as he spoke softly in her ear.

“I wonder who that is,” Gloria whispered to Lucy.

The woman behind them leaned forward. “That’s Mr. Malone’s mother.”

“Thank you,” Gloria whispered.

She studied the room some more. There was a gentleman in the first row, casually leaning back in this chair. He was wearing a dapper gray suit, studying his fingernails and looking slightly bored.

“Check him out.” Lucy looked in the direction of where Gloria was pointing.

“That’s the funeral director.” The lady behind them was answering again.

This time, Gloria turned around to face the eavesdropper. “Thank you, once again,” she replied, her voice dripping heavy with sarcasm.

The woman smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Gloria scowled. The woman behind her was putting a major damper on her investigation. She was too afraid to point anyone else out for fear of having Ms. Busybody wonder why she was studying different people in the crowd.

By the time the service was over, Gloria was almost certain one Mrs. Daniel Malone was the killer. After all, she had motive, she had opportunity and more than likely she had an antique charm bracelet with a missing charm.

I wonder if she’s noticed that her charm is missing yet?

That’s what Gloria should’ve been looking for. To see if the mourning widow was wearing an antique charm bracelet.

As they started to make their way out of the funeral home, Gloria eyed Mrs. Malone standing just a few short feet away from the women’s restroom. Gloria changed direction and made a beeline for the bathroom, convinced that if she could get close enough, she could get a good look at the woman’s wrist.

As she passed by the mourning widow, Gloria looked down at each of her wrists. Her heart sunk. There was no charm bracelet. Instead, she was wearing what appeared to be an expensive watch. She was no jewelry connoisseur but it looked like a Cartier.

Well, if she knows the charm is missing and there’s even the

slightest chance she lost it when she got rid of the body, then she wouldn't dare wear the bracelet in public. Gloria reasoned silently.

There was one more *Click* from Lucy's spy earring before the girls made their way out the door and in the direction of Annabelle. They buckled their seatbelts, Lucy turned to Gloria. "Well, are you happy? Did you figure out who the killer is?"

"I think the grieving widow hired a hit man. There's no way she would have been able to drag his body that far back in the woods by herself," Gloria concluded.

Lucy crossed her arms and studied Gloria's face. "Now how can you be so sure it was her?"

"Well, she had motive and opportunity," Gloria reasoned.

"What about his business partner?" Lucy asked.

Gloria's head whipped around. "What business partner?"

"Didn't you read this morning's paper?" Lucy lowered her sunglasses. "They mentioned Mr. Malone had a business partner. The police questioned him and then cleared him as a suspect."

"How on earth did I miss that?"

"I have no idea. It was on the front page," Lucy offered.

Gloria pulled out onto the main road and headed in the direction of the first antique shop on her small list.

Lucy rolled down the passenger window to enjoy the late summer breeze. "Now where are we going?"

Gloria patted her purse. “To find out if anyone remembers the charm.”

“Oh, that’s right, I almost forgot. But if you’re so sure the widow did it, why bother?”

Gloria looked at her friend incredulously. “Every good detective needs to check out every single lead.”

Lucy leaned her head back and closed her eyes. *Now she thinks she’s a detective.* Still, she didn’t want to burst her friend’s bubble.

They came up empty handed at the first thrift shop. The store owner shook her head as she studied the charm, certain she’d never laid eyes on it before.

At the second thrift store, “Trinkets and Treasures,” the middle-aged man pulled out a large magnifying glass and closely inspected the gold charm. “Nope. This didn’t come from my shop.”

Instead of handing it back, he turned the charm over and studied both sides. “This is certainly a one-of-a-kind. Looks like an Olivia Collings’ piece,” he concluded.

Gloria was intrigued. “Who’s that?”

The man set the magnifying glass down and placed the piece in Gloria’s outstretched hand. “She specializes in antique jewelry from the mid 1800’s. She’s also a highly respected jewelry designer.”

Lucy looked down at the delicate locket. “So is it worth any money?”

“If it’s from the 1800’s, I’d have to say it’s worth somewhere between \$15,000 and \$20,000.”

The girls gazed down at the charm with a new appreciation. They thanked the owner and made their way outside.

Lucy shook her head. “Wow, I had no idea.”

Gloria carefully tucked the valuable piece back inside her purse. “We have one more stop. If we’re lucky, this last one will turn up something.”

Ten minutes later they were standing inside the front door of *A Moment in Time Treasures*.

They wandered into the small, dusty shop and made their way over to the long glass counter. Gloria gazed around the room. It was crammed full of oddities and antiques. There was a little bit of everything - from a dated Singer sewing machine, complete with foot pedal to a large, metal wringer washer to a vintage Holly Hobby rag doll still in its original box. “We should come to these places more often. They have some cool stuff in here.”

Lucy nodded. “Sure does bring back some memories, huh?”

Just then, an elderly man stepped up to the counter. “Can I help you?”

Gloria pulled the charm from her purse and set it on the glass top. “We were wondering if you’ve ever seen this charm before.”

The man picked it up for a closer inspection. “Hmm. As a matter

of fact, I have.”

Gloria’s heart began pounding in her chest. They were onto something!

He turned it over. “I sold this to a couple not too long ago. Maybe two weeks.”

He set the locket back on the counter. “This one would be hard to forget. It’s a one of a kind. Worth a pretty penny, too,” he added.

Lucy was curious. “Do you remember how much they paid for it?”

He paused for a moment, deep in thought. He studied the old metal ceiling tiles directly overhead as if that would give him the answer. “Fourteen grand. Cash.”

He looked back at the girls. “The man pulled a huge wad of \$100 bills from his pocket and calmly counted them out on this very same counter.” He tapped the glass countertop for emphasis.

“Never had anyone pay in cash like that. Didn’t even bat an eye,” he added admiringly.

Lucy was just as intrigued as Gloria now. “Do you remember what they looked like?”

The old man looked beyond Gloria’s head and out the front picture window. “Yeah. They were kind of an odd couple. He was a bit older than her. My guess is maybe he was in his mid-40’s. Tallish with slicked-back blonde hair.”

“And what about the woman?” Lucy prompted.

“She was a pretty little thing. Blonde, petite. Much younger than him.” He shrugged. “Could’ve been his daughter for all I know.”

“Definitely an odd couple,” he confirmed. “Boy, was she excited to get that charm.”

The man went on, as if he didn’t notice that Lucy and Gloria’s mouths were hanging wide open. They had the killer!

Gloria tucked the charm in her bag. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name . . .”

“Mr. O’Donnell. I’m the store owner.” He reached behind the counter and handed Gloria a business card.

Gloria slipped the card into her purse. “Thank you, Mr. O’Donnell. You’ve been very helpful!”

With that, the girls stepped out of the store and back onto the sidewalk.

“I think you may have found the killer – or killers.” Lucy shook her head. “But now what do we do? Turn it over to the police and tell them what we know?”

Gloria hadn’t really considered turning it over as evidence. At least not yet. “I dunno. I need to think about it. After all, this is someone’s life we’re talking about.”

On the way back through Belhaven, they stopped by the post office to see if Ruth had any new gossip, err, information, on the murder.

When Ruth spied the girls coming through the door, she looked

like she was about to explode. There were two others inside the post office checking their boxes. She quickly waved the girls over to the front counter. “You’ll never guess what I found out today,” she whispered.

Gloria and Lucy leaned close to Ruth. “Malone was a bookie!”

Lucy shook her head in confusion. “What do you mean a bookie?”

Ruth pressed a finger to her lips. “Shhhh!! Not so loud!!” She glanced over Lucy’s shoulder to see if anyone else was listening. “You know, he took illegal gambling bets.”

Ruth couldn’t get the words out fast enough. “He fronted it with a so-called “Insurance Agency” but how he really made his money was illegal gambling.”

Gloria was intrigued. “How on earth did you find that out?”

“Ahem.” Gloria spun around and came face-to-face with the hunched over, cane carrying, bun-wearing figure of one Judith Arnett. Judith was the ringleader of the town’s unofficial socialites. If you could even call her that. She and her small band of cronies acted as if they owned the town of Belhaven. They made it their personal mission to be the first ones to start malicious, hateful rumors in hopes of ruining a good person’s reputation.

Ruth sighed in exasperation. “What can I get for you today, Judith?”

“I hate to break up your little party here but I need a book of stamps!” she snapped.

Ruth opened the drawer and slapped the stamps on the counter.
“That’ll be ten bucks!”

Piercing gray eyes peered over the rim of a pair of round, metal glasses. “I thought they were \$9.80.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Well, \$9.80 then.”

The old battle-ax counted out the exact change, handed Ruth the money and then tucked the stamps into her bumble bee flowered purse.
“Humph!”

She thumped her way over to the exit door, turning back once to glare at the threesome. With the slam of one large glass door, she was gone.

Gloria shook her head. *Good riddance you nasty old bat!*

Ruth leaned back over the counter. “You remember Derrick Johnson?”

Derrick Johnson was a local politician. City Commissioner of nearby Green Springs. That is, he “was” city commissioner until he got caught running an illegal table games business from his garage.

Lucy and Gloria nodded. Everyone remembered that scandal.
“Well, it appears that Derrick Johnson and Daniel Malone were bookie buddies, working together. Apparently Derrick Johnson was being investigated and when he got caught, investigators did some more digging around and discovered he and Mr. Malone were partners in the bookie business.”

Gloria let the news sink in. Maybe it wasn't a "slam dunk" Mrs. Malone was the killer after all.

Ruth straightened. Story time was over.

She remembered another little tidbit as she leaned forward one more time. "Oh, and rumor has it there's a third, silent partner in the illegal gambling ring. But no one seems to know who the mysterious third person is."

Well that made things *a lot* more interesting.

By now, more customers had stepped into the lobby. Lucy and Gloria said goodbye to Ruth and made their way out to Annabelle.

After Lucy climbed in the passenger seat she turned to Gloria. "That sure complicates your case." She might as well start talking to Gloria in detective lingo, seeing how Gloria was now convinced she was some kind of self-appointed undercover agent.

Gloria didn't bother replying as she started the car. The wheels in her head were spinning wildly.

When they got to Lucy's house, Bill's car was already parked in the driveway. "So what are you and Bill doing today?"

"Squirrel hunting, remember?" Lucy tugged at the door handle. "And tomorrow night we're putting up the deer blind. Bow season's opening up in a couple weeks, you know."

No, Gloria didn't know. Nor did she care to know. "Are you going bow hunting with him?" she asked.

Lucy was out of the car by now. She popped her red head inside the window. “Yeah, I might give it a try.”

“So you’re going to go out in the woods and murder an innocent deer?”

Lucy was aggravated with all the questions. “Not if you put it like that.” She glanced in the direction of the house. Bill was standing on the porch, waiting.

“Listen, I gotta run. Bye.” And Lucy was gone.

Gloria waved in Bill’s direction as she circled out of the driveway. To her, it seemed like a one-sided relationship. Lucy always doing whatever Bill wanted to do and never what Lucy wanted to do. But then, Lucy was a big girl. Not if, but when, Lucy got tired of it, Gloria was certain she’d let him know.

Back at her house, she decided to park Annabelle in the garage for a change. Pretty soon the snow would be falling so she might as well get used to being cooped up in the garage again.

She tossed her keys in her purse as she made her way up the porch steps. She had been so certain Mrs. Malone was the killer. Now she was back to square one.

She grabbed the knob as she peeked through the glass pane of her porch door. Puddles was standing right in front of it. His little mouth was moving in a “meow” motion. Puddles didn’t like it when Gloria was gone all day and he could be very vocal about his displeasure.

She slowly inched the door forward, scooting Puddles out of the

way when something caught her attention. There was a folded up piece of paper tucked in the door frame. It drifted to the ground and swirled around on the kitchen floor for a moment before settling next to Puddles' furry paws. She bent down to pick it up as she absentmindedly scratched Puddles behind the ears. *Maybe Jill stopped by the house and left a note.*

She slowly unfolded the piece of paper. It wasn't Jill's handwriting. Gloria set her purse on the counter and reached inside to grab her reading glasses. She flipped on the light to get a better look. The note was handwritten. The letters spelled out in bold, block ink:

“Stop snooping around Daniel Malone's murder or you could be next.”

Gloria's eyes widened in fear. She frantically glanced around her kitchen. *What if the killer or the person who wrote the note was inside?* After all, her door wasn't locked when the note was dropped off.

She quickly grabbed her purse and darted out the door. She stood there on her front lawn, staring up at her house. The one place she'd always felt safe and secure now seemed dark and menacing. Fear crept up her spine as she stood there wondering what she should do . . .

Just then her cell phone rang. It was Jill.

“Hello?”

“Hey Mom. Greg and I were wondering if now would be a good time to come over and change the locks on your doors.”

Whew!! Would it ever!!

“Yes. Now would be a perfect time.” Gloria was so relieved, she felt like bursting into tears.

“OK, we’re on our way. We should be there in about 20 minutes,” Jill said.

“Are you bringing the boys?”

“No. Not this time. They’re over at the neighbors playing,” Jill explained.

“OK. Thanks.” Gloria paused. “I’ve been thinking about what you said and it probably would be a good idea to put a new set of locks on this old place.”

Jill was relieved. Her mother wasn’t going to put up a fuss. “Good! I’ll worry about you a lot less once they’re on.”

After they hung up, Gloria made her way back up the porch steps. Just to be safe, she decided to wait for Jill on the porch. As she settled into the old wooden rocker, she could hear Puddles inside, meowing his silly head off.

She reluctantly shuffled over to the door and nudged it open, just far enough to let him slip out. Puddles waited for Gloria to settle into the chair before he jumped up on her lap and started purring.

She still wasn’t sure about going back inside the house. Maybe once Jill and Greg got there, she’d casually poke around inside, just to make sure the killer wasn’t hiding in the closet or something.

A few minutes later, her daughter and son-in-law pulled into the

drive. Gloria set Puddles down and made her way out to the car. It was nice to see Jill and Greg. They rarely came over these days. Those energetic grandkids kept them hopping for the most part.

