

A Meadowood Mystery

Deathly

Wedding

Woes

CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

Nancy M. Wade

Deathly Wedding Woes

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Book 5

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Chapter One

My Kind of Town

A thousand thoughts raced through my head as I planned for the bridal shower that would start in four hours. Clicking the door lock, I placed the closed sign in the window of our charming A & M Tea Exchange after the end of another bustling Saturday. The shop will be the perfect setting for the shower for my dear friend Colleen Callahan. Colleen and I shared a friendship that spanned from the early days of childhood to the hallowed halls of college, standing steadfastly by each other's side through every twist and turn. I don't know who was more excited about her upcoming wedding, Colleen or me.

When Colleen and Ron announced their engagement last Christmas in my living room, I jumped for joy. She was getting a great guy in Ron Wythe. For a while there, Ron had become the most eligible bachelor in Meadowood. I wondered if he'd ever convince Colleen to stop running and let him catch her as he courted her for years. Ron ran an insurance office in town and participated on the local Chamber of Commerce. He's been friends with my husband Doug ever since they went to school together at OSU and played on the Buckeye football team. Besides, he was almost as handsome as my own sweet husband.

Anna poured two cups of Earl Grey tea and placed them next to a plate of croissants filled with strawberry jam.

“Before you do another thing, you sit down and take a load off. Sugar, you need a break and so do I before we decorate for the shower,” Anna proclaimed in her western drawl as she stirred her tea and took a bite of the flaky croissant. “Mmm, these are so good. Remind me to order more from Martha.”

I plopped onto one of the floral chintz-covered chairs at the small bistro table and joined my friend and partner, Anna Thompson. Anna may be twenty years my senior, but I loved spending time with her.

Anna grew up on a Texas cattle ranch outside Abilene and lived there most of her life until her husband Chuck had to transfer with his job to Columbus or be forced to take an early retirement. So now they claimed our rural mid-Ohio as home while Chuck commuted into the city to work his remaining few years at McDonnell-Douglas. They were a friendly couple and quickly fit right into our little community.

The Thompsons have a nine-year-old son, Stevie, who is best friends with my son Johnny and also a member of my cub scout den. I would term Stevie a change of life baby, conceived in Anna’s later years since Chuck and Anna also have a grown daughter who’s married and lives in Dallas.

Taking a sip of the hot tea, I sighed with pleasure and stretched my legs out before me. I’m Meredith Gardner, Merry to my friends and family. I glanced around our cozy Victorian English tea shop, noting with pride the white linen tablecloths and delicate porcelain tea sets. Decorative floral wreaths hung on the walls. Display cases filled with knit tea cozies, delicate demitasse teacups, and a collection of sugar bowls and creamers added to our customer sales.

Anna and I had bought the shop and all its contents from the previous owner’s sister six months ago, last Christmas, after poor Nina died. Nina was a sweet gal too. I really liked her, but that’s a story for another time.

I’d been itching for a new challenge that I just wasn’t getting from

my Avon sales, so when the opportunity presented itself, I grabbed it. Business has steadily picked up over the past months and especially now that summer has begun with more people visiting our picturesque little town of Meadowood and stopping by our tea shop. Guess Meadowood has become a tourist attraction. To me, it's just home.

Meadowood is a typical, small Midwestern town, home to families like mine who've resided here for generations — average, middle-income people that work for a living and support their community. We're within driving distance to several big cities and an hour away from the Ohio state capital, but we're still basically a rural community. Rolling hills, rich with flourishing farmlands, fill the countryside that surrounds our centuries old town. Acres of corn and soybeans grow throughout the humid summer months, spreading across the land like a lush green quilt, until the hectic autumn harvest.

A tour of Meadowood makes you feel like you've stepped back in time. Historic buildings and quaint store fronts line the center thoroughfare through town. Large oak and maple trees border the streets and spread their heavy canopies of branches on each side. The usual insurance and real estate offices, a bakery and two banks blend with various other retail businesses downtown. All occupy brick and clapboard structures that don gables or dormers and date back at least a hundred years, without a single garish neon sign to destroy the historic image. Our tea shop is in a cute cottage that sits on the corner right across from the bakery, Martha's Delites. We serve tiny tea sandwiches and Martha provides our sweeter menu items, so we don't compete with each other's business.

My Aunt Fran owns and operates a popular dress shop on Park Street called Frannie's Frocks. The store sells the latest seasonal styles of dresses and pantsuits, comfy pullover sweaters, tees, and blue jeans. She's a genius with coordinating accessories with all her outfits, too. Now my aunt promised to create the perfect bridal gown for Colleen. Fran, with her magical touch, makes any bride feel like she's stepped out of a fairy tale, and Colleen was no exception. The dress she designed was

an elegant lace masterpiece over soft flowing chiffon that draped Colleen in a cloud of perfection like whipped frosting atop a tiered cake.

Swallowing a bite of the delicious pastry, I pointed to the archway. “What if we place a nice chair in the arch and hang the crepe paper to set it off? I found peach colored rolls of crepe paper at the Ben Franklin Craft store. It surprised me when I saw they had the right color. I thought we’d get stuck using orange, and I really wanted the peach that Colleen had chosen as the wedding color theme.”

“Did Fran finish your dress alterations?” Anna asked.

“Mm-hmm. I tried it on last night so she could hem it. Wait until you see my dress... it’s so soft and feminine with the peach chiffon material. I love it. The cap sleeves hang off the shoulder and the bodice hugs me then flows into a princess line skirt, but not tight like a sheath would. I was afraid if it was too fitted my hips and tummy would show in an obvious bulge.” I laughed and subconsciously placed a hand on my abdomen. “Oh my gosh, here I am stuffing my face when I’ve been trying to lose a few pounds before the wedding.”

“Oh pooh! You’ve given birth to two babies; you aren’t supposed to look like that skinny model— what was her name, Twiggy? You’re a woman and your curves show it. I’m sure Doug appreciates those womanly curves too. I’ve seen the way he ogles his own wife,” Anna said with a chuckle. She finished her tea then stood up and carried the dishes back to the kitchen.

“Stop, before I blush. You’re being kind, but I’ve got a mirror at home that says otherwise. I swear everything I eat goes straight to my hips.”

“I’m not being kind, just truthful. Sugar, when you get to be my age and see this ample figure in your mirror, you stop worrying about every little calorie,” Anna drawled.

I followed her with my cup and plate into the professionally appointed kitchen. We were so fortunate to inherit the large commercial stove with six burners that currently had four large tea kettles resting on them. A wide double-door stainless steel refrigerator took up half of one

wall. Sparkling clean white marble work surfaces held a block of carving knives and serving pieces. A pair of open shelves contained luncheon sized plates and several two-tiered servers and cake dishes. A row of overhead cabinets with glass doors held delicate porcelain teacups and saucers, while other cabinets held containers of tea leaves and sets of strainers. Labels tacked on the shelving edges identified and organized our teas: Earl Grey black tea, green tea, citrusy Lady Grey, white tea, and oolong tea. Each shelf held tins and packages of tea sorted by its type. We're still adding to our tea selections as we find more tempting varieties.

The kitchen and pantry were already well organized, so we were able to open for business with a minimum of remodeling. Most of the changes we made provided for a private entrance and closure between the tea shop and a one-bedroom apartment on the upper level we rented out. We were lucky to find a quiet college student, Nick Abrams, to rent the studio apartment, and his monthly rent helped give us a nice financial cushion.

"Let's get the room arranged and the streamers hung. We've got an hour before we've got to skedaddle to get home in time for the kids out of school," Anna said as she checked her watch.

"Okay. Is Stevie looking forward to summer break? Billy and Johnny have been chomping at the bit for this last week of school to be over. I think they're both excited about going away to summer camp this year. Have to admit, I've got some misgivings. My boys have never been gone from home for over two weeks and that was at their grandparents. This will be an entire month on their own. The house will be awfully quiet when they're gone. Doug thinks the boys will benefit from summer camp and will learn to be more independent," I said as I grouped a trio of tables and chairs on each side of the room. "Johnny wants the chance to play sports and swim; I'm not sure what Billy really thinks of the idea."