Jill called her mom every Saturday afternoon, asking if she'd like to come over for Sunday dinner. Once in awhile Gloria would go, but 99% of the time she turned her down. She and some of her church friends usually ate lunch together. And now that the "Garden Girls Club" was visiting shut-ins, Sundays were even busier.

Greg started on the locks straightaway as Gloria led Jill into the kitchen. "Would you like a glass of tea or a cookie?"

"Just the tea, thanks." Jill pulled out a chair and plopped down at the kitchen table. "We thought maybe after the locks are on we could run down to the restaurant and have dinner with you."

Gloria eyed her daughter suspiciously. That was a rare occurrence. The two of them coming to this little rinky dink town for dinner? Something must be up.

Jill clasped her hands together and looked up at her mom innocently. Gloria saw right through it. She couldn't pull anything over on her. One look from her mom and she was busted. Even at her age.

Gloria put her hand on her hip as she studied her only daughter. "And?"

"We want to talk to you again about selling the farm and moving closer," Jill confessed.

Gloria stopped pouring the tea as she turned to face her daughter.

“You can talk all you want but I’m not budging. This is my home,” she said.

Jill held up a hand. “Let’s wait til dinner to discuss this, OK?”

Gloria was adamant. “Well, I’m not going to change my mind.”

Jill didn’t answer. Just slowly shook her head.

“But I will take you up on the dinner offer. Let me go freshen up. Help yourself to a cookie or whatever . . .”

With that, Gloria made her way to the back of the house. She quietly tiptoed from room-to-room, peeking under beds, poking her head into every single closet. She even pulled back the bathroom shower curtain.

After checking every room, she let out a sigh of relief. There was no one lurking in the house.

By the time she made her way back to the kitchen, Greg was just finishing up. “So is your mom going to dinner with us?”

Jill nodded. “But she’s already insisted she’s not moving.”

Greg knew better than to get in the middle of that discussion. “Let’s head on over there. We can try out your new locks on the way out the door.”

Greg put the key on Gloria’s key ring and handed it back to her. She slowly inserted the key and clicked the lock. For good measure, she shook the door, just to make sure it wouldn’t budge.

Jill looked at her, eyebrows raised. Her mom hadn’t even put up a

fuss. Very unusual.

The five minute ride to Dot's was spent talking about the boys. Gloria had two grandsons. Tyler was 10 and Ryan was 8. Tyler was a real stinker, always getting into some kind of trouble and Ryan was right behind him, following in his big brother's footsteps.

Jill sighed as she glanced over at her husband. "We had a little problem with Tyler at school the other day."

Gloria wasn't one bit surprised. "What happened to my little angel?"

"Your "little angel" pulled the fire alarm. Sent the entire building outside. They caught him on camera. At first he denied it until they showed him his plain-as-day mug shot on video."

Jill shook her head. "I just don't know what we're going to do with him. He seems drawn to trouble like a magnet."

Gloria reached over the front seat and patted her daughter's shoulder. "This too shall pass. And we'll keep praying for him."

She leaned back. "At least you won't have to worry about him being a follower," she reasoned.

Jill shook her head. "That's part of the problem. He's a leader all right. Leading himself, his younger brother and all his friends into trouble!"

Greg found an empty parking spot right in front of the restaurant. The place was already hoppin'. Tuesday nights were popular with their

all-you-can-eat-spaghetti and meatballs special.

Gloria led the way inside. She waved to at least half a dozen diners she recognized.

The trio passed Margaret and Ruth sitting at one of the smaller tables. “Well if it isn’t our sweet little Jillifer.”

Jill forced a smile as she gave Margaret a small hug. Jill *hated* being called Jillifer.

The threesome stood there for a minute as they made small talk before moving on to an empty table in the back.

“I hate that name!” Jill hissed.

Gloria could only pat her hand. “I know, dear. I know.”

Dot made her way over to their table. “Well if isn’t one of my favorite people in the whole world.”

Jill half stood as she hugged Dot in a warm embrace. “So what brings you two to our boring little town?”

Gloria spoke first. “They changed the locks on my doors. Jill’s been fretting ever since they found Daniel Malone’s body out behind the school.”

Dot nodded her head in agreement. “That was a good idea.”

“And they’re going to try to talk me into selling the farm and moving closer to them,” Gloria added.

Dot threw her hands up in the air. “Well, I’m going to stay out of that one!”

She quickly jotted their orders down on her notepad and left.

Jill turned to her mom. “Won’t you even consider it? Why do you want to ramble around in that big old house by yourself?” She tried every angle. “Just think of all the friends you could make and all the cool trips you could take if you moved into Dreamwood.”

Dreamwood Retirement was the last place Gloria wanted to move to. It was nothing but a den of sin. What with all those old women desperately chasing after the pathetic few single men living there. Oh, Gloria had heard all the rumors. She wanted nothing to do with that.

“And Aunt Liz lives there,” Jill pointed out.

Which was one good reason why she had no intention of moving into Dreamwood. Just last week, Liz had the entire place in an uproar when she accused one of her neighbors, Mrs. Chatham, a sweet, gentle soul, of poisoning the Petunias in her flower box. The bickering got so bad, they had to move poor Mrs. Chatham into another building.

She put it as gently as she could, considering her daughter was only trying to look out for her best interest. “Over my dead body.”

Greg sipped his glass of ice water before chiming in. “You might as well let it go, Jill. There’s no way you can talk your mother into moving in there.”

Dot brought a tray full of homemade pasta and piping hot garlic bread over to the table. “She didn’t budge, did she?”

Jill shook her head sadly. “Not an inch.”

Dot placed a heaping bowl of spaghetti and meatballs in front of Jill. She patted her shoulder. “Now dear, don’t worry about your mom. She’s perfectly safe here.”

She poured more water into Jill’s glass. “After all, it’s not like your mom would be the target of a killer or anything like that.”

The timing couldn’t have been worse. Gloria had just taken a big gulp of ice water. When she heard Dot say she wasn’t a target, she spewed small drops of water across the table.

Jill reached over to pat her mom on the back. “Are you alright?”

Cough. Cough. “Yeah, just went down the wrong way.” Gloria dabbed at her mouth with her napkin and picked up her fork.

She swirled a large forkful of spaghetti and took a big bite. The aroma of fresh tomatoes and Italian spices wafted through the air. The dish was delicious. Dot sure knew how to whip up a mean plate of tasty pasta.

After dinner, the three made their way back to the car. Jill got into the passenger side and turned to look at her mom. “We did have one more thing we wanted to talk to you about.” She hesitated for just a second as she glanced at Greg.

“We were wondering if it would be possible for you to keep the boys for a couple days next month,” Greg added.

That was all? They were afraid to ask her to watch her own grandchildren? “Well of course I’ll keep the boys for you!” The boys might be a handful but she raised her own rambunctious young’uns just

fine. No doubt she could handle these two for a couple days.

Gloria had a thought. “But I have one request.”

“Of course, Mom. Anything.”

“They stay at my house instead of yours. I can keep them busy and hopefully out of too much trouble here on the farm.”

“If that’s what you want.” Jill sounded relieved. “I’m sure they’ll be thrilled.”

By now they were in Gloria’s driveway. She patted Greg on the shoulder. “I appreciate you changing the locks on the house. It makes me feel a lot safer.”

Gloria hopped out of the backseat. “You guys be careful driving home.”

She was more relieved for the new locks than she cared to admit. Even to herself. She would definitely be keeping her doors locked now that someone was leaving threatening notes.

Once inside, she snapped the heavy-duty bolt in place. For good measure, she closed the blinds and for the first time that she could ever remember, turned the porch light on.

After the blinds were shut, she lifted the corner and peeked out. *Maybe I should call Lucy. Tell her about the note. That way, if something happens to me, at least someone will know what happened,* she thought.

Gloria glanced up at the kitchen clock. It was 7:30. That’s right. Bill was taking her squirrel hunting tonight. Well, they should be back by

now. It was almost dark out.

Before she could change her mind, she dialed Lucy's number.

An out-of-breath Lucy picked up on the second ring. "Hello?"

Gloria got right to it. "I'm sorry to bother you Lucy. I just wanted to quick tell you something."

"No - no. It's OK." Lucy reassured her friend. "Bill left a few minutes ago. I was just sitting down to have a cup of hot tea and a piece of chocolate pie."

"How was squirrel hunting?"

"Ma mated mit."

Lucy's mouth was full of pie. But Gloria was used to translating Lucy's words while she was eating. "So you hated it?"

"Muh huh."

"Yeah. I can't imagine it being too much fun killing those cute little critters."

Gloria took a deep breath and dove right in. "Someone left a threatening note on my door. I found it after I dropped you off this afternoon."

She must've swallowed because now she could hear Lucy clear as a bell. "Oh my gosh, Gloria! What did it say?"

Gloria pulled the note from her kitchen drawer and read it out loud.

"You need to take that to the police! Right this minute." Lucy was

verging on hysterical. “I’m on my way over there. We can go together!”

Gloria shook her head, as if Lucy could see her through the phone. “No, I don’t want to do that. I think whoever it is – is just trying to scare me.”

“Just like they were trying to scare Daniel Malone?” Lucy pointed out.

Gloria couldn’t explain it but she just had a gut feeling that it wasn’t necessarily a threat but a warning. Like keep away.

Lucy wasn’t so sure. “I dunno about this Gloria. I’ll never forgive myself if something happened to you and I could’ve done something to prevent it.”

It was nice that someone was so concerned for Gloria’s safety. Maybe she was being totally naïve but she just didn’t feel the need to go to the police. At least not yet.

After several more minutes of heated discussion, she was able to convince Lucy that she would be fine now that the kids had changed all the locks.

Just before hanging up, she promised to call Lucy in the morning to reassure her she was still alive. That no one had broken in and murdered her in the middle of the night.

Later that night, Gloria crawled into bed with a baseball bat tucked safely under the covers beside her. She lay there quietly as she strained to hear any unusual sounds. Her hearing wasn’t what it used to be. Even so, she could still make out some muffled noises. Funny, if she focused on it

hard enough, the house made lots of odd little creaks and groans.

Finally, she began to drift off to sleep. Her last thought was maybe it was time to spill the beans to the Garden Girls Club.



By Thursday, meeting day, Gloria rehearsed in her head how she planned to tell the group about her findings. They knew something was up when Gloria asked if they could meet at her house instead of their usual spot at the restaurant.

Ruth was the first one there. She looked like she was going to blow apart into a million little pieces she was so anxious to find out what Gloria knew. She plopped down at the kitchen table and got right to it. “Did you find something out about the Malone murder?”

Gloria smiled mysteriously at the nosy Nellie.

“Come on, Gloria! The suspense is *killing* me!” she begged. “I couldn’t even sleep last night.”

Gloria was saved by Margaret who walked in at that precise moment. “I hope you have some decent treats for us today. Taking me away from Dot’s goodies just isn’t fair,” she grumbled.

Next to arrive was Dot. Gloria let out a sigh of relief when she spied her friend carrying a huge tray of baked goods. She set the tray on the table and plucked the plastic cover off. There were frosted sugar cookies with colorful sprinkles, toasted coconut macaroons, white chocolate, macadamia nut cookies (Gloria’s personal favorite) and last but

not least, oatmeal raisin cookies.

Although Gloria tried hard to whip up some tempting goodies, they paled in comparison to Dot's mouthwatering treats. Gloria set a tray of coffee cups and condiments next to the baked goods.

Margaret grabbed a toasted coconut macaroon from the tray and popped it in her mouth. "Thanks for the goodies, Dot. These are delicious." She mumbled from her full mouth. She wiped the cookie crumbs on her pants as she eyed Gloria. "Not that Gloria's cookies aren't tasty," she added.

Last but not least was Lucy. The two of them had rehearsed how they planned to tell the group about the charm, the funeral and the threatening note.

After they were all settled in around the kitchen table, Ruth got right to the point. She was dying to know what was so important that they had to meet in private. "Ok, what do you know?"

Gloria rose to her feet dramatically. "I have a clue in Daniel Malone's murder."

Gasps were heard all around the table. Before they could start asking questions, Gloria pulled the charm from her pants pocket and set it on the table in front of them. "I found this at the murder scene that day we all went out there. It was wedged under a rock. Inches from the body," she explained.

More gasps as they all leaned in for a closer look.

Gloria went on to explain how she and Lucy attended Daniel

Malone's funeral and then made their rounds to the area antique stores and what they found out from Mr. O'Donnell.

Dot was the first to speak. "You need to take this to the police. Let them know what you found out."

Gloria paused for just a second before reaching behind her and grabbing the note off the kitchen counter. "That's not all."

She laid the note on the table next to the charm. "I found this note in my door after Lucy and I got home from the funeral the other day."

One by one, the girls passed the note around the table, their eyes widening in horror as they read the words.

It was Ruth's turn. "Gloria, you're not safe here. You need to turn this over to the police immediately."

Margaret was next. "Someone could be watching you." Her eyes darted around the room and then out the kitchen window. "Watching *us*."

Gloria hadn't considered that. The last thing she wanted to do was put her friends' lives in danger!

But she had been giving it some thought. Of course, she needed to turn everything over to the authorities. "I suppose you're right. But what do I tell them was my reason for not turning it over sooner?"

Ruth had the answer. "Simple. Because you were afraid the killer or killers would find out and kill you!"

Dot, ever the level-headed one, chimed in. "You need to do this now, Gloria. For your own safety."

Gloria knew her friend was right. They were all right. She guessed she just needed to hear it from someone else.

The girls changed subjects and began to discuss other Garden Girls Club business. They made a new list of shut-ins to visit Sunday afternoon.

At the end of the meeting, Gloria promised them all she would go to the police station first thing the next morning.

Later that night, Gloria tossed and turned, her restless sleep filled with bits and pieces of disturbing nightmares. In one of them, she was back at the crime scene. Dusk was settling in. Tall pine trees cast long shadows over Gloria as she made her way down the hill to the edge of the woods. A light breeze blew through her hair as she shivered in the cool evening air. She pulled her jacket close to her body.

She made it to the edge of the woods and stopped. Her eyes darted back and forth as she peered into the shadowy forest. She stood there for several long moments before turning to go. Suddenly, she caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure peeking out from around one of the majestic pines.

Instead of bolting back up the hill, she was drawn like a magnet to the sinister figure. She took a step forward, her feet crunching on the dead pine needles beneath her. She took another step as she moved deeper into the dark woods. The figure peered around the tree again as it warily watched her approach.

Gloria's heart was pounding in her chest. She swallowed hard. Common sense screamed at her to turn and run but her body refused to

listen as it kept moving forward.

A strong gust of wind came out of nowhere as it whistled through the towering trees. “*Over here.*”

She stopped in her tracks. Was her mind playing tricks on her or did the shadowy figure just whisper to her?

She stood still as she strained to hear. “*Over here.*”

A wave of fear washed over her entire body which now refused to move. She couldn’t go forward or back. It was as if some invisible force was holding her in place. She opened her mouth to speak but no words would come out.

She tried to scream but her voice was frozen inside her body. She stood motionless in terrified silence. The figure began to move closer as it darted from one tree to the next, stopping just long enough to pop its head around the side to study her.

Gloria willed her body to move, to turn and run away but her feet were cemented into the ground.

By now, the figure was mere feet away. She narrowed her eyes as she tried in vain to get a clear look at the face. As her eyes focused on the silhouette, she realized the person was wearing a mask. A ski mask. The only thing visible were sharp, piercing eyes and a grim, unsmiling mouth.

Something suddenly caught her eye. The sinister figure was holding a shiny object in their claw-like hand. It was a long, sharp knife.

The figure stepped clear of the trees and with calculated and

deliberate steps, closed the distance between them. The dark form was almost within striking distance when Gloria's body decided it was no longer frozen solid. She shot out of the woods like a rocket, her feet moving at the speed of light, as if the devil himself were chasing her. She was almost to the clearing when something reached out and grabbed the back of her jacket, pulling her down.

Just as her body hit the cold, hard earth, Gloria woke with a start. She sat straight up in bed, her heart pounding. Her eyes darted around the room, searching for shadowy figures.

Puddles lifted his head from the cozy blankets he was burrowed down in. He slowly stood on all four paws as he arched his back in a long stretch. Gloria reached over and scooped up her beloved pet. He started purring as he rubbed his head against her chin.

Gloria pulse eventually slowed when she realized there was no one in her room and it was just a bad dream.

She switched on her bedside lamp and grabbed her Bible. The nightmare shook her up more than she cared to admit.

It didn't take long for her to find one of her favorite Bible verses:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” John 14:27 NIV

Gloria meditated on the word for a few moments. She closed her eyes and prayed for God's all-encompassing peace. As she settled back into her warm, comfy bed, she pulled the covers up around her neck. She

drifted off to sleep within minutes. There were no more dreams of shadowy figures and sharp knives.

Chapter 7

Gloria pulled Annabelle into a curbside parking spot, right outside the Montbay County Sheriff station in nearby Langstone. She checked one last time to make sure the note and charm were safely inside her purse.

Before she could change her mind, she jumped out of the car and made her way inside the double doors.

She hesitated before taking a first step in the direction of the tall, gleaming counter that filled the small room.

The man behind the counter lifted his head. “Can I help you?” he asked.

She wasn’t sure where to start. “Yes. Uh. I have some information about the Daniel Malone murder and I’m not sure who I need to talk to.”

The officer’s eyes narrowed. She had his full attention. He studied her closely. “Officer Kennedy is handling that case. Let me see if he’s in.”

The officer disappeared in the back. Minutes later, a tall, broad shouldered officer walked through the door. He looked to be about Gloria’s age. “I’m Officer Kennedy. I was told you have some information on the Malone murder?”

Gloria clutched her purse and nodded. “Yes.”

“Follow me.” He turned and made his way down a long hallway lined with glass partitions and rows of identical doors. He stopped in front of one of the few open doors and motioned her inside. “Have a seat.”

Gloria made her way just inside the room and gingerly sat on the edge of an empty chair. She picked the one closest to the door, as if at any second she might try to make a run for it.

He closed the door and made his way around the back of the desk. Officer Kennedy softened as he faced the woman in front of him. He could tell by the way she was clutching her purse she was very nervous.

He smiled gently and leaned back in his chair. “So what do you know about the Malone murder?”

Now that Gloria was here, sitting right in front of a cop, her tongue tied in a large knot. She had no idea where to start.

Instead, she pulled the charm from her purse and set it on the desk. “My friends and I went out to the scene of Mr. Malone’s murder last week. I found this wedged under a rock, just a few feet away from where the body was found,” she explained.

Officer Kennedy leaned forward and picked up the charm. He turned it over in his hand.

He glanced up at her. “The crime scene investigators missed this?”

She nodded. “It would appear so.”

He set it down and looked back at the anxious woman. His gut told him this wasn’t all. “Anything else?”

“I took it to some pawn shops in Green Springs. One of the owners recognized it. Said he sold it to a man that sounds like it might have been Daniel Malone.”

She swallowed hard and gripped the handles on her purse before continuing. “And a woman who looked a lot like Mr. Malone’s wife.”

Officer Kennedy folded his hands together as he rocked back and forth in his chair. “How do you know what Mr. Malone’s wife looks like?”

Gloria attempted a small smile. She was almost embarrassed to admit the next part. “Because my friend and I went to his funeral and I saw her there.”

Officer Kennedy shook his head in amazement. “Just out of curiosity, what on earth would possess you to go to the funeral of a man you never met?”

Gloria was getting a little irritated. He was beginning to sound just like Lucy.

He leaned forward. “Unless you knew Mr. Malone. Did you know Mr. Malone?”

Now she felt like he was starting to interrogate her! She shook her head. “No. I never met him.”

“So you took it upon yourself to do a little detective work on your own?”

Gloria nodded. “That’s not all.”

Officer Kennedy shook his head. “Somehow, I’m not surprised.”

Gloria pulled the handwritten note from her purse and pushed it across the desk in Officer Kennedy’s direction.

“After I got back from the funeral and the thrift stores, I found this note tucked in my door.”

He picked up the note, slowly unfolded it and read the words.

He folded the note back up and set it on the desk. “How long have you had this?”

Gloria tugged on the edge of her tan blouse. “A-a few days now.”

He shook his head again. “The killer hasn’t been found yet. Has the thought crossed your mind that your life could be in danger?”

By now she was starting to feel pretty darn foolish. “Yeah. I’m not sure why I held onto all this so long. Maybe I thought that if I turned it in I’d be in even more danger . . .” she trailed off. She didn’t sound convincing, not even to herself.

He leaned forward and studied Gloria. “Is there anything else?”

She shook her head. “No. That’s everything.”

“Have you had any odd occurrences lately? Lights on in your house that you’re certain you turned off? Cars following you?”

She shook her head again. “Not that I know of.”

Officer Kennedy reached over and picked up the charm. “This is crime scene evidence. I’ll have to keep it.”

Gloria nodded. “I understand.”

He reached over and picked up the note. “I’ll have to keep this, as well.”

“No problem.”

Officer Kennedy stood up. “Let’s head back up front. You’ll need to sign a statement before you leave.”

He studied her for a moment. His kind gray eyes meeting hers. “I’m going to send extra patrol through your area now that we know someone is threatening you.”

Gloria nodded in relief as she jumped to her feet. It made her feel the tiniest bit better knowing someone would be keeping an eye on her.



The rest of the week flew by. Sunday was hectic - between church services, lunch with the girls and then visiting the week’s shut-ins. By the time she got home that evening, she was exhausted.

She popped a frozen dinner into the microwave and walked into the living room to turn on the TV. The 6 o’clock news was just starting. They were showing Andrea Malone being led away in handcuffs by two uniformed officers.

Gloria sat down in the chair as she grabbed the remote and cranked up the volume.

“Folks, if you’re just tuning in, we have breaking news. Based on new police evidence, Andrea Malone, the widow of local businessman Daniel Malone, has just been taken into custody for the murder of her husband.”

The phone on the end table next to her started ringing. She absentmindedly picked up. “Are you watching the news?” It was Lucy.

“Yeah.”

“Wow. That’s crazy! So it was Mrs. Malone.”

“It would seem that way.” But Gloria wasn’t convinced.

“What do you mean? Of course she did it!”

Gloria hopped out of the chair and made her way back to the kitchen. She pulled her dinner from the microwave and placed the piping hot mound of unrecognizable food on the counter. “I dunno Lucy. It just seems too cut-and-dried. Too easy for it to be Mrs. Malone.”

“Don’t go looking for trouble,” Lucy warned.

“No. No, I’m not,” Gloria assured her. “Look, I gotta run. My dinner’s ready.”

After Gloria hung up the phone, she slumped down in the kitchen chair. Puddles hopped up onto the seat beside her, butting his head against her leg for attention. She pet her furry friend while the wheels in her head spun out of control. *This was just too easy...too convenient.*

Later that night, she drifted off into a fitful sleep. She had another dream. She was back in the woods behind the school. There was another knife-wielding stranger lurking near the crime scene but this time, she could almost make out the menacing figure’s face. It was a man’s face – not a woman’s face.

She woke in a sweat, clutching her throat. Was she having some

vision about the real identity of Daniel Malone's killer? Was he coming back from the grave to tell her they had it all wrong?

She grabbed her Bible and turned to 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV)

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles ...”

This whole thing had her really shook up. She offered up a quick prayer for peace, closed her eyes and tried to fall back asleep. She tossed and turned for a long time before finally nodding off.

Gloria woke with a start. Sunlight was streaming in through her bedroom window. She glanced over at the bedside clock. It was 9:30 in the morning! She never slept that late.

She jumped out of bed and headed straight to the shower. Puddles hopped off the bed, determined to tangle himself around her ankles. It was way past his regular breakfast time! He wanted to be fed and he wanted to be fed right now!

Gloria did an about face and made her way to the kitchen. Puddles came first. She rewarded him for his patience as she opened a can of his all-time favorite dish. Canned chicken and salmon.

On her way back to the bathroom, she noticed the morning newspaper laying at the bottom of her porch steps. She popped her head out the door and looked around before stepping into the cool morning air. She clutched her gown around her as she made a mad dash for the paper.

Back inside she dropped the paper on the table and turned to go

when something on the front page caught her eye. It was a picture of Andrea Malone. Her forlorn face staring straight into the camera. Gloria swallowed hard. This was all her fault. Even if she was guilty.

She turned the paper over so she didn't have to look at her haunted expression. The feeling that something wasn't quite right was nagging at her brain.

What if the real killer was still on the loose?

A thought popped into her head. Maybe not the wisest thought but a thought nonetheless. What if she attempted a stake out of Mr. Malone's insurance office? If the killer was still roaming free, now that Malone was dead and his widow in jail, charged with his murder, the killer would feel free to do – well – more criminal stuff!

Gloria mulled the idea over as she showered. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. When she got to the closet, she stood there for several long minutes trying to decide what to wear. What does someone in a stakeout wear, after all? Any TV show she ever watched, they were wearing dark clothes. Yes, she should definitely wear something dark!

She threw on her outfit, grabbed her keys and purse and headed for the door. On her way out, she pulled a pair of binoculars out of the cupboard, just in case.

Gloria parked across the street from Daniel Malone's office. She studied the building. It looked innocent enough. She slowly sipped the hot coffee she'd picked on the way and then pulled a breakfast sandwich

from the bag. She chewed her sandwich as she zeroed in on her target. From where she was parked, it was hard to tell if the place was even open.

Gloria sat there for what seemed like an eternity. She glanced at her watch for the umpteenth time. Not one single person had even walked by the building and she was bored to death. This wasn't very exciting at all! On top of that, she had to go to the bathroom after drinking all that coffee.

She reached down to start the car when a tall, thin man suddenly stepped through the doors and onto the sidewalk. Gloria squinted at him. He looked to be in his mid-40's with dark, wavy hair.

She snatched the binoculars off the seat beside her. Maybe this was the business partner. He appeared to be holding the door for someone. Gloria put the binoculars up to her eyes and adjusted the lens. A petite blonde woman stepped into view. Gloria's eyes widened in disbelief. If she didn't know better, she'd swear it was Mrs. Malone! But it couldn't possibly be Andrea Malone. She was in jail.

She zoomed in to get a close up of the woman's face. She could be Andrea Malone's twin! But wait, she had a mole on her cheek less than an inch from the corner of her mouth. Gloria wasn't 100% positive but she didn't think Andrea Malone had any moles. At least not that she could remember.

Gloria grabbed her cell phone and snapped a couple quick pictures of the woman before she moved away.

Her heart was pounding in her chest. *What if this was the woman*

Mr. O'Donnell sold the charm to – not Mrs. Malone?

The tall, sharp-dressed man draped his arm across the woman's shoulders as they strolled down the sidewalk. Seconds later, they rounded the corner and out of sight.

Gloria tossed her phone and the food bags in the passenger seat and quickly fired up the engine. She slammed the car into drive and peeled out of the parking spot in hot pursuit. She gripped the steering wheel with one hand as she fumbled to click her seatbelt in place with the other. There was no way she was going to lose sight of these two – not now that she was finally on to something!

She rounded the corner just in time to see the couple disappear into a nearby coffee shop. Gloria crept along as she searched in vain for an empty spot. It was useless – they were all taken. She made a quick left as she searched for an opening Annabelle might be able to fit into when she spied an alley just ahead. Annabelle barely fit down the narrow two lane dirt path as she scraped against overhead branches and brush.

The alley ran directly behind the coffee shop. There was a small parking lot in the rear. She started to maneuver the car into the narrow entrance when she realized she might get *into* the small parking lot but there was no way she would ever be able to get back out.

Gloria slapped the steering wheel in frustration. “If you ever break down Annabelle, I’m trading you in for a Fiat!”

But Gloria wasn't going to give up that easy. She circled the block a second time and her patience paid off. Someone had just vacated a front

and center parking spot. Gloria quickly slid into the open spot and jumped out of the driver seat, keys in hand.