Anna and I moved a wing-back chair in front of the archway and draped crepe paper streamers across the arch and dangled them on each

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side. We placed bud vases with bright peach-colored gerber daisies on the center of each table. They looked so pretty against the white linen. Next, we added tiny mint favors tied with narrow ribbon inside squares of orange and white tulle at each place setting. Satisfied that all was ready, we locked up the shop and both left for home in time to meet our boys and get family dinners started before the seven o'clock shower.

Chapter Two

Bridal Shower

Stirring the pot of spaghetti sauce, I lowered the heat to keep it from scorching then filled a large pot with water to boil pasta noodles. Our furry baby, an orange and white tabby cat named Mittens, rubbed his back against my legs and butted me with his head demanding my attention. I reached down and scratched his head but he wasn't satisfied with a mere token of affection.

“Mroww,” Mittens whined his displeasure with me.

“I know you're hungry. Sorry you have to wait, but I hardly think you're starving to death,” I told him.

Taking the hint, I entered the laundry room off the kitchen, filled his food dish with kibble and gave him a fresh bowl of water. He immediately started purring as he lapped his food; his little motor sound vibrated loudly.

Late afternoon sunlight streamed onto the kitchen's speckled granite counters above driftwood gray cabinets. The pale slate and taupe colors of the glass tile backsplash sparkled as light poured through the French doors to the adjoining deck. My favorite room, our kitchen felt comfortable and homey. I opened the doors wider to the rear deck,

allowing a gentle summer breeze to flow through the room. Mittens took advantage of the open door to dash outside and stalk unsuspecting birds. He was in his jungle cat mode.

We normally kept all the windows of our colonial two-story home open while the temperatures remained mild. I hated putting on the air conditioning and buttoning up the house and tried to postpone until the heat and humidity rose to unbearable amounts. Air conditioning was a blessing to combat peak summer heat, but I still preferred the fresh air as long as I could.

As a 33-year-old mom of two rambunctious boys, my life was a whirlwind of scraped knees and spilled juice boxes. Between my hours at the tea shop and time spent working with the boys as their cub scout den leader, life was never dull but I'd never want it any other way. I looked up, as the subjects of my motherly worries scampered through the kitchen door and dropped book bags onto the floor. Both boys rushed to grab cold drinks from the refrigerator. Billy leaped over Mittens who had returned to stretch out in the middle of the floor to wash himself. The cat barely moved, completely trusting the boys.

"Hi Mom," Billy greeted me as he picked an apple from the bowl on the counter.

"Miss Callahan told me to tell you she will see you tonight," Johnny relayed his message as he wolfed down a cold glass of milk and grabbed two cookies from the jar.

"Dinner's in an hour," I called after them as they dashed up the stairs.

Johnny was my studious and reserved son; he often preferred to sit and listen while observing people and actions going on around him. He was eleven years old going on thirty, overly mature for his age. I could always depend on him to lend a hand with chores or look after his younger brother. Between the two boys, I think my Johnny favored his father more than me, not just his dark brown hair and hazel-colored eyes, but his sense of responsibility too – so like Doug. Billy, two years

younger, could be a little scamp; he flashes a huge smile and bats those big blue eyes and gets away with murder. They were a pair.

Opening my laptop computer, I browsed text messages and emails then noted the RSVP replies to Colleen's bridal shower. I answered a couple of email inquiries then updated my calendar appointments. This is going to be a super busy week with all the wedding events, starting with the bridal shower tonight and the bachelorette party on Friday. Not to mention that the boys needed to be driven up to camp at the Cuyahoga Valley National Park by Wednesday. Yep, I don't think my calendar could get any fuller.

I'd never admit it, but the tea shop was keeping me so busy, it'd been a while since I'd had a chance to even run a dust cloth across the wood surfaces in the house. Now I dashed about the living room and hurried to clean what I could, depositing in my pocket a torn candy wrapper left on an end table and a stray sock shoved under a sofa cushion. I lovingly polished a pair of my grandmother's antique brass candlesticks resting on the mantle under the serene scene of the Thomas Kinkadee painting that hung above the fireplace. Doug and I had splurged on the painting for our fifth wedding anniversary years ago. Every time I looked at it, I smiled in fond memory of the wonderful weekend we had spent in Amish country and the gallery where we had bought the art.

Dinner was almost ready as I set the table and called to the boys to wash up when I heard my husband's car pull into the driveway. I smiled at him as he strode into the kitchen and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Mmm, something smells good. Is that spaghetti for supper?" Douglas Gardner asked as he placed his cap on a coat hook, unbuckled his deputy's Sam Brown belt and removed his service revolver.

He unlocked the gun cabinet that stood in the laundry room's corner and placed his gun in the cabinet, out of harm's way and little hands. Doug never failed to complete this routine safety procedure before joining the family. I nodded in approval and watched him as he

walked to the kitchen sink to wash his own hands. He looked so handsome in his uniform; I admit, I was awfully proud of his recent promotion to Chief Deputy Sheriff.

“You girls are doing that bridal shower tonight, right?” Doug asked as he poured himself a tall glass of iced tea then walked over to the foot of the stairs to call the boys. “Hey! You guys, come down for dinner.”

“Yes, it starts at seven but Anna and I need to get there before that to put on the kettles and prepare the food. Can you help clear the table after supper so I can get out of here early?”

“Sure, no problem. How long is this thing going to last?”

“Hmm, about two hours, I guess. We’re only serving desserts, but Colleen will have gifts to open and will need time to mingle... yeah maybe two hours, then time for Anna and me to clean up. I’ll give you a call or text when I’m ready to leave.”

I finished cutting slices of garlic bread then served a heap of cooked pasta on each plate.

“Okay, just be safe. It won’t be dark until nine but remember to stay alert for trouble.” Doug spoke in his serious lawman voice.

“Yes dear, I will. I’d say not to worry because nothing happens in Meadowood, but I know better than that.”

Doug snorted as he turned his attention to spooning out a meatball onto his plate and a full ladle of sauce. I served each of the boys then helped myself to a considerably smaller portion if I wanted to fit into my bride maid’s dress at the end of the week.

“Have you decided what you and Ron are definitely doing for the bachelor party on Friday?” I asked Doug between mouthfuls of spaghetti.

“Mmm-hmm, we’re going to play a round of golf and later have drinks in the Buckeye Room at the inn.”

“We girls might run into you then since we’re having a spa day at Oak Meadow that will take the better part of Friday afternoon. Maybe we should all get together for dinner before you guys take off for your football talk and beer.”

“Yeah, I’ll mention it to Ron,” Doug said as he helped himself to a second serving and I got up to put my dish in the sink.



Laughter filled the room as friends greeted friends and women gathered to wish the bride-to-be good luck. Anna and I made the rounds, refilling tea cups and offering sweet petit fours that were beautifully decorated with white chocolate and orange icing. Martha had spent the morning baking the delicious treats that looked almost too pretty to eat. Almost.

Carol Goodwin sat with Barbara Williams as they both enjoyed the tiny cakes. Barb was Ron’s gal Friday in his insurance office. Both ladies were my friends and mothers of two cub scouts in my den. I heard them comment to our other friend, Martha, on her sweet accomplishment.

“Martha, these taste so good and look fabulous. Are you going to sell them in your bakery?” asked Carol as she took a second bite.

“Thanks. Believe it or not, they take a lot of work despite being so tiny. I’m not sure if I can get a high enough price for them to recoup my time. Maybe I’ll add them to a special menu for the holidays, decorate them in red, white, and green holly or something. Glad you’re enjoying them,” Martha commented as she sipped her tea.

Colleen was all smiles that lit up her lovely emerald-green eyes and added a rosy glow to her creamy complexion. I admired my friend with her Irish coloring, complete with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose and her flowing auburn hair. She’s going to make the most beautiful bride, and not just because of her natural beauty but because she’s such a kind, generous person too. Everyone loved Colleen. The turnout for her shower was proof. I think every woman in town came to wish her well. Our tea room was bursting at the seams.