She furtively glanced around as she made her way across the busy street. For a brief second she wondered what on earth she hoped to accomplish once she was inside the restaurant. There hadn't been enough time to think it all through. It just seemed like the right thing to do. The kind of thing any good detective would do.

Gloria stepped inside the front door and glanced around before spying a booth right behind her targets. She scooted in on the side closest to the couple before picking up the restaurant menu.

She turned her head ever so slightly as she bent an ear back in an attempt to eavesdrop on the couple behind her.

“So are you thinking about selling the insurance agency now that Daniel's gone?” the blonde woman said to the tall man across from her.

“I'm not sure yet, Chels, what I'm going to do. I don't want to make any rash decisions.”

The woman lowered her voice. “I was thinking if you did, maybe it's time to start over, you know. Move away. Try something new.”

The male voice replied. “What about your family? Everyone lives in the area. Are you ready to just up and move?”

“Well, we can always come back for a visit,” she reasoned. “I just thought with all that's happened, maybe it's the perfect time for a fresh start.”

Gloria's mind was whirling. *Now why would a successful businessman even consider just up and moving away – unless he was trying to put some distance between himself or herself and something they had done....*

By now the waitress was standing in front of her booth looking down at her. “Are you ready to order?”

Gloria shook her head, willing the waitress to leave ASAP so she could go back to her eavesdropping.

The waitress walked off. Gloria picked up the menu a second time. There was nothing but silence behind her. She shifted in her seat. Still nothing. She turned all the way around. The blonde woman was sitting in the booth all alone. *What happened to the tall man that was with her?*

She whirled back around and came face-to-face with the man. He was standing beside her table staring down at her, a puzzled look on his face. “Do I know you from somewhere?” his voice trailed off. “You look vaguely familiar . . .”

Gloria felt instant heat rush to her face. She shook her head. “No-no. I don't think so. You must have me confused with someone else.” She fanned her face with the menu, praying he didn't recognize her from the funeral home.

“I could've sworn . . .” He shoved a hand in his pocket. “Maybe it'll come to me.” He shook his head, as if to clear it. “Well, sorry to bother you then . . .”

That was Gloria's cue to leave if there ever was one. She jumped up out of the booth, leaving the lunch menu on the table. She scooted out the door and made a beeline for Annabelle. By the time she started her car, she remembered all the coffee she'd consumed and the fact that she really had to go to the bathroom. She'd gotten so caught up in her detective work, she'd forgotten all about it!

After what seemed like forever, Gloria pulled into her drive. She eased Annabelle into the garage, swung the door wide open and bolted up the steps. The morning paper was still sitting on the kitchen table, right where she left it.

First things first. She flipped the paper over. Andrea Malone's pitiful expression was staring directly at Gloria. She slipped her reading glasses on and leaned in to get a closer look. Her complexion was smooth and flawless, not a single mole anywhere.

Gloria pulled the phone from her purse and scrolled to the first picture she'd taken of the mysterious blonde woman exiting the insurance agency. When she compared the two pictures side-by-side she could see small differences, including the mole but if one didn't know better, it would be very easy to confuse the two.

After a much-needed bathroom break, she grabbed her keys off the counter and headed back out to the car, paper in hand. It was time for another visit to Mr. O'Donnell and his thrift shop.

As she stood waiting for Mr. O'Donnell inside his store, she had a chance to look around. She walked over to inspect an old banana seat

bike, just like her kids used to ride. This one was pink. Jill had one just like it growing up. There was some cool, old nostalgic stuff in there.

“Good morning, young lady.”

Gloria whirled around. Mr. O’Donnell was standing behind the counter, his serious bespectacled gaze studying her.

Gloria walked over to where he was standing. She hesitated. “I-I’m not sure if you remember me . . .”

He slowly nodded. “Of course. You were here last week with the charm. You and your friend.”

Gloria nodded. “The lady and gentleman that bought the charm. You remembered them.”

“Mmmhmm. As a matter of fact, the police were in here a couple days ago, asking me to identify the lady.”

“They brought a picture and everything. Something about investigating the man’s murder.” Mr. O’Donnell shook his head sympathetically. “So sad.”

“Yes, it is,” Gloria agreed. “Very sad, indeed. I have a question for you . . .”

“Shoot.”

Gloria set the newspaper on the counter in front of him. Next, she placed her phone beside it with the picture of the mysterious blonde woman she’d snapped the photo of.

She dropped her elbows on the countertop and leaned in. “This

kind of looks like the same woman, huh?”

Mr. O'Donnell bent down for a closer look. He gazed from the newspaper to the phone. “They sure do.”

Gloria stood up. “But they're not.”

Mr. O'Donnell's eyes shot up as he studied Gloria. He looked down at the pictures again. Surely they were the same person...

Gloria tapped on the phone screen to make the picture larger. “See, the woman here has a mole on her face.” She pointed to the spot. “But the woman in the newspaper doesn't have one.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you're right.”

“So let me ask you. The woman that came in with Mr. Malone, did she have a mole on her face like the lady here?” She pointed at her phone again.

Mr. O'Donnell drummed his long slender fingers on the glass countertop thoughtfully. “Now that I think about it, she did. Yes, she did have a mole on her face. Right here.” He pointed to the side of his face.

“Well, I think we need to let the police know about this – don't you?”

He agreed. “Yes, yes of course we do.”

“I'm going to run by the county sheriff's department. There's an Officer Kennedy I spoke with earlier. Hopefully he can help clear this up.”

Gloria headed to the door. She grabbed the knob and turned back

to where Mr. O'Donnell was still standing.

“It's quite possible you'll be hearing from the police again.”

She jumped back in her car and drove straight to the Montbay County Sheriff's station.

Gloria made her way over to the counter. “Is Officer Kennedy in this morning?” The guy at the counter was the same one she saw last time. He nodded. “I'll go get him.”

Minutes later, Officer Kennedy strolled into the reception area. He wasn't sure if he was surprised to see Gloria again or not. “You again.”

“I-I'm sorry to bother you,” she said. “I have some new information about the Daniel Malone murder.”

Instead of answering, he shook his head and motioned her to follow him to the back.

They stopped in front of the same office as before. He waved her inside. He waited for Gloria to take a seat before he made his way to the chair behind the desk.

There was a long pause as Gloria tried to figure out exactly how to put it.

“What new information do you have, Mrs. Rutherford?” he prompted.

Gloria repeated the same steps with Officer Kennedy that she did just a short time ago with Mr. O'Donnell. She set the newspaper with Mrs. Malone's picture on the desk. Next, she set her phone with the

picture of the mysterious blonde woman beside it.

He leaned forward and glanced from one photo to the next. “They look like the same woman.”

“Yes, they do,” she nodded. “But they’re not.”

He looked from one to the other again. He grabbed his glasses off the desk and slipped them on as he leaned in for a closer look. “You’re right.”

“Mr. O’Donnell from the thrift store said the woman that came in with Mr. Malone was the woman on my phone.”

Officer Kennedy’s head snapped up. Two sharp gray eyes peered at her from the rim of the glasses. “He’s positive?”

Gloria nodded. “You can ask him yourself.”

Kennedy was curious. He pointed to her phone. “Where did you get this picture?”

Gloria was almost embarrassed to admit it. “I snapped it in front of Mr. Malone’s insurance office.”

“So you just happened to be in front of Daniel Malone’s insurance office and this woman just happened to walk out of the insurance office. And you just happened to take a picture of her.”

“Not quite,” Gloria confessed. “I just wasn’t 100% convinced Mrs. Malone was the killer, so I thought I’d take a drive over to his business. You know, see if I could pick up on anything unusual . . .”

“So you staked out the place.”

Gloria nodded.

“You’re quite the little detective.” Officer Kennedy crossed his arms and studied Gloria. “I appreciate you stopping by. We will certainly be looking into this new information.”

He felt a pang of sympathy for the woman sitting in front of him. She seemed like a nice enough lady. She was quite pretty now that he really looked at her. Maybe she was just bored. After all, what would possess a woman to take it upon herself to investigate a murder? She was running around acting like she was some sort of private investigator.

He led her back to the front of the station. “Before you start doing any more investigating, maybe you should give me a call. Run it by me.”

Gloria thought about it for a minute. It probably wasn’t very wise to be poking around when quite possibly there was still a killer on the loose. Not to mention whoever it was that had left her a threatening note.

She didn’t dare tell him that she’d followed the pair to a local coffee shop and proceeded to eavesdrop on their conversation. It wasn’t like she learned anything earthshattering anyways. At least nothing that could be used to solve Daniel Malone’s murder case.

“I promise I’m not going to do anything else,” Gloria assured him. “But if I think of anything, I can give you a call?”

He nodded as he fished a card out of his pocket and handed it to her.

Gloria made her way back to the car. Yes, she’d promised Officer Kennedy she wouldn’t do anything else, but what harm would there be in

taking a quick look around the crime scene one more time - just in case the investigators missed something else?

She had darn near talked herself out of it when at the last minute, Annabelle seemed to have a mind of her own. It was almost as if the car was driving itself as it made a right hand turn and headed in the direction of the elementary school.

The school was dark and empty. It hadn't been used in years – ever since Belhaven's youngsters started getting bussed into the larger town of Lakeville. It was sad to see it all but abandoned. All three of Gloria's children had gone to school there and there were many happy memories. Gloria herself used to volunteer as a playground monitor and would sometimes tag along on the kids' field trips.

Gloria parked as close to the school as possible. She slid out of the driver's seat and made her way down the sidewalk, towards the woods. She nervously glanced around. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all. Maybe she should've brought Lucy with her...but it was too late. She was already here.

At the bottom of the hill, she headed in the direction of where she found the charm. The rock was still there but the leaves covered in blood were long gone. She kicked at the leaves on the ground, looking for anything that appeared to be out of place or like it didn't belong.

Out of nowhere came a muffled crunch. It was the sound of breaking pine needles. As if someone nearby had stepped on them. She jerked her head up and swiveled around, praying she wouldn't see anyone

– or anything. The thought suddenly occurred to her. What if there was a coyote or bear wandering around in the woods?

Every fiber of her body screamed at her to get out of there. She didn't want a real live version of her frightening dream from the other night. Her heart pounding, she stepped out of the woods and raced back up the hill. She didn't stop until she was safely on the sidewalk. Only then did she look back. She stood there for just a moment as she studied the area. It appeared that her vivid imagination was getting the best of her. There was nothing there.

The wind began whistling through the trees. Gloria glanced up at the sky. Storm clouds were beginning to build. It was time to head back to Annabelle.

She turned on her heel and began walking in that direction when she had a sudden thought. The kind that any good detective would more than likely have. *I wonder if the investigators bothered to check out the bushes in front of the school . . .*

She ran a hand over the top of each bush as she began retracing her steps. Not even halfway down the sidewalk something caught her eye. She leaned over the bush and focused her attention in the direction of the tan brick wall. Yes, there was definitely something back there. She squeezed in behind the bush and dropped down for a closer inspection. Her eyes widened as she realized just what it was she was looking at.

She jumped back out of the bush, grabbed her cell phone and dialed Officer Kennedy's cell phone number.

He picked up right away. “Paul Kennedy here.”

“Yes, Officer Kennedy, this is Gloria Rutherford. I met with you just a short time ago.”

Kennedy leaned back in his chair. *Now what?* “Yes?”

She went on. “I-I think I may have found another clue in the Daniel Malone murder.”

Kennedy shook his head. He wasn’t surprised. This lady wasn’t giving up....

“I think you might want to see this,” she added.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“At the Belhaven Elementary School, not far from where Daniel Malone’s body was found.”

Kennedy jumped out of his chair and grabbed his jacket. “Don’t touch anything. I’ll be there in 20 minutes.”

Gloria nervously paced back and forth as she waited for Officer Kennedy to arrive. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. She couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching her – and the feeling was coming from the woods.

She was just about to jump back into her car and lock the doors when she spotted the police car pull up beside Annabelle.

She breathed a huge sigh of relief as she watched the now-familiar figure get out of the car and make his way over to where she was waiting.

The first words out of his mouth were, “You promised me you

weren't going to do anything else without running it by me first."

"I-I know. It's just that, as I was driving home, I got an overwhelming feeling that I should maybe stop back here one more time. Make sure there weren't any other clues..."

He crossed his arms as he studied the petite figure in front of him. "What did you find?"

Gloria pointed over at the bush. "Behind there."

Officer Kennedy stepped off the sidewalk as he pushed the bush aside and looked down. "Well I'll be darned." He looked back at Gloria. "You didn't touch this?"

Gloria shook her head. "Nope. As soon as I saw it there on the ground, I called you."

He fished a clean handkerchief from his front pocket, reached over and picked up what appeared to be another piece of evidence. He carefully wrapped it in the white cloth and turned back to Gloria.

He shook his head in wonder. "I don't know how you keep finding this stuff and everyone else misses it."

Gloria shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe they're not trying that hard."

As Gloria and Officer Kennedy made their way back to the parking lot, Gloria glanced back at the woods one last time. She just couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

"Now what?"

She shook her head. “I’m just getting the feeling we’re being watched.”

Kennedy looked back in the direction of the woods. Nothing was there.

She didn’t dare tell him she’d walked back into the woods by herself to check out the crime scene one final time.

“I’m paying a visit to Daniel’s partner later today. Hopefully the crime lab will have the results back on this before I do . . .” He opened his door and started to get in. “I suppose I’m wasting my breath – but will you promise me you won’t do any more nosing around?”

Gloria nodded solemnly and she really did mean it.

On the way back home, Gloria felt a weight lifted from her shoulders. Hopefully with all the evidence, the police would be able to track down the real killer and put them behind bars.

Puddles was waiting for her at the kitchen door when she got home. Gloria wasn’t sticking to her regular schedule these days and he didn’t like his daily routine messed up. Not even one little bit.

She bent down to scratch his head. “Hey there, goofy. Did you miss me?”

Her only answer was a light bite and then a couple licks to make up for the warning nibble.

She made a cup of hot tea and a last minute decision to call Lucy to fill her in on everything.

After Gloria told her what had transpired, Lucy sputtered. “You could’ve gotten yourself killed!” She paused. “So the cop is cute, huh?”

Gloria was indignant. “I never said Officer Kennedy was cute!”

“Hmmm . . .” Lucy wasn’t convinced. She could detect just the slightest bit of interest in Gloria’s voice when she mentioned the man’s name.

“Lucy, that’s just crazy!” Gloria sputtered in protest.

Lucy decided to let it go. No sense in getting Gloria’s dander up if Gloria didn’t even realize she was interested in this cop Kennedy. “I’ve got the pictures from the funeral home on my computer if you want to come by and take a look at them.”

“Yeah, maybe tomorrow.” Gloria’s phone started beeping. “Look, I gotta go. My call waiting is beeping at me.” And she hung up.

Jill was on the other end. “How’re the new locks working out? You’re using them, right?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.” Her mother sounded distracted.

“Everything OK?”

“Yes. Yes, everything’s fine.”

It was obvious her mother didn’t want to talk to her about whatever was on her mind so Jill didn’t press. But she did call for another reason. “Just wanted to remind you about watching the boys in a couple weeks. That still OK?”

“Of course. Just remind me when it gets closer,” Gloria added

absentmindedly.

Gloria spent the rest of the evening alone. Well, she spent the rest of the evening with Puddles. Their favorite old crime series, Detective on the Side, was running a marathon. Gloria envisioned herself as one of the characters in the show, the female detective Joyce Jameson, who worked as a hairdresser by day and an undercover officer by night.

She must've nodded off in her recliner sometime during a stakeout. When she finally woke up, her shows were over and an infomercial was on. Some kind of mini putting range to practice your golf swing while on the toilet. Potty Putt-Putt or something like that. Gloria shook her head. *Do people really buy that stuff?*

She slowly eased out of the comfy recliner. Getting old wasn't that much fun. She threw on her pj's and crawled into bed, not bothering to brush her teeth or wash her face. After all, she'd be up in a couple hours and have to do it all over again.

Chapter 8

Officer Paul Kennedy wandered back into his office. If this Gloria lady was right, maybe Andrea Malone *wasn't* the killer and they were holding an innocent woman. He turned what was more-than-likely new evidence in the case over to the crime lab for testing. Maybe they should hire Gloria Rutherford as a crime scene investigator. She seemed to do a much better job at finding clues than the paid professionals, he thought wryly.

Now it was time to pay another visit to Daniel Malone's insurance agency and talk to his partner, Barry Hicks.



“And what was your name?” The bookish receptionist in red-rimmed glasses peered over the top of them as she studied the man in front of her.

“Officer Paul Kennedy.”

“Just a moment.” She disappeared behind a cheap Lauan door as Kennedy gazed around the front lobby. Nothing looked suspicious. He'd heard the rumors about running an illegal gambling business, using the insurance agency as a front, but that wasn't his department.

The receptionist stepped back into the front lobby. “He's ready to see you now,” she announced.

Kennedy followed her through the plain brown door marked by a

cheap plastic sign that read “Private.”

She scooted to the right and waved him in to one of the dreary, wood-paneled offices in the back of the small building.

Barry was seated behind the desk, his hands clasped together in his lap. “So what do I owe the pleasure of another visit?”

Barry Hicks was a tall man. Not so tall as to stand out in a crowd but tall enough that you noticed. Not necessarily an unattractive man either.

Kennedy didn’t wait for an invitation before taking a seat. He looked around the small office. Maybe there was a picture of Mrs. Hicks in here.

“We just got some new evidence in your business partner’s murder case. Thought I’d stop by and ask you a couple more questions.”

Barry Hicks was one cool cat. Didn’t even bat an eye. “I’ve already answered your questions, but I’ll be glad to help in whatever way I can.”

Kennedy’s eyes landed on what he was looking for. A picture. A picture of Barry and what was more than likely his wife.

Kennedy pointed to the 8x10 sitting on the old 70’s credenza behind Barry’s chair. “Nice picture. That your wife?” he asked.

Barry swiveled around. He looked at the picture as if he’d never seen it before.

“Yes, that’s Chelsea.”

Kennedy nodded. “Hmmm. Nice looking lady.”

“Thanks.”

“Has anyone ever told you she looks a lot like Andrea Malone?”

Barry Hicks slowly shook his head. *What an odd question.* “No. Not that I can ever recall . . .”

“Well, they do look a lot alike.” Kennedy got to his feet and walked over to the picture. He picked it up and studied the smiling blonde. “Yes. She really does look a lot like Andrea Malone.”

The pieces were starting to fall into place. Barry didn’t like where this was going. Not one little bit. “I thought you were here to talk about Daniel’s murder?”

Kennedy pulled the charm from his pocket, leaned over and set it in front of Barry Hicks. “Ever seen this charm before?”

Barry swallowed hard as he focused on the charm. “No. Never. Should I have?”

“It was found right next to Daniel Malone’s body.”

“You charged Andrea Malone for her husband’s murder. It was probably hers,” Hicks sputtered.

Kennedy made his way back to the chair across from Mr. Hicks. His eyes narrowed as he studied the man.

Hicks rubbed a nervous hand across his brow.

Kennedy leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he stared at the man across from him. “That’s what we thought. At first.”

He decided to switch tactics. “Your wife and Andrea Malone could be sisters. Yeah, I think it would be pretty hard to tell the two of them apart.”

Kennedy tapped a finger on the side of his cheek, as if in deep thought. “Except for the mole.”

He quickly went on. “Yeah. Moles are kinda like tattoos. No two are alike, wouldn’t you agree?”

Barry Hicks swallowed the lump in his throat. He stood up. “Unless you have something specific you’re here to ask me about, I’m a very busy man and you’ll need to leave.”

Kennedy got to his feet. “Oh, but I do.”

Just then there was a small, timid knock on the door. Barry’s eyes grew wide. He started shaking his head in the direction of the doorway.

Kennedy turned around to see the woman in the picture, Chelsea Hicks, hovering uncertainly just outside the door.

The timing couldn’t have been better if he planned it himself. “We were just talking about you.” Kennedy waved her in. “Please, come in Mrs. Hicks.”

She took a small step forward. “I’m- I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Kennedy pushed one of the cheap, vinyl chairs in her direction. “No, not at all. Have a seat.”

She didn’t take her eyes off her husband as she made her way over to the empty chair.

Kennedy studied the blonde woman. “I was just telling your husband that you and Andrea Malone look a lot alike.”

Chelsea Hicks swallowed hard.

“Except for that little mole you’ve got.” Kennedy pointed in the direction of her face. “You two could almost be twins.”

Chelsea shifted uncomfortably as she glanced at her husband and then back at Officer Kennedy.

Kennedy picked the charm up off the desk and reached over to hand it to Chelsea Hicks. “Have you ever seen this charm before?”

Chelsea’s eyes grew huge. Her mouth dropped open as she stared at the charm the officer was holding out. She looked at him as if he were holding onto a snake. She shook her head adamantly. “No. Never.”

“Have you ever been to ‘A Moment in Time Treasures’ thrift store?”

A very nervous Chelsea Hicks shook her head again.

Kennedy got right to the point. “Then you won’t mind taking a ride to the thrift store so that the owner can confirm he’s never laid eyes on you before?”

Barry Hicks jumped out of his chair, knocking it backwards into the credenza with a loud *thud*. “That’s ridiculous! Why on earth would my wife need to do that?”

Kennedy turned to study Chelsea Hicks. “The shop owner isn’t sure if he sold this charm to Daniel Malone and his wife, Andrea, or if he

sold it to Mr. Malone and your wife, Chelsea.”

Barry Hicks was blubbering now. “This is preposterous! You’re dragging my wife into something she has no part of.”

But Officer Kennedy wasn’t so sure. Chelsea Hicks was now pale as a ghost. She grabbed her throat and abruptly jumped to her feet.

Kennedy felt a twinge of sympathy for the poor woman. “You do understand you don’t really have a choice, Mrs. Hicks?”

He looked over at a red-faced Barry Hicks. “She either goes now of her own free will or she goes after we press charges against her for the murder of Daniel Malone.”

The woman gasped. Her knuckles turned white as she clutched the sides of the chair. Her terror-filled eyes staring blankly at her husband. “I-I’m just going to go and get it over with, Barry.”

“Over my dead body!” Barry Hicks lunged forward.

Just then, two uniformed officers burst into the room. Kennedy hoped to avoid the situation escalating to this level but he just had a feeling . . .

“Feel free to accompany your wife,” Kennedy offered as the officers took a warning step forward.

“Of course I’ll go,” Hicks sputtered, keeping a close eye on the two burly police officers.



Mr. O'Donnell was waiting for them when they made their way inside the small antique shop.

“Mr. O'Donnell, as I explained earlier, we need to ask you whether or not you've ever seen Mrs. Hicks before.”

Kennedy moved to the side as Chelsea Hicks slowly shuffled over to where Mr. O'Donnell was waiting. The shopkeeper carefully slid his glasses on as he studied Chelsea Hicks.

“This is ridiculous,” huffed Barry Hicks. “Of course he's never seen her before!”

After several long, agonizing moments the store owner nodded. “Yes, I have seen this young lady before.”

By now Chelsea was visibly trembling. She gripped the edge of the counter in an effort to steady herself.

“I sold her and a gentleman a heart-shaped charm,” he continued.

Kennedy pulled the charm from his pocket. “This charm?”

The man carefully studied the small piece of jewelry in Kennedy's hand before nodding. “Yes, that's the one.”

The store owner turned to an ashen-faced Chelsea Hicks. “You were so excited to get the charm. It certainly is a one-of-a-kind.”

He went on. “And very expensive. That's one of the reasons I remember it. Don't sell too many of those expensive treasures very often. Made enough money off that one sale to keep my shop open for months.”

That was all Kennedy needed to hear. He glanced at the two officers that were standing guard by the doorway. “We won’t take any more of your time, Mr. O’Donnell. Thank you.”

With that, the small group made their way back outside. “We need to take you down to the station for some questioning, Mrs. Hicks.”

A wide-eyed Chelsea Hicks stared straight at her husband. “You’re going with me.” It wasn’t a question. It was a statement.

Kennedy rolled back on his heels. Things were beginning to get interesting.

Barry Hicks nodded. “I’ll follow you down there.”

That was not what Chelsea Hicks had in mind. “No. You’re riding with me in the police car.”

Kennedy was just about to say it would make more sense for her husband to follow behind but something told him to keep his mouth shut.

“I can just follow you there Chels.”

She ignored her husband and turned to Kennedy. “He needs to ride with us.”

“We can’t just leave our car here,” Hicks argued.

But she wasn’t going to have any of that. She stubbornly shook her head.

“We can have one of our officers drive your car to the station,” Kennedy offered.

And so it was decided. Chelsea and Barry Hicks slid into the back

seat of the police cruiser. The ride to the station was eerily quiet. Not a murmur or a peep out of either one of them.

Back at the station, they made their way to the interrogation room. Officer Kennedy had one of the best in the field on stand-by. Jack Green could get anyone to talk. He was a real pro and Kennedy loved to watch him work. He sniffed out liars like a springer spaniel flushing out a pheasant.

Jack Green stepped inside the room and closed the door. Years of interrogations trained him to immediately zero in on the weaker of the two. He studied the pair as he made his way over to where they were waiting.

He used one of his favorite tricks first. Try to catch them off guard right out of the box.

“You look lovely today, Mrs. Hicks,” Jack flattered. “I can’t help but notice your designer bag. My wife’s been begging for one of those exact same bags for months.”

Chelsea smiled hesitantly as she glanced down at her brand new Louis Vuitton. She liked this Detective Green much better than the other fellow.

Barry Hicks was nervously pacing. Jack Green turned to the man. “Would you like to have a seat, Mr. Hicks?”

Hicks stopped just long enough to glare at Jack Green. “What I’d like to do is get the heck out of here!”

Jack looked back at Chelsea. “We’ll work on that but first I have

to ask Mrs. Hicks a few questions.”

Chelsea looked uneasy again. The bag completely forgotten.

Jack set the charm on the desk in front of Chelsea. “Is this your charm?”

Chelsea leaned back as if the charm was about to bite her.

“It’s OK to admit it’s your charm,” Jack added softly.

She glanced uncertainly at her husband. He stopped pacing and stared at his wife. His face was expressionless.

She looked back at Jack and nodded ever-so-slightly.

“So it is your charm,” the detective confirmed.

She nodded again.

“And that was you in the thrift store?” he prompted.

“Yes,” Chelsea Hicks admitted.

Jack was almost done. “And that was Daniel Malone with you inside the antique shop?”

“I object!” Barry Hicks shouted.

Jack calmly faced the angry man. “Mr. Hicks, this isn’t a courtroom.”

Hicks walked over to his wife and squeezed her shoulder.

“Chelsea, don’t say another word.” He glared at Jack Green. “I want my attorney present for any further questioning,” he huffed.

Jack ignored Hicks as he turned his attention back on Chelsea

Hicks. “Is that what you want Chelsea?” he softly asked. “We can wrap this up right now if you want to tell us what happened.”

Just then, Paul Kennedy got a call from the crime lab. He walked over to the corner, his back turned away from the others in the room. “Hello?”

“Hey Paul. It’s Allen down here at the crime lab. We have the results back on that evidence you brought in earlier.”

“I’ll be right there!” Kennedy turned to Jack Green. “I’ll be right back.” He looked over at Chelsea Hicks. “We might have a new piece of evidence in this case.”

With that, Paul Kennedy yanked the door open and rushed down the hall.

Five minutes later, he was back, a manila envelope in his hand. He walked over to the table and placed the envelope on top. “Would you like to have a seat, Mr. Hicks?”

Barry Hicks had no intention of doing that or anything else. “I already told you. I’m out of here until I can have a lawyer present.”

Kennedy shrugged. “That’s certainly your prerogative, Mr. Hicks.” He pulled the object – a folding knife with a long serrated blade – out of the envelope and set it on the table. “We just recovered this from the crime scene.”

Barry Hicks mouth dropped open. Every bit of color drained from his face as he stared down at the knife. Chelsea Hicks’ hand flew to her mouth as she stared at it in disbelief.