Teresa walked over to where I was standing next to Colleen, seated in the bride’s chair.

“I expect to see you two gals in my shop by nine a.m. on Saturday if I’m gonna do both of your hair styles for this wedding.” She rubbed

strands of Colleen's curling locks between her fingers. "I think we should pull it up in back and leave tendrils of hanging curls to frame your face." She looked at my short curly locks and sighed, "not sure what I can do with your mop," then she laughed.

Teresa Maxwell owns the beauty shop Cut & Curl. She's been styling my hair for years. I loved Teresa for her good-natured manner, even though her appearance can be disarming when you first meet her. Teresa believed in experimenting with every new hair color or style on herself before offering it to a customer. Some days her hair was flaming red or orange and other times, like today, you found her with streaks of purple among her light brown strands. She's a kind heart but a terrible gossip.

I confess to using Teresa's gathered scuttlebutt in the past to solve a particular crime. Not that I'm an investigator or anything, but sometimes I get involved with local issues. I think of it as my civic duty.

I've been called pig-headed in the past; some might say stubbornly so, but it's only because I care so much. I'll be the first to admit that I'm nosy. Yes, my curiosity has gotten me into trouble more than once when I've poked my nose into matters that were best left to law enforcement. I just can't help it. When my friends need help or something just doesn't jive, I feel it's my duty to step in, get involved. Of course, that can sometimes put me at odds with my husband who does not appreciate my investigative skills.

Thank goodness my only worry right now was coordinating the best wedding for my dear friends Colleen and Ron. I simply wanted the most important day in their lives to be perfect.

Anna tapped a spoon on her water goblet; the tinkling chime drew everyone's attention and the hum of voices quieted. "A toast to our dear friend, Colleen...the prettiest bride ever." Everyone raised their glasses or tea cups in agreement.

"Let's gather round as Colleen opens her gifts," I suggested. I handed her the first gaily wrapped box.

Colleen carefully removed the large silver bow then tore off the wrapping paper. She lifted the box lid and pulled out a white lacy teddy.

Holding the skimpy lace garment in front of her, Colleen's cheeks blushed beet red. "It's lovely but, um, it looks a bit small."

Anna giggled and with a wicked grin and a wink of her eye, drawled, "That's all right honey, you aren't supposed to wear it very long." The room broke into laughter and nervous twitters that sounded like a group of teens instead of mature, mostly married women.

Colleen laid the garment back in its box then reached for another wrapped gift. She sighed in relief as she opened a non-embarrassing toaster oven.

I handed Colleen gift after gift and wrote a register of each item with the name of its donor so the bride could send thank you notes later. Aunt Fran moved to my side as she watched Colleen exclaim over a set of plush bath towels.

"Thank you all so much. Ron and I appreciate all your thoughtfulness. I swear, our home will be the best furnished home in town with all these marvelous housewares," Colleen announced with a gracious smile and a tear in her eye.

"You're welcome!" The group all replied as they prepared to leave.

"You've made quite the haul," Aunt Fran said as she looked over the pile of presents.

A widow, Fran was still an attractive woman with her dark blond hair streaked with a few gray strands, the only sign of her advancing years. Teresa had been encouraging my aunt to dye her hair and get rid of that gray, but Fran prefers the natural look. I've always thought I favored my aunt more than my mother since we had the same coloring... both dark blonds with a blue-gray eye color. We're both very close as niece and aunt; I love her dearly and confide more in my aunt than my mother most times. I've also got my aunt to thank for my share of the partnership in the tea shop since she generously offered to invest in our venture.

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“Everyone has been so generous,” Colleen acknowledged. “I can’t wait until Ron sees the barbeque tool set; that’ll be his favorite and I know he’ll lay claim to it first thing.”

“Oh yeah! A man and his tools...you can’t separate them, especially a grill master.” I laughed as I stuffed paper and ribbons into a large trash bag.

“Guess we better get all this loaded into my car, although I don’t know how it will fit. By the way, are you still coming with me tomorrow afternoon to Oak Meadow? School lets out at noon and I can be ready to leave about one,” Colleen said.

“Sure thing. How about I put some of this into my minivan?” I looked at the stack of boxes and gift bags crowded around Colleen’s chair.

It took three trips to the car to carry all the gift boxes; Colleen’s trunk and rear seat of her Mustang were full and my minivan contained the rest. I walked back into the tea shop to see that Anna and Fran had finished clearing the tables and were loading the dishwasher.

“Give me a hand, Colleen. Let’s slide this chair back into the corner next to the baker’s rack.” That done, we both yanked on the paper streamers to pull them down and added them to my trash bag. I glanced about the room; everything was back in place and ready for business tomorrow.

Colleen put her hand on my arm, halting me as I carried the trash bag toward the rear door. “Thank you for hosting this bridal shower. It was wonderful and meant a lot to me.”

“No problem. That’s what friends are for. Besides, I’m carrying out my matron of honor duties according to Emily Post,” I told her as I patted her hand in affection then entered the kitchen. “Coming through,” I called out to Anna as I exited the rear door and tossed the bag into our dumpster.

I kissed my aunt goodbye and promised to stop by for a chat soon. Anna turned out the lights, and I locked the door then followed Colleen home to unload her treasure. Street lights blinked on when I pulled up

in front of Colleen's house. I recalled I had promised Doug to let him know I was leaving the shop. Oops. The clock on the van dashboard showed close to ten o'clock. Glancing out my car window, I noticed how dark it had become. I quickly sent Doug a quick text. I had kept my promise. Sort of.

Chapter Three

Twins

Monday... the school year officially ended. Billy and Johnny skipped across the kitchen, their arms loaded with folders of papers and bags of school supplies cleaned out from desks and lockers. Naturally, all of it seemed to wind up on the floor of the laundry room expecting me to sort through it in my free time. I took a deep breath and immediately poked through the pile to remove anything that might tempt Mittens to eat then left the rest to wait until I had a spare moment.

Anna and I decided to close the tea shop at noon that day since school was getting out early and both of our kids would be home. She had offered to keep my sons at her house while I rode out to the Oak Meadow Inn with Colleen at one o'clock. I don't know how I'd manage without the help of my friends; we all babysat for each other when needed and shared meals on more than one occasion. Of course, Billy and Johnny would be highly insulted if they knew I referred to them playing with Stevie Thompson as Anna babysitting—heavens, they were too old to require a babysitter! Still, it gave me peace of mind to know I could run an errand and my boys were being looked after in my absence.

Colleen beeped the horn of her bright yellow Mustang as she pulled

into my driveway. I grabbed my purse and ran out the door to hop into her jaunty car. She had the convertible roof down so we could enjoy the warm summer breeze. I noticed she'd taken the time to change from her high heels and work attire into a pair of capris, tee shirt, and sandals... similar to my outfit.

We drove along with the sun in our faces and the wind in our hair as we headed to the inn. The Oak Meadow Inn, located on the edge of town, sprawled over forty-five acres of the rolling rural landscape surrounding Meadowood.

Within minutes Colleen had maneuvered the sports car into the ample parking lot of the inn. As I got out of the car, I paused to admire the beautiful grounds and breathe in the sweet fragrance of the white roses and honeysuckle planted along the paved walkways.

"Looks like the inn is bringing in some high-classed patrons," I said. I pointed to the black Cadillac Escalade with its New York plates parked nearby as well as a Mercedes and two BMWs.

"Guess so."

"You know, it surprised me when you told me you wanted your wedding here," I said as I waited for Colleen to catch up.

"Why? It's a lovely setting and the gazebo in back is perfect for the ceremony. Patsy Malone from Stems & Petals plans to drape garlands of white roses and peach daisies across the gazebo with clusters of the same flowers on each row of chairs down the aisle. Won't it be pretty? Besides, Reverend Kilgore told me he officiates numerous weddings here and doesn't mind the ceremony not being inside the church."