Kennedy picked the knife up and turned it over in his hands. “This is certainly a unique knife.” He adjusted his reading glasses as he inspected the sharp blade. “It looks like there are some sort of initials engraved on it. “BFH.”

Paul pulled off his reading glasses and looked over at Barry Hicks. “Correct me if I’m wrong but your middle name is Franklin, isn’t it? Quite a coincidence, I would say,” he added.

Barry Hicks clamped his mouth together in a hard straight line. Things were not going well for Barry.

Chelsea Hicks burst into tears as she began sobbing hysterically.

Her husband quickly careened out of control as he grabbed his wife’s hand and attempted to yank her out of the chair.

Two officer’s standing nearby pounced, grabbing Barry Hicks arms and dragging him away from his wife.

Mrs. Chelsea Hicks stopped sobbing long enough to point at her husband. “He did it!”

Hicks fought to break free as he lunged towards his wife. “Chelsea stop!”

“He killed Daniel Malone!” She screamed.

Barry Hicks tried in vain to break free from the officers. They quickly wrestled him to the ground as Paul Kennedy began reading him his rights.

He cursed at the officers. “You can’t arrest me!”

The cuffs were finally on and they half-carried, half-dragged Barry Hicks from the room.

The three of them sat in stunned silence for a long moment after the outbreak ended.

Jack didn't even have to nudge Mrs. Hicks into talking this time.

Chelsea's face teared up again as she began to speak. "Daniel and I had been having an affair for several months. We did a pretty good job of keeping it quiet. No one knew."

Kennedy walked over and handed Chelsea a box of Kleenex. She grabbed a tissue and dabbed at her eyes before continuing. "Daniel and I planned on leaving Andrea and Barry. We just hadn't found the right moment yet."

She twisted the handkerchief around her finger before going on. "Not long ago, the four of us were having dinner together. Daniel, Andrea, Barry and me. I noticed Andrea had on this stunning charm bracelet."

Chelsea's eyes narrowed. "I remember remarking to her how much I liked it. She went on-and-on bragging about how each charm was a priceless antique."

"After that evening, I couldn't get that bracelet out of my mind. I just had to have one too."

She looked woefully at Detective Green. "I hounded Daniel until he finally gave in. I wanted mine to be even nicer and more expensive. Not long after that night, he tracked down a similar bracelet to surprise me

with.”

“For once, I had something better than Andrea.” The tears were forgotten as she smiled smugly.

“It was only about a week after he gave me the bracelet, I wandered into that antique store and spotted the heart charm. I dragged Daniel there the next day and he bought it right there on the spot,” Chelsea explained.

She shook her head as she thought about the charm. “I had no idea how much the darned thing cost until the shopkeeper told me. By then, it was too late and Daniel had already paid for it.”

Her expression grew solemn as she looked directly into Jack Green’s eyes. “He loved me more than he loved her.”

Jack was going to ask her what about your husband but thought better of it. He wanted her to finish telling her story.

He didn’t have long to wait. “Anyways, a couple days later, Barry and I were getting ready for a dinner date and he noticed the bracelet. I’m not sure why. He never notices anything I wear.”

“He said something like, “Doesn’t Andrea have a bracelet like that?”

She went on. “I knew I’d been busted. Barry must’ve seen right through me even though I tried to tell him I bought it for myself on a whim.”

“We argued for a long time until I finally confessed that Daniel

bought it for me and I admitted to the affair.”

She began rubbing her wrist. “We got into a little scuffle and Barry tried to yank the bracelet off. The charm came off in his hand. I watched him shove it in his pocket. That was the last time I’d seen it until today.”

Chelsea looked at Jack Green imploringly. Her blue eyes filled with unshed tears. “I tried to reason with him but he was so angry! He knew Daniel was working late in the back of the office that night so he drove there to confront him.”

She shuddered as she remembered that night. “He was furious.”

Jack was curious. “Why didn’t you go over to the office, try to smooth things over?”

Chelsea shook her head. “Not when Barry gets angry like that. He was out of control! He had crazy eyes. Like he wanted to kill someone.” She looked down at the tissue in her hands. “I waited for hours for Barry to come home. Finally he did.”

The tears trailed down her cheeks. “He came into the bedroom and turned on the light. He was covered with blood. It was all over his pants, his shirt. Even his shoes.”

She began trembling as she remembered that moment.

“Daniel’s blood?” Jack prompted.

She nodded. “He told me they got into a heated argument. Barry pulled his hunting knife on him and stabbed him.”

Paul Kennedy stepped forward. “Weren’t you scared you’d be next?”

She shook her head. “Oddly enough, no.”

“Barry told me after he killed him, he freaked out. Drove around for hours until finally, he dragged Daniel’s body into the woods behind the school and dumped it.” She went on. “He panicked and threw the knife into the bushes. I guess he thought if the police pulled him over, he didn’t want the murder weapon on him.”

She glanced down at the charm on the desk. “I completely forgot about the charm until Officer Kennedy showed it to me.”

Kennedy walked over to where the two were seated. “So you were going to let an innocent woman take the fall for your husband’s crime?”

She nodded a blonde head. “It’s not as if Andrea and I were really friends or anything.”

Jack looked up at Kennedy. “Looks like we have enough to charge Barry Hicks with murder.”

He looked back at the woman across from him. “You know you’re an accessory.” It was more a statement than a question.

Chelsea nodded her head. It was beginning to sink in. They were in deep trouble.

“Maybe I need to keep my mouth shut until I get a lawyer, too.” But it was a little too late by then.

Chapter 9

Gloria awoke to the annoying sound of her phone ringing. She opened one eye and squinted at the clock. Both eyes popped open. It was ten o'clock in the morning!

She hopped out of bed and raced to the phone. "Hello?" she answered, still half asleep.

"Is this Gloria Rutherford?" a male voice asked.

"Yes. Speaking."

"This is Officer Paul Kennedy from Montbay County Sheriff's Department." He paused. "You were here yesterday."

Gloria's eyes widened. She was awake now.

"I just called to let you know we made an arrest in the Daniel Malone murder."

Gloria plopped down on the edge of the bed. He had her full, undivided attention.

"It's a bit of a long story," he added.

When he finished telling her what had happened, Gloria sat there in stunned silence. She actually solved a murder. All by herself.

"Thanks to you, an innocent woman is now free and the killer is behind bars," he said. "We may need to have you testify as a witness," he warned.

That was thrilling news to Gloria. A real murder trial. And she

was going to be part of it! *Wait'll the girls hear about this one!*

She didn't have long to wait. As soon as she hung up with Officer Kennedy, her phone started ringing again. It was Ruth. "Did you hear they charged Daniel Malone's partner with his murder?"

"Uh-huh."

"Who told you?" Ruth demanded. "It's not even in the paper yet."

"No one told me. The clues I found helped catch Malone's killer!" Gloria was pretty pleased with herself.

"You're kidding." Ruth was almost – but not quite – speechless.

"No, I'm not," Gloria reassured her friend.

Ruth was itching to hear the story. "Look, I gotta get back to work but I'm dying to hear all about it."

"We need a Garden Girls Club meeting. Pronto!" she added.

By the time Gloria was out of the shower, a hastily planned meeting had been arranged.

As they sat around a table at Dot's restaurant later that afternoon, the group was in awe as Gloria told her tale of detective work and sleuthing.

Margaret, ever the trouble maker, had a question of her own. "So what's up with this Officer Kennedy?"

That was the second time someone mentioned him and Gloria was getting more than a little irritated.

“Absolutely nothing,” Gloria snapped.

But the girls just smiled. Gloria was definitely interested in Officer Kennedy, even if she didn’t know it yet!

Gloria was still glowing on the drive home from the restaurant. She hadn’t felt this alive since James died. Finally, she’d done something with purpose instead of just rattling around the big ole farmhouse day in and day out.

She almost felt deflated now that it was all over.

When she pulled into her driveway she noticed a shiny black Mercedes sedan parked next to the garage.

Annabelle rolled to a stop as Gloria peeked out her windows to see who it was.

Well, I’ll be darned.

A pretty, blonde lady stepped out of the Mercedes and slowly made her way over to where Gloria was now standing.

“Are you Gloria Rutherford?” she asked.

Gloria nodded.

“We’ve never met before.” The petite woman held out a slender hand and introduced herself. “I’m Andrea Malone.”

Gloria shook her hand in stunned silence as the woman went on. “I just wanted to thank you. I heard you were the one responsible for finding out who really killed my husband.”

“How did you find out?”

The petite blonde shook her head. “It’s a small town.”

Gloria nodded. It sure was.

“Anyways, I just wanted to thank you in person.”

The two women were only a couple feet apart now. Gloria could see she looked worn out. Like she hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in a real long time.

“I’m sorry about your husband,” Gloria said.

Tears sprang up in the soulful blue eyes. “Thank you. I-I should get going . . .” She turned to go.

“Wait a minute!” Gloria reached out and touched the woman’s arm. “Would you like to come inside for a cup of coffee?”

Andrea paused. “I-I don’t want to impose . . .”

“Oh, you’re not imposing at all dear,” Gloria reassured her.

Andrea looked down at the ground as she considered the unexpected offer. “That would be nice. Thank you.”

Gloria led the way up the porch steps and in through the back door. She started to apologize for the old farmhouse. “Nothing fancy in this old house. I’m sure it’s a lot different than what you’re used to . . .” She stared at the 1950’s kitchen cupboards and worn Formica countertop.

Andrea set her purse on the table and slid out a chair. “Oh, I think it’s cool! Growing up, I always wanted to live in a house just like this.”

Her expression gave a faraway look. “My father is a stock broker and my mother a doctor. We lived in Manhattan. In a high rise

apartment,” she added.

She laughed as she looked over at Gloria. “I don’t think I ever saw real grass until I went away to college.”

Gloria studied her face. The poor thing looked so forlorn. *Someone needs to take her under their wing and that someone should be me.*

Gloria set the hot cup of freshly brewed coffee in front of the delicate blonde. “If you’re ever in the mood for a little fresh country air, I would love the company.” She looked around her kitchen, as if seeing it through new eyes. “It gets kinda lonely out here by myself. My kids are all grown and gone now,” she explained.

“I would like that.” Andrea smiled wistfully. “I would like that a lot.”

Gloria pulled out a chair as she sat across from the young woman. “Do you have any family nearby?”

She shook her blonde head. “No. My parents are still in New York. I was an only child. Daniel and I never had children of our own. I have two step children.” She stared down at her hands. “But they never did care for me too much. And now, they like me even less.”

Andrea hesitated before continuing. “My parents weren’t able to make it for the funeral. They’re pressuring me to move back to New York but I really don’t want to,” she confessed.

Gloria uncovered a plate of cookies that were sitting on the table and pushed them in Andrea’s direction. “Would you like a chocolate chip

cookie? I made them yesterday.”

Andrea started to shake her head “no” but suddenly changed her mind. “Yes, thank you. I can’t remember the last time I had a homemade cookie.” She reached for the cookie and paused for just a fraction of a second before taking a bite. “This is delicious.”

Gloria felt God nudge her. “If you decide you’re going sticking around the area, I’d love for you to try our church here in Belhaven.”

Sad, soulful eyes looked met Gloria’s. “I haven’t been to church since I was a young girl.” She picked up the cup of coffee and took a small sip. “My grandmother used to take me every Sunday.” She paused. “Right up until she passed away.”

Gloria swallowed hard. Sitting in front of her was a lonely young woman. Perhaps God put her in her path for a reason . . .

“I would love for you to come.” The pieces were all starting to come together. Gloria was getting excited. God sure moved in mysterious ways. “If you’re free, why don’t you spend Saturday night here at the house? I’ll make you a big old farmhouse dinner and we can get up Sunday morning and go to church.”

That sounded wonderful to Andrea. She was all alone now. The few people she did know were avoiding her like she was still the killer. She really had no one.

She glanced back at Gloria. But she didn’t know this woman at all . . .

Gloria could see the teeniest shred of doubt in her young mind. “I

think Officer Kennedy would vouch for me.” She waved a hand. “Almost everyone in this town has known me for decades.”

Andrea was sure she was as good as gold. Still, she did need to do a little checking around. Just to be safe. But for now, “Yes, I would like that very much.”

She took a last sip of coffee and stood. “I really should get going.”

Gloria scribbled her phone number on a piece of paper and then walked her out to her sleek black car. “I’ll just plan on you coming by – say around 5 Saturday?”

Andrea nodded. It was hard to believe there were still genuinely nice people in the world. She opened her car door and started to slide in.

“Thanks again, Mrs. Rutherford . . .”

“Gloria. Please, call me Gloria. I’ll plan on seeing you Saturday.” She turned back toward the house. “Oh, and church is very informal. You can wear slacks or even jeans. Some of the younger crowd dress very casually.”

Chapter 10

Gloria woke early Saturday morning, excited about the fact that company was coming. She was pleased as punch about the special dinner she had planned for Andrea Malone. The poor thing probably hadn't had a home cooked meal in years, if ever!

Gloria got busy whipping together a pot roast. The house smelled heavenly. She pulled the door open and lifted the lid when the phone rang.

She quickly shut the oven door and shuffled over to the phone. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Rutherford, this is Andrea Malone."

Gloria's heart sank. Hopefully she hadn't changed her mind.

"I just wanted to make sure you were still OK with having company tonight."

Whew!! "Yes, of course dear. I'm working on dinner right now." She glanced up at the clock. It was 4:30. "I hope you like pot roast."

"It-it sounds wonderful. I've never had it before but I'm sure I'll love it."

Gloria shook her head in amazement. *Never had pot roast?* "Then you're in for a real treat. Head on over any time my dear."

"If you're sure it's okay . . ." Andrea trailed off.

"Absolutely," Gloria reassured. "I'm looking forward to the company."

By the time Andrea pulled her Mercedes into the drive, Gloria was pulling a piping hot loaf of homemade bread from the oven.

Puddles was circling her feet, sniffing the air appreciatively. He loved it when Gloria cooked and it wasn't that often anymore. Delicious treats were in his future!

Gloria wiped her hands on her apron and made her way out onto the porch.

Andrea looked even younger than Gloria remembered. She was dressed like a teenager in skinny jeans, a bright blue summer blouse and black flats. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail. As she got closer, Gloria could see she wasn't wearing any makeup. But she didn't really need any. Her complexion was flawless.

She was carrying her small purse, a backpack and a small bouquet of bright flowers. "I hope I'm not too early." She handed the flowers to Gloria. "These are for you – for having me over," she added.

Gloria was touched by the gesture as she reached out and wrapped her in a warm hug. "You're right on time!" She looked down at the colorful daisies and tulips. "These are beautiful – thank you!"

They made their way into the house. Gloria settled her into the downstairs spare bedroom before popping the flowers into an antique flower vase and setting it in the middle of the table. The flowers brightened the entire room.

Gloria checked the roast one final time as she lifted the lid and peered inside. It was cooked to perfection. The thick slab of meat was

bubbling away. She poked a fork in the potatoes and carrots surrounding the beef. Tender and juicy.

“The kitchen smells wonderful.” Andrea was standing in the doorway.

“Thank you, my dear. Have a seat.” Gloria waved her to the table.

Andrea no more than sat down when Puddles decided to find out who the unexpected guest was. He jumped onto her lap and started sniffing her hand.

“What a beautiful cat.” Puddles tilted his fluffy white face to the side as he gazed up at his new admirer.

“That’s Puddles and you can just put him on the floor if he’s bothering you.”

But he wasn’t bothering Andrea. Not one little bit. She always wanted a pet. Her parents couldn’t stand them and Daniel was allergic to animals. She began scratching his ears and he was loving every second of it as he began purring loudly. “I think he likes me.”

Gloria set two plates and some silverware on the table before settling into a chair opposite Andrea. She clasped her hands in prayer. Andrea followed suit. After Gloria said grace, the girls dug into the food.

Gloria watched as Andrea loaded her plate with the tender beef and perfectly cooked potatoes and carrots. She grabbed a slice of piping hot bread and smeared a thick layer of melting butter on top.

The poor girl must be starving to death! She ate everything on her

plate, finishing long before Gloria was done.

Andrea looked sheepish when she realized how quickly she gobbled up her meal. “I guess I was hungry.”

Gloria paused as she studied the young girl across from her. “Can’t imagine you had much of an appetite in jail.”

She slowly shook her head and shivered. “That place was scary. I’m so grateful for you helping the police figure out who really murdered Daniel.”

Gloria gazed out the kitchen window, in deep thought. “One of the things that didn’t add up was the fact that Daniel was a pretty big guy and you’re just a ... well, a tiny little thing.” She shook her head. “There was no way you could’ve gotten your husband into the woods. At least not by yourself.”

Gloria got a little carried away with her sleuthing and didn’t realize how her words were affecting Andrea. The poor thing had tears in her eyes as she listened to Gloria.

Gloria scolded herself. *Shame on me for reminding this poor child of something so painful.*

She quickly changed the subject as she grabbed the dirty dishes off the table and carried them over to the sink. Gloria stuck the leftovers in the fridge as she turned back to where Andrea was standing. “Now if you get hungry, feel free to help yourself.”

“Thanks again, Mrs. Rutherford. Uh, Gloria.” Andrea walked over to the kitchen window and stared out at one of the big red barns

dotting the edge of the sprawling side yard. “Are those yours?”

Gloria walked over to where Andrea was pointing. “Yes. I still own all the barns and several acres of farming land.”

Andrea stared out the window at the big red barn. “I’ve never been in a barn before.”

Gloria finished drying her hands and untied the apron from around her waist. She pulled the apron over her head and hung it neatly on a hook near the door. “Gosh, I haven’t been in that barn for months now. Would you like to take a look?”

Andrea’s head bobbed up and down. Would she ever!

The sun was just starting to set as the two of them made their way across the gravel drive in the direction of the big red barn. The double doors were heavy. Gloria tugged at the rusting metal latch until it finally broke free. The wheels groaned in protest as the women forced the doors down the old track.

The fading daylight cast long shadows across the smooth cement floor. Gloria stepped inside first. Andrea was right behind her. She peeked around Gloria’s shoulder as she gazed up at the combine tractor. “What’s that thing do?”

Gloria was more than a little surprised. *A city slicker interested in farming equipment? Go figure.* “That harvests crops like corn and wheat.”

Andrea walked over to the tractor. She ran an admiring hand along the massive metal frame. “Does it still work?”

Gloria nodded. “I’m pretty sure.” Her eyes wandered upward and came to rest on the cab. She could almost see James sitting inside, smiling down at her. A sudden lump filled her throat as she blinked away unexpected tears.

Andrea turned around to find Gloria standing so still, a somber expression etched on her face.

She walked over to where the older woman was standing. Andrea apologized. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

Gloria shook her head. “It does make me a little sad,” she admitted. “But it also brings back some wonderful memories of my dear husband.”

Andrea impulsively wrapped her arms around Gloria’s shoulders.

After a few quiet moments, Andrea pointed to a narrow doorway. “What’s back there?”

Relieved to be able to take her mind off James, Gloria led her through the doorway and down a small, narrow step. The outside walls of the cramped room were lined with identical wooden stalls. A long narrow plank ran the entire length of the room, covering the old metal drain that was cemented down the center.

Andrea stepped inside. The faintest whiff of souring milk and bales of hay lingered in the air. She looked around in awe at the ancient metal storage tanks nearby. The place was simply fascinating.

Gloria could see how enamored Andrea was with the old barn as she came up beside her. It was almost like seeing it herself in a brand new

light. Although she loved the old farm with all her heart, she took it for granted that it would always be here. Comfortable, familiar, home.

Andrea was grateful the older woman had taken the time to show her the barn. “Thank you for showing this to me. It’s one of the coolest places I’ve ever been.”

“Maybe you should sell your home and move out here to the country,” Gloria suggested.

Andrea’s head swung around. The thought had never crossed her mind but now that Gloria mentioned it, maybe she *could* move to the country. She didn’t know all that much about living anywhere other than the city but she could certainly learn. And Gloria could teach her.

A beaming smile lit Andrea’s face. Yes. She just might do that.

On their way back out of the barn, Andrea spied a sturdy wooden ladder set back in the corner. It led to an opening in the top of the barn. “What’s that?”

“The hayloft,” Gloria explained.

Andrea’s eyes were wide with wonder. “Can I take a peek?”

“Yes, of course. But be careful. I haven’t been on that ladder in years,” Gloria warned.

That didn’t scare Andrea one little bit. Before Gloria could change her mind, Andrea darted over to the ladder and scrambled to the top.

Gloria shook her head as she watched her scamper up the ladder. This was a little country girl at heart!

Andrea gazed around at the old bales of hay stacked up in the corner. There was a pitchfork piercing one of the bales. Andrea shuddered. *I need to stop watching so many scary movies!*

Just as she lowered her foot to back down the ladder, something caught her eye. There was an old wool blanket spread carefully out over the top of two square bales of hay. Propped up against the hay was a dark blue backpack. And it didn't look that old.

A chill ran down Andrea's spine as she narrowed her eyes and scanned the loft. Nothing else jumped out at her that seemed so obviously out of place. She slowly backed down the ladder, one step at a time.

She brushed off her pant legs as she turned to Gloria. "This place is the bomb!"

Gloria smiled as she plucked a piece of straw out of Andrea's blonde locks. "I'm glad you like it dear."

On the way back to the large double doors, Andrea studied the walls leading out to see if there was anything else lying around that looked like it didn't belong there. Her eagle eye honed in on a flashlight tucked behind a tall wooden post. It was almost out of sight. But not quite.

Andrea helped Gloria push the heavy old doors shut and watched as she dropped the latch back in place.

A cool evening breeze chilled the air as the fallen leaves danced around on the ground. Andrea shivered in the damp air.

Gloria felt the chill, as well. "Let's get back inside before you catch cold in this night air."

Back in the kitchen, Gloria walked over to the fridge. “Ready for a piece of chocolate cream pie?”

Andrea’s cheeks were bright pink from a mixture of the exertion and farm-fresh air. “That sounds delicious.”

She glanced worriedly out the window, in the direction of the barn. “Do you lock your doors at night, Gloria?”

Gloria paused, a tall cold glass of milk in her hand. She nodded. “My son-in-law just changed the locks the other day. I never used to but I do now.”

She set the glass down in front of Andrea. “Why?”

Andrea didn’t know how to say this without scaring Gloria. That’s the last thing she wanted to do.

She took a sip of milk. “When we were in the barn and I climbed up the ladder to look in the loft, I saw a blanket spread out on top of a couple bales of hay that were way back in the corner.”

Gloria’s eyebrows raised. Why would a blanket be in the loft?

Andrea went on. “There was also a backpack. I’m pretty sure it was navy blue and it looked fairly new. Like someone had just left it there.”

Gloria pulled out a chair and sat down with a thud. *What on earth would a backpack be up there for?* “Now I know I didn’t leave something like that up there.”

But Andrea wasn’t done. “One more thing. On the way out, I

noticed a flashlight tucked away behind a post by the door.”

“You don’t think a homeless person is living in your barn, do you?” Andrea asked.

Gloria slowly shook her head. Anything was possible . . .

“I didn’t want to say anything while we were in there,” Andrea explained. “You know, in case the backpack’s owner was hiding somewhere inside the barn . . .”

A shiver ran down Gloria’s spine. *Someone living in her barn?*

She got up and made her way to the kitchen door, twisting the bolt in place with a firm click. The thought of someone in her barn was starting to creep her out.

Gloria definitely needed to have it checked out. “It’s too late to do anything tonight but I’ll have my son-in-law stop by tomorrow and take a look up there.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she began having second thoughts. If Jill even remotely believed someone was living on the farm – a homeless person or anyone else - she’d make her mom move out that very day. Maybe that wasn’t such a great idea . . .

“On second thought, I’ll have my friend Lucy’s boyfriend take a look up there.” Gloria gazed out at the barn that now loomed dark and sinister. “Tomorrow. We’ll do it tomorrow.”

Andrea hoped she wasn’t making a big deal out of nothing. She could see Gloria was shook up. “I’m sure it will turn out to be nothing.”

She tried to sound reassuring. “But better safe than sorry.” Andrea yawned. The busy day had her completely worn out.

Gloria took the cue. “I guess it’s time we hit the hay. Haha.”

Andrea grinned. “Yeah, all this farm life wore me out.”

Gloria checked each and every door one more time before heading to her bedroom. But sleep was elusive once again. She tossed and turned half the night. *What if someone was living in her barn?*

She reached over to touch the empty spot where James had slept beside her for so many years. A small sigh escaped her lips. Some days she missed him so much. Today was one of them. A small tear trickled out of the corner of her eye and ran down the side of her face. She grabbed his pillow and pulled it to her face. She took a deep breath. If she tried hard enough, she could still catch a faint whiff of his after shave. She wrapped her arms around the pillow and hugged it tightly, wishing more than anything it was him and not just his pillow.

After several long hours, Gloria finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

Chapter 11

Sunday morning shined bright and sunny. Gloria crawled out of bed and pulled on her robe, relieved the night was over.

She shuffled into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. Andrea was already up. Gloria could hear her banging around in the bathroom.

Puddles was ready for breakfast and he was not about to leave Gloria alone until she fed him. “You can be a big pain in the butt, you know that?”

Andrea laughed from the doorway. “I think he likes me. He slept on the pillow beside me all night.”

Gloria looked down at Puddles. “Traitor!”

She poured Andrea a cup of coffee and set a box of cream cheese Danish on the table beside it.

Andrea pulled out the kitchen chair and plopped down as she reached for the Danish. “I’m sure I’ve gained at least five pounds already!”

Gloria eyed her critically. “You could certainly use it.”

Andrea was dressed in her Sunday best, wearing an adorable pink floral dress with matching pink pumps. A pearl necklace and matching earrings completed her look.

“I slept like a baby last night.” She took a sip of the hot caffeine. “This farm life really agrees with me.”

Gloria poured herself a coffee as she leaned against the counter. “Maybe you really should consider moving.”

A sad look marred the pretty face perched at the table. “With Daniel gone, I’m kind of lost.” Tears glistened in her eyes as she looked up at Gloria. “He was my whole life and now he’s gone. I don’t even feel like I properly mourned.” A lone tear made a slow path down her cheek. “I’m mad at him. I’m heartbroken. I’m so many things I don’t know how to feel.”

But Gloria knew exactly how she felt. Losing someone you love, especially a spouse, was one of the toughest things she’d herself had ever experienced. She walked over and hugged the slender shoulders. “One day at a time, Andrea.” She leaned back to look her straight in the eye. “That and prayer. My faith in God is what helped me through. And still does today.”

Andrea nodded, more tears threatening to spill over.

Gloria grabbed a box of tissue as she pulled out a chair next to the weeping woman. It was clear she needed to get it out and now was as good a time as any.

Gloria patiently waited until the sobbing ended and every last tear was wiped away. Andrea dabbed at her eyes as she looked up at Gloria. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that,” she apologized.

Gloria patted her hand. “I’m glad you did. You needed that and I’m sure you feel a little better.”

Andrea half-smiled, half-hiccupped. “I do.”

Gloria reluctantly stood. “I better go get ready before we’re late.”

Thirty minutes later, the two of them were coasting through town in Annabelle. A look of peace and calm settled on Andrea’s face. “I just love this little town, Gloria.”

Moments later, they eased into a rare front row parking spot. Andrea’s eyebrows furrowed as she began to have second thoughts. “I haven’t been to church in years.”

Gloria smiled warmly. “Don’t worry dear. God hasn’t forgotten you.”

With a small smile, Andrea took a deep breath, grabbed the handle and pushed the door open.

Gloria hadn’t mentioned to anyone Andrea was coming to church with her today. She didn’t want to give a single one of them a chance to start wagging their tongues, gossiping about sweet, gentle Andrea.