"Uh-huh, I'm sure he does. It's just that the last time we had a big event here, it kind of ended in a disaster and I didn't think you'd want to be back," I reminded her as we walked toward the front entrance of the impressive structure with its exterior walls covered in rough granite stone that rose to a charcoal slate tiled roof. Floor to ceiling windows in the foyer and banquet rooms provided a view of the panorama of brick patios with terraced gardens and the lush green nine-hole golf course.

"I hardly think the problem we had at our reunion will happen

again at my wedding. You're normally the optimistic one; I didn't expect gloom and doom from you," Colleen said with a frown. "C'mon."

Entering the lobby, a person's eye was drawn to the bold timbers stretched across high cathedral ceilings in the great room. Bright patterned area rugs softened the hardwood floors and reflected the jewel-toned fabrics of the sofas and chairs grouped near the tall stone fireplace. Framed paintings by landscape artist Debra Dawson of Denison University in Granville hung on cream-colored walls in the room.

We headed to the reception desk. An attractive, middle-aged woman wearing tortoise-shell framed eyeglasses paused in her writing as we approached.

"Hello. Can I help you ladies?" she asked politely.

"Good afternoon. I'm Colleen Callahan. We're holding our wedding and reception here on Saturday and I wanted to check on some last minute details with your manager, Blake Garrett."

"Certainly. I'll just buzz his office for you. Why don't you go ahead to the banquet room and he'll meet you there. Do you need directions?"

"Thank you," said Colleen.

"We know the way," I said as Colleen and I started toward the adjacent hallway.

Goose bumps ran up and down my arms. I know it didn't make any sense, but I suddenly had a feeling of foreboding. I rubbed my arms and tried to shake off the strange sensation. It was nothing; must be just cold air conditioning on my skin producing the goose bumps. That's what it was. Wasn't it?

Colleen and I entered the large banquet hall. It was just like I remembered it from the last time we were here. Colleen stood in the center of the room then suddenly twirled around with her arms above her head like a ballerina. Her giddy laughter rang out and I smiled at her antics.

"Can you believe it? In just a few days I'll be Mrs. Ronald Wythe," Colleen exclaimed. "I'm so happy. Maybe you better pinch me so I know I'm not dreaming."

I dutifully pinched my friend. “See...no dream. It’s for real.”

“Ouch!” She rubbed her arm in mock horror. “You didn’t have to pinch so hard!” Colleen pouted then spun about again. “This place is ideal. Can’t you just picture it? I’d like the head table placed against this wall so we can savor the view from those magnificent windows. The buffet tables can be placed along the opposite wall.”

“Exactly Miss Callahan,” interrupted the manager as he joined us in the room. “We’ll arrange the guest tables to provide an ample dance floor in the center of the room plus we’ll place a separate gift table near the door for the convenience of your guests. You can trust my staff; they’ve done this a few times.”

“Of course, Mister Garrett. I must be acting like every silly bride who has to micro-manage the smallest detail. I apologize. I have full confidence in you and your staff to create the perfect setting.”

“Would you like to go over the final menu selections while you’re here?” he asked.

Colleen looked to me and I nodded as we followed him outside onto the patio and took a seat at one of the umbrella- shaded tables. Luncheon guests and golfers lounged on the patio; a soft hum of conversation floated on the air.

“I’ll be right back, ladies. Enjoy a cold drink while I go get your wedding menu from our chef.” Garrett turned and strode quickly toward the kitchen while we waited.

“Did I tell you that my parents decided to stay here when they fly in from Scottsdale on Wednesday? Mom thought it would be less stressful if they didn’t stay at my house,” Colleen said.

“Gee, I’d offer to pick them up at the airport on Wednesday, but that’s the day we have to drive the boys to camp. Sorry.”

“No problem. Ron offered to use his car to get them. He’s so thoughtful; Ron said his Chrysler 300 sedan would be roomier and more comfortable than my small Mustang. He’s right too.”

Enjoying the day, I watched the afternoon sun sparkle on the pond at the bottom of the hill, like diamonds floating on top of the water. I

leaned back in my chair; the breeze lifted my short curls off my neck. Heaven. As I glanced at Colleen, her face had suddenly turned white and her eyes widened. I sat up abruptly and tried to follow her gaze to determine what had shocked her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked anxiously, swiveling in my seat to scan the area.

Seated at a table, partially hidden by the huge umbrella, was Colleen’s fiancé, Ron. He was engaged in an animated conversation with a pretty waitress. Their laughter penetrated the conversational hum. From the way his hand kept caressing the girl’s arm, it was more than just a friendly chat. How could Ron so openly flirt with a gal only days away from his wedding? It just wasn’t like him. Obviously, Colleen thought so too.

I glanced at Colleen; her face reflected the hurt and betrayal she must be feeling. My own anger built to see my dear friend so wounded. I felt like confronting him myself but before I could move, Colleen marched to his table and slapped his hand away from the surprised waitress’ arm. I stood silently by her side, ready to step in if needed.

“Hey!” the girl yelled.

“Ron, what on earth is going on here?” demanded Colleen. Her green eyes sparked in anger and her voice lowered to a growl. “How dare you!”

“Now darling, I was just having a friendly word with lovely Jenny here.”

Her Irish temper flaring, Colleen spoke with a clenched jaw, “You... you’re unbelievable! I can’t believe you’d do this right before our wedding!”

“Wedding? Sweetie, you never told me you were engaged,” Jenny spoke in a huff as she pulled away from Ron.

“Not me baby. Forget that wedding stuff, let’s have some fun,” he insisted as he reached for Jenny’s hand again.

Colleen had had enough. “You know what, Ron? You’re on your own. Enjoy your evening with Jenny! The wedding is off!” Her hand

struck his cheek in a resounding slap that echoed among the shocked diners and wait staff watching the drama.

Blake Garrett, witnessing the lover's spat, stopped mid-stride. His eyes darted back and forth between the bride-to-be and me. I shrugged, shook my head, then rushed after my friend who had stormed off. I caught up to Colleen in the lobby as she stood gasping for breath with tears flowing from her eyes.

"C'mon. You need a drink. You can't drive all upset and you need a minute to calm down."

I linked my arm with hers and dragged her into the nearby Buckeye Room. The darker, quiet setting would allow her to compose her emotions without witnesses. The room was so shadowy compared to the bright patio, I could barely make out the Buckeye football memorabilia and OSU souvenirs that gave the room its name. Taking a moment for my eyes to adjust to the shady interior, I spotted a table in the corner and steered us into it. A waiter followed us and waited expectantly.

"Two glasses of merlot," I ordered. I watched him as he returned to the bar but then shifted the direction of my gaze. I couldn't believe my eyes.

Ron and Doug sat at the bar talking quietly with their heads together. I could tell by the expression on my husband's face that it was a serious conversation. He was so engrossed that he had not even noticed us when we entered. But how did Ron manage to get from the patio to the Buckeye Room so quickly? Why had he changed his shirt too?

Colleen sat staring at the tabletop; her eyes glazed over. I shook Colleen's shoulder and brought her attention back to me.

"Look!" I pointed to our two men seated at the bar.

"But...how could...? I don't understand."

"Let's go find out what's going on," I said as I made my way across the room, dragging Colleen with me.

Doug broke apart from Ron and shot me a surprised look as I sidled up next to him.

“Uh, hi honey,” Doug said as he pressed a kiss onto my cheek. “What are you girls doing here?”

The waiter set our glasses of wine on the bar in front of the empty stool next to Ron. He raised an eyebrow and grinned at me then went back to his bartending. Really! Did he think we were on the make? What kind of gals did he think we were?

“Were you or were you not on the patio flirting with that waitress five minutes ago?” demanded Colleen as she stared at Ron.

“What? What are you talking about? I haven’t been on any patio. I’ve been here with Doug for at least half an hour,” Ron defended himself.

I noticed they both held pilsner beer glasses that were below half full, proof they’d been sipping their beer for awhile.

“Well, if you weren’t, than who was I talking to?” Colleen asked as she flounced onto a bar stool and took a long swig of her wine.

I raised my eyebrow at her action, but silently waited to hear Ron’s explanation of how he could be in two places at once.

Ron hung his head; color rushed to his cheeks, as he grasped both of Colleen’s hands in his. His voice was hesitant as he begun, almost beseeching.

“Darling, I, um, never told you much about my childhood. I’m sorry, I should have before this. It’s just that... well...I have a twin brother. His name’s Ray.”

Colleen raised surprised eyes to him and waited for him to continue. She squeezed his hands to encourage him to go on.

I looked at Doug but he just shrugged. This surprise announcement of Ron’s could have knocked me over with a feather. I could just imagine what Colleen must be feeling.

“When my parents divorced, they separated us. Ray got to live with Dad and Mom got me. We were only seven years old and I haven’t seen him since then.”

“How sad! But why are you telling me this now?”

“Ray called me yesterday. Somehow he learned I was getting married and asked to come to the wedding. He arrived last night. Here.”

“Oh my God! I’m so glad,” Colleen cried as her breath came out in a rush. She hugged Ron and smothered his face in kisses as she laughed in relief. “I believe I just met your brother!”

Ron’s confusion grew as his eyes darted to me and Doug but gave in to Colleen’s exuberant affection being showered upon him.

I smiled at the happy couple and stood in the crook of my husband’s arm as he quirked an eyebrow and tried to make sense out of Colleen’s crazy reaction.

“I’ll tell you later at home,” I whispered. I took a sip of my wine and toasted the joyful couple who were oblivious to outsiders at the moment. “Maybe I better ride home with you. They’ve got a lot to catch up on.”

Minutes later, we finished our drinks and left the entwined pair.

Chapter Four

Shots Fired

Doug and I stepped out of the front entrance and headed toward his police cruiser parked in the valet lane. We were almost at the car when I heard my name being called, causing me to pause and turn around.

“Hey you two. We didn’t mean to scare you off,” shouted Colleen, waving from the lobby doorway. She and Ron walked briskly toward us. Then Colleen laughed and, letting go of Ron’s hand, rushed toward me. Ron followed a few steps behind.

Suddenly, a loud noise filled the air. A gun shot echoed off the tall building and surrounding hillside. We all froze where we stood.

“Get down!” Doug immediately ordered all of us. The shot ricocheted off the blacktop parking lot; splinters of tar and macadam flew into the air close to us.

Doug crept to his cruiser and cracked the passenger’s door open. He stayed crouched as he reached inside and grabbed a rifle then radioed the station.

“Shots fired. Oak Meadow Inn. Send back up. Chief Deputy Sheriff Gardner.”

I stayed low as I tried to crawl toward the shelter of the car. Straining

to listen for sounds of any movement, I risked looking over my shoulder but saw no one outside except the four of us.

“Meredith! Stay put!” commanded Doug as he scanned the area.

“I’m all right. I think the shooter’s gone.”

I searched for my friends. Colleen’s face had turned stark white again. The terror of an active shooter was something Colleen had read about. As principal of the local elementary school, she had drilled for this scenario, but she’d never experienced it for real until now. Colleen’s body trembled in a delayed reaction as she continued to lie on the ground with her arms covering her head.

“Baby, baby! Are you okay? Did you get hit? I’m right here, honey,” Ron spoke in a voice that shook as he crawled closer to Colleen. They lay on the ground and held each other, listening to distant sirens coming toward us.

Doug and I slowly rose and stood next to his cruiser. Doug patrolled the area, searching behind shrubberies and scanning the rooftops. He returned to inspect the bullet hole in the pavement; squatted down and pried the shell casing out of the blacktop. Using the end of his ballpoint pen, Doug lifted the spent bullet as a deputy pulled up behind his cruiser.

I watched Tony Dalton sprint over to Doug as the two men spoke quietly then Tony took off with another deputy in tow to spread out across the grounds.

My attention was drawn to my friends as Doug approached them and helped Colleen to her feet. Ron held her close as their faces both reflected fear and shock over the shooting.

“Are you hurt? Do you want me to call an ambulance?” asked Doug as he placed a reassuring hand on Ron’s shoulder.

“I, uh, think we’re okay. Just shook. Holy cow, Doug! Does this kind of thing happen to you all the time?”

“What? I don’t think someone intended that shot for me, buddy. I think you were the target,” Doug told him as he continued to scan the

area, his face deadly serious. “Maybe you better come into the station so we can talk and sort this out.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. I don’t have any enemies. Why would anyone want to shoot me?” Ron worried, a stricken expression on his face.



I wound up driving Colleen’s Mustang home while she sat in the passenger seat, still white as a ghost and trembling despite the heat of the summer day. Parking in the driveway, I helped Colleen out of the car and brought her into my kitchen. Colleen sat on a stool at the counter while I hurried to put the kettle on to brew her a soothing cup of tea.

“How can you be so calm?” she asked me as I placed cups and saucers on the breakfast bar.

I stopped and studied my dear friend then clasped her hands in mine. “I’m not calm, believe me. Maybe it’s just because I’ve been in situations like this before and I’m used to it. Gosh, that’s a horrible thought, isn’t it? When did our lives become so hardened that gun fire is common place?”

Taking the stool next to Colleen, I turned and hugged her fiercely. Both of us clung to the fact that we were alive and no one had been hurt. We sat silently like that until the whistle on the tea kettle interrupted our reverie and we broke apart. Moving to the stove, I turned off the burner and poured boiling water into a ceramic teapot to steep chamomile tea leaves. The sweet herbal vapor rose in a calming scent. After allowing the tea to steep a few minutes, I poured each of us a cup.

“Here. Drink this. You’ll feel better.”

Colleen took a sip of the hot tea then sighed, taking a deep breath as she tried to unwind. “What a crazy day! First I see Ron flirting outrageously with that waitress only to learn it wasn’t Ron and my fiancé has an identical twin brother that he never told me about. Then we’re

almost shot to death—maybe you were right...that resort is jinxed. I'm not sure I want my wedding to take place there."

"Things will look better to you in the morning. I wouldn't make any rash decisions today. Think of all the deposits you've paid and the invitations you sent out. You can't abandon all that," I said as I sipped my tea. My mind raced to consider all the arrangements and the chaos that would ensue if Colleen canceled three days before the wedding.

"You're right. I just want to wake up and find this nightmare was all a dream and my wedding will go on as planned."

"Don't worry, Doug will get to the bottom of things. There has to be some explanation."

Little did I know what catastrophes lay ahead.

Chapter Five

A&M Tea Exchange

My washing machine gyrated with the last load of clothes to be washed before I could finish packing Billy and Johnny's bags for camp. I had a hunch that once those boys got to camp, they'd wear the same clothes for days and half of what I packed would never be worn. Ugh! I hated to think of the smell of dirty, unwashed clothes on sweaty little boys. Yuck. Why can't boys be more like sweet little girls? Of course, where would the fun be in that? I chuckled to myself as I tossed the wet clothes into the dryer.

"More coffee?" I asked my husband as I reached for the pot.

"Sure. What are your plans today?" Doug asked before he swallowed another sip of coffee.

"Well, finish this laundry for one then I've got to pop over to Martha's and pick up two dozen scones for the tea shop. Anna and I open at ten so I've got to hurry. Can you make sure the boys get to Anna's house before you leave for the station?"

"Yeah, no problem. I'm driving out to Oak Meadow this morning to have another look around so I've got time."

"You know, one thing has me puzzled..."

"Only one thing?" Doug laughed.

“If Ron hasn’t seen his brother for close to thirty years, how did Ray learn about him getting married? Did he read something posted on social media? Colleen doesn’t have a Facebook page because she keeps a low profile as a school principal. I know Ron doesn’t have a personal page, although I think Barb manages a Facebook page for the business. There have been no articles in the newspaper except maybe their engagement announcement back in January. Could he have seen that?”

“You ask good questions. I’ll try to get some answers when I speak to the gentleman today. By the way, since his brother is in town, Ron asked me if I’d mind stepping down to allow Ray to be best man. I told him that would be okay. I understand.”

“Oh, well, yeah. I guess that makes sense. I kind of looked forward to wearing my pretty brides maid dress and being escorted by my husband down the aisle though.”

Doug pointed to the clock on the wall, “Don’t you need to get going?”