An usher was standing just inside the front door. “Morning Justin.” Justin was the mayor’s son. He was also a commercial airline pilot and one of the precious few eligible bachelors in Belhaven. The single girls in town all vied for his attention but so far, he hadn’t seemed all that interested in any of them. Growing up together made them seem more like buddies than girlfriend material.

He handed Gloria a church bulletin and then turned to shake Andrea’s hand when he suddenly froze. He grasped her hand in a warm grip but forgot to let go. Andrea smiled uncomfortably as she gently pulled her hand from his.

Finally, he stuttered, “G-Good morning, ma’am.”

Gloria jumped in. “We’ll find our own seat this morning. Thank you, Justin.”

Andrea giggled as they walked away. “He was awfully friendly.”

Gloria shook her head. “More like star struck.”

Dot saw them standing in the doorway. She stuck her hand in the air and began waving. “Over there.” Gloria grabbed Andrea’s hand and pulled her along.

If Dot was surprised by Andrea’s presence, she did a good job of hiding it. “Good morning ladies,” as if Gloria brought guests to church on a regular basis.

That wasn’t the only look they were getting. Several regulars turned around to catch of glimpse of Gloria’s guest but that was as far as it went.

Nosy old coots, Gloria sniffed.

Pastor Nate’s message was perfect. It was about a life filled with God’s peace. Gloria was thankful for today’s message. Last week had been pretty rough. She scribbled down the key scripture so she could go back and study it later.

“You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.” Isaiah 26:3 NIV

It was a powerful message for Andrea, as well. Tears silently trailed down her cheeks as she listened to Pastor Nate.

After the service, the small group made their way out to the church courtyard where the others were already waiting.

“Andrea, these are my closest friends Ruth, Lucy and Margaret.” She pointed to each one as she named them.

Andrea smiled as she shook each of their hands. “Nice to meet you.”

“We just started visiting people in our community that aren’t able to get out and about,” she explained to Andrea. “We bring them bags of fresh fruit and vegetables and whatever else we think they might need every Sunday afternoon.”

There was no harm in inviting Andrea to tag along. Gloria was sure the others wouldn’t mind. “Would you like to come with us?”

Ruth chimed in. “Yes, dear. We’d love to have you join us if you want.”

She shook her head. “That seems like a really thoughtful thing for you all to do. Maybe next time. I have some things to take care of at home.” Andrea turned to look at the small group. “But thank you for asking.”

Gloria opened her purse and fumbled around for her keys. “Then I’ll just meet you guys in front of Dot’s at our regular time.”

Andrea followed Gloria to the car. “I didn’t mean to make you rush off.”

“Oh, not at all dear,” Gloria reassured. “I have a few things to take

care of myself before I meet up with them later.”

Back at Gloria’s house, Andrea ran in to grab her things. It looked like she really did have stuff she needed to take care of.

Gloria waited for her on the porch. She was sad to see her go. It was nice to have company for a change. Someone to cook for...

Andrea shut the screen door on her way out. She glanced over at the barn. “You’re going to have someone check out the barn today, right?” she fretted.

With everything going on, Gloria completely forgot. “Yes. I promise I’ll have someone check it out later today.”

Andrea hugged her new friend before pulling the car door open. “Thank you for everything. I had a wonderful time.” She looked around one last time. “Maybe I can come visit again sometime.”

“Absolutely, dear. Anytime you want. I really enjoyed the company.”

Gloria had a thought. “Why don’t we plan on lunch one day next week when you’re free?”

Andrea nodded enthusiastically. “I would love to!” And with a small wave of her hand, she was gone.

By the time she met up with the girls at the restaurant, they were all there waiting on her.

Gloria no more than got out of her car, when the barrage of questions started.

Ruth couldn't wait to find out what the scoop on Andrea was.

“How on earth did you end up with Andrea Malone?”

“She stopped by my house the other day to thank me for helping find her husband's real killer. One thing led to another and next thing you know, she's going to church!”

“She seems like a very sweet girl,” Dot observed.

“Yes, she is.” Gloria couldn't agree more. “And she's here all alone. Her parents live in New York.”

Margaret just couldn't help herself. “Well, don't get too close to her. Her husband was a criminal too, you know,” she warned.

Lucy stuck a hand on her hip and glared at Margaret. “Now you don't know that for a fact, Margaret Hansen! That is just a rumor.”

Margaret sniffed loudly and shrugged her shoulders. Everyone had a right to their own opinion.

Ruth opened the van door. “C'mon, let's go!”

They carefully avoided the topic the rest of the afternoon as they made their rounds. It gave the girls a sense of satisfaction when they saw the expressions on the faces of the shut-ins. Too bad they hadn't thought to do something like this years ago.

On the way back to the restaurant, Gloria remembered the barn. She turned to Lucy. “Is Bill coming over today?”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah, we're going fishing this afternoon.”

“Do you think he'd be able to stop by my house and check out the

big red barn?”

Lucy turned her attention to Gloria. “Why? What’s in the barn?”

Gloria went on to explain how Andrea spotted the backpack, blanket and flashlight in the barn. “I’d feel a whole lot better if he could take a look around.”

A few hours later, Lucy and Bill pulled into the drive. Gloria ran out to meet them. Bill wasn’t big on chit chat and having coffee so she didn’t bother inviting them in.

They made their way to the door. Bill patted his pants pocket before reaching over and grabbing the metal handle. “Got a little glock here, just in case.”

Gloria shivered as the door opened. Bright sunlight flooded the inside. Bill pulled the gun from his pocket as he took a step forward. Lucy and Gloria hung back, watching as he slowly made his way across the cement, his heavy work boots echoing hollowly on the barn floor.

He looked back to where the girls were still standing. Gloria pointed to the loft. “Up there.”

Gripping the gun in one hand and a rung of the steep ladder with the other, Bill made his way to the top. When he got there, he paused for a fraction of a second before dropping to his knees and inching forward on the wooden platform. At the barn’s peak, he was able to stand again. The loft wasn’t too big, maybe covering a third of the center part of the large barn. He walked over to where the bales of hay were pushed together in a small cluster.

The girls took a step inside the barn so they could keep an eye on him.

He shook his head as he looked back at them. “There’s nothing here. No blanket. No backpack.”

He was just about to turn around when something shiny caught his eye. He bent down and plucked it out of a small pile of straw. It was a pocket knife. He turned it over in his hands and then held it up for Gloria to see. “This yours?”

She shook her head. “What is it?”

“A small pocket knife.”

She shook her head again. “No. James had a hunting knife but it’s a lot bigger than that and it’s in the house. I know exactly where it’s at.”

Bill took another long look around. He tucked his gun back in his pants, put the knife in his pocket and made his way back down the ladder.

When he got to the girls, he pulled the knife back out and handed it to Gloria. It was small and red and Gloria had never seen it before in her life.

“Let me finish checking out the rest of the barn.” Bill pulled the gun back out of his pocket and headed to the milking parlor.

Minutes later he was back, shaking his head. “Nothing in there. The door on the other side was open about this far.” He spaced his hands a few inches apart.

They stepped out of the barn as Bill pulled the heavy barn door

shut. He turned to Gloria. “It’s possible someone was camping out in the loft and you spooked them the other day.”

He pointed to the metal handle. “You should think about putting a padlock on that and the door on the other end of the milking parlor.”

Gloria nodded. She’d already thought about that. “I’ll work on it this afternoon.”

She walked Lucy and Bill to his truck. “Thanks for checking it out for me.”

He pulled the passenger door open and Lucy hopped in. “Let me know if you need anything else.” He gazed back at the barn before getting in the driver side. “Don’t forget about those locks.”

Gloria nodded and waved as they drove off. *Just one more thing to have to worry about.*

By the time she reached her porch, she could hear the house phone ringing. It was Jill, checking in on her. “Everything’s fine, dear. Safe and sound. Nothing to worry about here.”

But Jill wasn’t convinced. “And the locks?”

“Yes, they’re working great,” Gloria said.

They talked for a few more minutes before Jill reminded her about watching the boys the following weekend. Gloria almost forgot. “Yes, of course. I can hardly wait to spend time with those two little pumpkins.”

Jill wasn’t as convinced it would be wonderful. More like one of the most stressful weekends her mom would probably have in quite some

time. But they didn't have a choice. Jill and her husband Greg signed up for a couple's weekend retreat at their church and no one else was able to babysit.

Gloria reassured her daughter again before hanging up. She loved those boys more than anything, but she did have to wonder what she was getting herself into...

It was too late now. Jill needed her and there was no way she would ever tell her no. And with that final thought, Gloria made her way to the living room. She was pretty sure a rerun of *Detective on the Side* was on.

The End.

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Gloria's Glorious Pot Roast Recipe

2 lbs. Boneless Chuck Roast

3 Tablespoons All Purpose Flour

1 tsp. Ground Black Pepper

1 tsp. Salt

1 Small Pat of Butter

1 Can Cream of Mushroom Soup OR Cream of Celery Soup (depending on preference)

One Cup Chicken Broth OR Beef Stock (depending on preference)

½ medium yellow onion

Four medium yellow or red potatoes

Four large carrots

Preheat Oven to 325 Degrees

Sprinkle meat with salt and pepper. Season to taste

Melt small amount of butter in large pan over medium/high heat. Add meat. Brown all sides. Using tongs, sear sides of meat to seal in the juices.

Place seared meat in metal roasting pan. Add water to coat bottom of pan. Cover with lid or aluminum foil.

Cook in oven for 1-1/2 hours.

Remove from oven.

Remove lid and add washed and sliced/quartered potatoes, sliced or baby carrots and sliced yellow onion.

In med bowl, mix cream of mushroom or cream of celery soup, beef broth & flour together. Pour mixture over meat. (Can substitute liquid from

roasted meat as broth)

Cover and continue cooking for one hour.

After one hour, check for meat tenderness and check vegetables to make sure they're tender. *Adjust cooking time based on size of roast and tenderness desired.

Let sit for five minutes and serve.

Serving size: 4-6

Grandkids Gone Wild

Garden Girls Series Book 2

Hope Callaghan

FIRST EDITION

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Preview of Book 2 (Grandkids Gone Wild)

Gloria Rutherford grabbed her broom off the side porch and began sweeping the small pile of brown leaves out of the corner. She stared up at the clear blue sky. Fall was a beautiful time of year to live in West Michigan. The changing seasons and cool fall days were something Gloria would never, ever tire of.

But today there was no time to reflect on how much she was enjoying the new season. She was trying to get ready for her much-anticipated company. Her grandsons Tyler and Ryan were coming for the weekend. The fact that they hadn't been over in quite some time and that her daughter Jill seemed overly-anxious about the visit made Gloria wonder if perhaps they would be a little too hard to handle...

She swept the last few leaves from the porch and shuffled over to prop the broom in the corner when something caught her eye. The tall weeds next to the edge of the barn were swaying back and forth, as if blowing in the wind or being moved by an unseen force. Which was more than a little odd considering there wasn't even the slightest of breezes.

She took a step down as her eyes wandered to the small set of doors on the far side of the barn. The door wasn't completely shut. It was open a good six inches.

Gloria was certain she hadn't left the door open. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd actually used the side door. She grabbed her cell phone off the chair, shoved it into her back pocket and began walking in the direction of the barn. The boulder she used to keep

the door closed had been rolled back. She side-stepped the boulder and pushed the door open, just far enough to stick her head inside. She stood there for a brief moment waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dim interior when she heard a faint creaking sound coming from inside, as if someone was stepping on a wooden floor. The only wooden floor in the barn was the loft.

She grabbed the shovel by the door, pushed the door open a little wider and squeezed through the narrow opening. Another hollow creak was followed by a distinct *ping*, as if a coin or small metal object had been dropped on the cement floor.

Gloria took a tentative step inside. “Hello?” She strained her ears. A second small creak echoed from the direction of loft. She took another step forward. “Who’s there?” She paused. A third creak closely followed the second. This one was even louder.

She stopped in her tracks. The thought of someone being inside the barn with her freaked her out. It was at that precise moment she began to have second thoughts about confronting a potential intruder.

Tires crunching on the gravel saved her from having to decide the best plan of action. She whirled around in time to catch a glimpse of her daughter’s familiar blue Buick as it pulled into the drive.

Gloria cast a wary glance down the long center, past the milking parlor in the direction of the loft before turning back. She quickly pulled the door shut and rolled the boulder back to its original spot.

By the time Gloria made it across the yard, the boys were already

out of the car and barreling towards their beloved Grams. She wrapped them in a warm hug as she stared over the tops of their heads at her daughter, Jill.

After a quick hug, the boys took off in the direction of what used to be the pumpkin patch. Jill followed her mother inside the house, carrying the boys' backpacks as she went. She dropped them in the spare bedroom and made her way back out into the kitchen. "I hope they aren't too much of a handful," she fretted.

Gloria put her arm around her daughter's shoulders. "Now don't you worry about them one little bit. Go. Have a good time. We'll be just fine," she reassured her.

Moments later, Gloria watched as Jill's car pull out of the driveway. She turned around just in time to see Ryan bash one of the pumpkins on a nearby rock. He grabbed a handful of slimy pumpkin guts in his fist and then smashed them in his older brother's face. Tyler didn't take too kindly to the gooey globs of seeds and slime clinging to his forehead and hair. He grabbed Ryan by the back of the neck and shoved his younger brother's face into what was left of the rotting pumpkin.

Gloria darted across the uneven garden as fast as her sneakers would allow, but it was too late. By the time she reached the battling boys, both were covered in the stringy, stinky substance. Tyler warily watched as his Grandmother approached. He leaned over to wrap a sticky arm around her when she took a small step back. "If you so much as lay a single finger on me with that goop," she warned, "I'll tie you to that big oak tree over there and leave you out here overnight."

Tyler's eyes widened in horror at the thought of being left outside all night by himself. He instantly dropped his arm to his side.

Gloria stuck a hand on her hip and pointed in the direction of the house. "Now get in that house and wash up," she commanded. "Both of you!"

The boys lowered their heads and shuffled towards the door. When Grams used that tone, they knew she meant business.

She slowly followed them inside. The uneasy feeling someone was in the barn returned as she cast a wary glance over her shoulder.

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