“Oh gosh, yes. Thanks, honey,” I gave him a quick peck on the cheek and grabbed my purse as I rushed out the door.



The bell above the shop’s door chimed gaily as morning patrons entered. I glanced at Anna as she arranged the scones, that I had picked up earlier from Martha’s bakery, onto a tray.

“Sounds like we’ve got our first customers of the day,” I said as I straightened my apron and went to greet our guests.

Two groups of ladies waited by the entrance to be seated. I ushered them each to nearby bistro tables. I stood next to both tables as I announced our daily menu choices.

“Good morning! Welcome to the A&M Tea Exchange. Our brunch menu today includes your choice of three different tea sandwiches. We’re serving a tuna and cucumber sandwich, also a light apple and Brie sandwich with prosciutto or a refreshing chicken salad with chopped

grapes and walnuts. For dessert we suggest either a flaky scone paired with homemade strawberry jam and whipped cream or an apple tart topped with caramel sauce.”

“Ooh, those sound wonderful,” said one woman as she nodded at her friend. “You were right. This place is darling,” she whispered in a not too quiet voice.

I smiled to myself. Word was getting out about our tea shop and tourists were making it a stop among their places to visit. I couldn’t have been more pleased.

“What kind of tea may I bring you? If you are in the mood for something cold to drink, we have a refreshing iced tea brewed with a light citrusy flavor.”

“I’d like a cup of Earl Gray tea please and a tuna sandwich with scones,” one woman ordered at the first table. Her friend nodded in agreement. “I’ll have the same please.”

The ladies at the second table obviously had been shopping. I spotted a bagged with Frannie’s Frock’s logo printed on it and a bakery box from Martha placed on an empty seat at their table.

I greeted them with a friendly smile; nice to see business in town thriving. “What can I bring you ladies?”

“Um, everything sounds wonderful. I believe I’ll try the chicken salad and the apple tart.”

Her companion ordered the chicken salad but with a scone. Both asked for the iced tea.

“It’ll be just a few minutes, ladies. Feel free to browse around while you wait,” I suggested as I dashed back into the kitchen.

Anna and I had all our ingredients sliced and stored in containers and the salads were both previously mixed and refrigerated. All we needed to do was quickly toast the wheat bread or slice the French bread and assemble the sandwiches.

Anna had whipped up the tuna earlier by mixing into a large stainless-steel bowl cans of flaky tuna, heaps of creamy mayonnaise, a few tablespoons of low-fat sour cream with minced dried dill, and a splash of

tarragon vinegar. She had lightly seasoned it with salt and pepper to taste then chilled the salad until we were ready to serve.

I was proud to say that we made our chicken salad from scratch too. We roasted boneless chicken breasts then cut them into pieces and shredded with a food processor before adding a mixture of finely chopped walnuts, diced green grapes, celery, and dollops of mayonnaise seasoned with dashes of tarragon and dried Dijon mustard. It was a creamy delight that pleased your taste buds.

“You make the tuna sandwiches and I’ll do the chicken,” I told Anna as we popped slices of wheat bread into the toaster. A pot of Earl Gray steeped on the counter waiting to be poured.

Plating the slices of French bread, I spread them with the chicken salad mixture then cut the sandwiches into four diagonal pieces for the proper tea sandwich size. Anna spread her tuna salad onto the wheat bread and sliced them into four triangles then cut off the crust edge before serving.

I used one of our tiered cake servers to arrange scones on the bottom dish and added small bowls of jam and cream to the upper dish. My delivery of the dessert tray to table number one was met with applause and oohs and ahs. I scurried back into the kitchen to serve both of their beverages and sandwich plates on a tray.

Anna brought out the other tray of food and drinks to the second table, serving the apple tart and scones on separate plates.

“You ladies enjoy,” Anna said as she returned to the kitchen and we prepped for the next group of customers.

I rang up our luncheon tickets plus sales of two knit cozies then cleared the tables and readied them for new guests. It was after two o’clock before Anna and I had a pause in the stream of customers and could sit down to enjoy a cup of tea ourselves.

“Mmm, busy morning. I didn’t recognize any of the women in the shop today either. That means they were all out of town tourists. Hard to believe the amount of interest in Meadowood. Makes me feel like I live in historic Roscoe Village. I always wondered how the residents felt

when so many strangers invaded their town, and I guess we now know.”

“Well, it must be that advertising campaign the mayor has going on. It’s been pretty successful bringing in tourism,” Anna commented. “I can’t say I mind. It’s been good for business.”

“Certainly has. Our bottom line has been on the plus side for the past three months and I’d love to keep it that way. Maybe we should think of bringing in other retail items that we can sell. Any ideas?”

“I’ll give it some thought, but we don’t want to diversify too much. Folks get confused if you give them too many choices. Keep it simple works best.”

“Okay. Boy my feet are killing me. I don’t know how you do it; you’ve got more energy than me.”

“Oh, sugar, I run out of steam. Don’t think I don’t feel my years, but I’ll tell you... Chuck and I got a new lease on life when Stevie was born. That child keeps us young.”

I smiled at her and squeezed her hand. “You and Chuck are examples of what good parents look like. Doug and I have a hard time keeping up with our boys and we’re a whole lot younger than you. I think you’re amazing.”

“Oh pooh, now you’re just trying to embarrass me. Hey, did I tell you I saw Ron Wythe this morning on my way in to open the shop? I waved and called out but he never said a thing. Didn’t even look my way. Sure was odd. Getting this close to the wedding must have him discombobulated,” Anna said with a laugh.

“Maybe it wasn’t Ron.”

“Of course it was Ron. Do you think I don’t know what Ron looks like? I was only across the street; my eyes aren’t that bad yet.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. But, it could have been his brother that you saw.”

“What brother? Ron Wythe has a brother? First I ever heard tell,” Anna said as she finished her tea and began placing soiled dishes in the dishwasher.

“Yeah, it was a shock to us too. I met him yesterday. And get this.. he’s an identical twin brother. I swear to God, you can’t tell them apart. Poor Colleen got into a huge argument thinking Ron was cheating on her and it turned out to be Ray. Kind of funny when you think of it, but I can tell you she was awfully upset at the time until she learned the truth.”

“Well, I’ll be!” drawled Anna. “If that don’t beat all.”

Chapter Six

Ray

Doug entered the Buckeye Room at the inn. He moved to the bar and took a stool next to the Wythe brothers. Ray and Ron sat together. Doug had to admit that he wasn't sure who was who until Ron turned to him with his hand extended, then the subtle muscular difference in their builds caught his attention. Ron still looked as fit as he did while playing football at OSU; Doug knew he worked out in the gym three times a week too. Although Ray appeared fit, he didn't have the same muscle definition as Ron.

"Hey Doug. Good to see you."

"Hi Ron. You guys doing okay? No more incidents like yesterday?"

Ray, sitting on his brother's right, simply shrugged his shoulders indifferently. He eyed Doug before offering a greeting. "You the cop that was with Ron in the parking lot? He tells me you think that shot might have something to do with me." Ray lifted an eyebrow in question.

"Was it? I think I recall telling Ron I was pretty certain the shot wasn't meant for me, so that only leaves you or Ron. Suppose you tell me about yourself. Where's home, Ray? What kind of business are you in?" Doug inquired. His instincts told him the guy was sleazy and not to be trusted. It was a weird feeling listening to words coming out of a face

that'd been your best friend for years but now belonged to someone different.

"I'd be interested to learn more too, Ray. I still can't believe how you showed up in Ohio of all places. What really brought you here after all these years? Why haven't you reached out to me before this?" Ron asked his brother as he tried to read his closed expression.

"Can't a guy want to see his only brother get married? As for me... not much to tell. I live in New York, a borough in the Bronx. Nothing fancy. Actually, it's kind of funny that we both seem to be in the same business...strange how twins are so much alike. I'm an insurance agent; mostly representing commercial properties."

"Yeah, that is odd," said Doug as he scrutinized the man's demeanor and tone. He was sure he wasn't telling the entire story.

Ron threw his arm around his brother's shoulder and grinned. "Two peas in the pod." He chuckled. "Man, if Mom could see the two of us together now. Wonder what she'd think?"

"Yeah, too bad the old broad kicked the bucket before she got to see us together and you married." Ray said as he threw off his brother's arm.

A flicker of hurt crossed Ron's face at the crude remark from his brother. *Did Ray resent him because he lived with their mother as a kid while he was forced to live with their father? It wasn't his fault or decision.*

Doug studied the interplay between the brothers. He knew Ron well enough to know Ray's last comment had cut deep. He couldn't imagine being a young boy and suddenly losing your mother and your brother at the same time, especially a twin brother. Doug thought of Billy and Johnny and how close they were and what a hardship it would be if the boys were separated. Ron's parents didn't do their boys any favor by splitting them up in the divorce. That kind of life event left deep scars; he'd read enough psychological profiles on criminal behavior to support the claim.

"So is Dad coming to this shindig? Did you tell him you were getting hitched?" Ray persisted. He signaled to the bartender for

another beer, finished off the glass in front of him then slid it toward the barkeep.

“I sent him an invitation; mailed it to the last address I had off a Christmas card from a few years ago. I’m not even sure if he received it. I wish Dad had at least kept in touch with me; I can’t tell you how much I missed you, Ray. What our parents did to us wasn’t fair.”

“Yeah... well, spilt milk. Dad and I moved around a lot when I was a kid. He had a hard time keeping a job because of the booze. I think I attended a different school every year, always bouncing around.” Ray stared unseeing into the mirror behind the bar.

“I’m sorry. That had to be tough.” Ron laid a hand on his brother’s arm, trying to empathize.

Ray pushed off the hand and turned away. “I don’t need your pity. I’ve done all right. Now I move with the in-crowd in New York City, I’m not buried in a hick town like you.”

Ray slid off the barstool and stormed out of the room, leaving Ron to stare after him and Doug to make a mental note to check into Ray’s background.

“Sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into him. But then, guess I don’t really know my brother. It might have been better for all of us if he had stayed away.”

“Merry asked me an interesting question this morning. She wondered how Ray had learned of your wedding. How did he know where you lived if you guys have been apart for almost thirty years? I’m going to check into Ray’s background and try to find out what’s going on. I gotta tell you Ron, something isn’t adding up.”

“Let me know what you find, Doug. If he’s in trouble, I want to help. He’s still my brother; I owe him that much.”

Doug shook Ron’s hand then left the bar. He decided to walk the grounds surrounding the parking lot to search for any missed traces of yesterday’s shooter. A black Cadillac Escalade drove out of the lot as Doug stepped outdoors. He noted the New York plates, but the dark opaque windows prevented a glimpse of the driver or any occupants.



“Okay, is that all of it?” I asked as Billy and Johnny squeezed in one last duffle bag filled with footballs and baseball gloves. Heaven only knows what else the boys considered essential to take to camp.

“Mom, I don’t think we can get anything more into the back of the van,” Johnny pointed out as he climbed into the back seat and buckled up.

I stood next to my minivan waiting on Billy. He had Mittens in his arms giving the cat one last hug. Mittens tolerated the show of affection for a few seconds then meowed and squirmed out of Billy’s grasp and sauntered back into the kitchen, probably in search of his food bowl.

“Come on. Your dad wants to get going.”

“I’m coming,” Billy said as he joined his brother and slid the door closed. Both boys instantly pulled video games from their pockets that would occupy them for the duration of the drive.

Doug locked up the house as I got into the passenger seat and handed him the set of keys. It would feel nice to have someone else drive for a change. I looked forward to enjoying the scenery up to the park during the two hour ride.

“Let’s take route three up through the Amish country before you turn onto the interstate,” I suggested to Doug. “We’ve got plenty of time and it’s such a pretty day.”

“All right. Sounds like a good idea. I don’t need the hassle of high-speed highway driving. Mileage is about the same anyway.”

I settled back in my seat to scan the scenery with the sun on my face and a soft breeze blowing through the open car windows. The narrow two-lane state road wound through the rural countryside. Fields of wildflowers in riots of color graced meadows while tall grasses swayed across the gently rolling hillside. Groups of dairy cows stood chewing contentedly as we passed. It wasn’t long before we had to slow down and wait on a horse-drawn black buggy clip-clopping ahead of us. Within the

buggy, members of an Amish family rode peacefully home from marketplace. The young children, wearing the traditional plain clothing and wide-brimmed hats or cute bonnets, waved to Billy and Johnny as we passed. Leaning out the van windows, my boys grinned and waved back enthusiastically. I felt proud that my sons didn't jeer or scoff at the Amish children and respected a lifestyle so different from theirs.

Another hour of driving saw us on the interstate highway, just south of Lake Erie. We were getting closer to the Cleveland area and the entrance to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

"There's the sign," I said as I pointed to the Brecksville entrance to the park.

Doug turned into the park gates then stopped at the ranger office for directions to the summer camp cabins. He popped back into the van with a map in hand and a fistful of brochures.

"Should be about a half mile in. The ranger said to take the road on the right and follow the signs. Be there in a few minutes, guys," Doug said over his shoulder as he backed up and steered toward the right fork in the road.

Following the camp signposts, we entered into a large circular area with log cabins positioned around the main circle. A large recreation building was situated in the center. A car parking lot veered off to the left of the encampment. We pulled in and parked then began the chore of unloading bags and checking in with the camp advisor.

"Whew! That went easier than I had expected," I said, thirty minutes later, as I pushed hair out of my eyes and settled my cap on the back of my head. I reached up to close the rear hatch lid.

"Yeah, Billy and Johnny should have a great time here. They'll get settled into their cabins and once they meet their bunkmates, they probably won't miss us at all."

"Really? Do you think so? I mean, do you think they'll be okay?" I glanced toward the cabins and the groups of boys gathering in doorways. I had hoped for one last hug or at least a farewell wave from my sons.

“They’ll be fine. I’m sure they’ll miss their mommy too, but maybe not half as much as you’re going to miss them,” Doug said with a laugh.

We both began to get into the van to leave when I heard Billy’s voice calling out. I paused with my hand on the handle.

“Mom! Wait a minute.”

I stood next to the van as he and Johnny ran up to us. Billy threw his arms around my shoulders and gave me a tight hug. *Funny...it wasn't that long ago when he could only wrap his arms around my waist. When did he get so tall?* A tear slipped down my cheek as I realized my little guy was growing up.

Johnny gave me a more formal and brief embrace. He was at that age where it was embarrassing to show his parents some affection. Not cool...but it warmed my heart that he still wanted to.

“I’ll miss you guys. Call us if you need anything. Hear me?”

“Aww Mom. We’ll be okay. See you next month,” Johnny said as he grabbed Billy by the hand and turned to rush back toward the other campers.

“Have a good time!” I called after them. I glanced at Doug; he appeared to be wiping his eyes too.

He caught my glance and hastened to say, “must have some dust in my eye.”

I nodded and stayed silent as we got into the van and left the park, prepared to be empty nesters for the next month.

We had just taken the ramp onto I-71 south bound when my cell phone rang. I looked at the caller ID and was surprised to see Colleen’s name displayed on the screen.

“Hey friend,” I started to greet her but was interrupted by her frantic cry.

“Merry! Oh my God— I thought we were going to die!”

“Calm down. What happened? Where are you?” I asked as I put my phone on speaker so Doug could listen as he drove.

He frowned. His eyes met mine in concern as we both concentrated on the hysterical voice on the phone.

“Someone tried to kill us. We’re at one of those rest stops on the highway. The state police are here,” Colleen tried to explain in between snuffles and gasps for breath.

I could hear other crying in the background and a murmur of voices. “Colleen listen. Are you with Ron? Can you tell me what happened? Did you pick up your parents from the airport?” I suddenly thought to ask as I checked the time on my watch and realized it was past the time for their flight to arrive.

I could hear Colleen hiccup and swallow hard as she tried to steady her nerves. Then a man’s voice came through the speaker.

“Merry, is Doug there? This is Ron. Some damn fool tried to run our car off the road.”

Doug spoke in a level tone as he listened to his friend and processed the information in his mind.

“Ron, Merry and I are on our way back home. Where are you exactly? We can be there shortly. Give me a mile marker or some landmark so I can find you.”

“Um, yeah, we’re on 71 northbound about twenty-three miles outside the Columbus airport. I, uh, think the last mile marker I recall is one-thirty-one near Sunbury. I pulled into a truck rest stop to call the police, the one with the Flying J gas station.”

“Okay. I know the place. Is anyone hurt? It’ll take me about a half hour to reach you. Are the troopers still there?”

“Yeah, they’re here. Still taking pictures of the damage to my car and taking statements.”

“Hang on buddy. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

Chapter Seven

Road Rage

What was happening? First a gun shot and now road rage? This was too crazy for words. Stuff like this just didn't occur in our world...not to my friends.

I placed my cell phone in the cup holder and plugged in the charger cord to make sure my phone wouldn't fail me when I needed it the most as we rushed to the truck stop. I glanced at Doug, his expression solemn, as he accelerated the van above the posted speed limit. My careful, law abiding husband never broke the rules unless there was an emergency. By the way he was driving, I knew he considered this a matter of top priority.

Colleen's voice, the panic that I heard along with the muffled crying from her mother in the background, kept replaying itself in my mind. My best friend was getting married in a few days; this was supposed to be a happy time for her, not one of fear.

"I need your help with something," Doug said, never taking his eyes off the road as we sped down the highway.

"You do?" I couldn't believe my ears. He usually cautioned me to stay out of his investigations. Now he wanted my help. Holy cow.

"You're better at all this social media stuff. Do what you do best and

search for information on Ray Wythe. Go online, see what you can dig up and also try and find whatever was posted about Ron and Colleen's wedding. I'm still curious how Ray found out about their marriage. Just bring me whatever you find and don't go running off to investigate on your own."

"Okay, I can do that. Does this mean you think Ray is involved in this car accident?"

"I don't know what to think, but Ron never had any trouble until his brother came to town. Maybe Ray has been the target all along and Ron is just a case of mistaken identity."

"Hmm." I thought about what Doug said as I sat back in my seat; traffic slid by in a blur as we raced toward our friends.

Doug hurried toward the northern bands of the Columbus outer belt and the place where Ron and Colleen waited with her parents. He made record time as we pulled into the truck stop.

We came to a halt next to one of the Ohio State police cars. A trooper stood next to Ron's damaged Chrysler 300. Doug stepped out and reached for his identification as he approached the trooper.

"Hi. Chief Deputy Sheriff Doug Gardner." Doug shook hands with the lawman. "I'm a close friend of the victim."

Doug and the trooper walked around the vehicle as the trooper pointed out the damage and discussed what information Ron could provide. The driver's door and side contained deep dents, plus the crash scraped paint from back bumper to front quarter panel. Streaks of black paint from the other car produced stripes against the vanilla cream white of the Chrysler body.

"If this had been a lighter weight car, those folks would be sitting in a hospital now or the morgue instead of a rest stop," the trooper commented.

Doug glanced at his friends then back to the wrecked car.

"Did anyone get a description of the other car? Do you think this was a case of road rage? I have to tell you that yesterday, someone took a

shot at Mister Wythe and myself in a parking lot up in Meadowood. The shooter came close to hitting him.”

The state policeman raised his eyebrows in surprise; his eyes darted back to Ron then he took out his notebook to add the new information.

“You think both incidents are connected?” asked the trooper.

“Yeah, I’m beginning to think my friend has a target on his back. Somebody trying to run him off the road a day after being shot at... too much of a coincidence for me to ignore.”

“Send me an email with the shooting report and I’ll add it to this TA report.”

“Can do. How about keeping me in the loop on what your state forensics come up with on the car? Maybe we better run parallel investigations,” Doug suggested.

I hurried over to where Colleen and her mother huddled on a bench. Colleen’s father appeared drawn and tired as he stood with one hand resting on his wife’s shoulder in a comforting gesture.

“Oh my gosh, are you okay?” I asked my friend as I enveloped her in a hug. “Mrs. Callahan, were you hurt? Do you need anything?”

“We’re fine, just shook up. I’m so thankful that Ron is such an excellent driver. He kept control of the car and prevented a crash when that maniac hit us,” Colleen’s mother said. She released Colleen’s hand and turned to her husband, clasping his arm and smiling faintly.

I looked at Colleen’s parents as they held onto each other and took strength from their love. Liam and Bridget Callahan were Irish-Americans that traced their ancestry back to Cork County, Ireland and the family that emigrated during the famous potato famine. They raised their daughter to be proud of her heritage.

If Colleen looked into a magic mirror, she’d see herself in the future as Bridget, an older version of her daughter, with her auburn hair and green eyes. Liam always made me think of the actor Brendan Gleeson with his closely trimmed beard and mustache and ginger colored hair, especially when he entertained us with stories and his voice took on a humorous Irish lilt. Studying the two of them now, I recalled the many

happy occasions playing with Colleen, their house always open to neighborhood kids. It was hard on Colleen when her parents moved to Arizona after retiring; she missed them terribly and was looking forward to their visit this week. It certainly didn't get off to a good start.

Ron joined the state trooper and Doug to sign forms and wait on the tow truck enroute.

"What happens now?" asked Ron.

"Well, Mister Wythe, if you folks are all okay and don't need any medical attention then you're free to go. I think we have everything we need for the time being. Our forensic people will inspect your car once we get it into our secured facility in Columbus. We'll need a day to two, then the car can be towed to a body shop of your choosing for repairs, if that's what you want," the police officer informed Ron as he snapped a few more pictures of the damage and handed Ron a copy of the report.

"My poor car," Ron groaned. "I just had this baby detailed too, ready for the wedding, now look at her." He ran his hand lovingly over the hood of his car and shook his head sadly.

"Do you remember the make of the car that hit you?" Doug asked.

"Didn't see the make, just a huge black SUV. Thing looked like a tank coming up behind us when he first rammed us. I swerved and tried to get out of his way when he slammed into the side of us a couple more times. The force almost yanked the wheel out of my hands but I managed to hang on and stay off the berm. Gotta tell you Doug, I put my foot down and the hemi in this baby roared to life. I flat out ran the guy; that's how we got away. He couldn't keep up with me. Figured the best thing I could do was get off the highway and seek a public place," Ron explained again.

"You did the right thing. No doubt, your assailant wouldn't want to pursue you with so many witnesses around. Guess we better think about getting all of you home," Doug said.

Ron opened the trunk of his car and removed his in-laws suitcases before the tow truck hooked up his sedan. He carried them over to our minivan and I saw Doug help him load them into the back. I cringed,

thinking of the dirt in the cargo area from the potted plants I carried the other day. I hope the luggage didn't get too soiled.

"I'm used to hauling around a van full of squirming cub scouts. I know there's room for all of you if you don't mind a few cookie crumbs on the seat," I said as I directed the Callahan family to our van. "Ron, why don't you sit up front so you have more leg room. I can sit in the back with Colleen unless you two want to be together," I offered.

"Thanks Merry, but the rear seat is fine. Let Liam and Bridget take the middle row, it's easier for them to get in and out. Colleen and I can ride the third row."

With one last word with the tow truck driver, Ron watched his prized vehicle hauled away. I swear I saw him wipe a tear away before he assisted Colleen into the van then flipped the seat back in place for Liam and Bridget to climb in.

Doug checked that all his passengers buckled up then left for Meadowood and what the morning would bring.

Chapter Eight

Strangers in the Night

Mittens purred as my fingers played in his soft fur and I absentmindedly scratched his head while he sat on the stool next to me at my kitchen counter. I was deep in thought studying the computer screen and trying to think of other web sites to try in my search for information. I only had a couple more hours before it was time to open the tea shop and I'd need to pause my research. After yesterday's frightening crash on the road and worrying about my friends, I couldn't sleep. So, I tiptoed downstairs at six in the morning still wearing my shortie summer pajamas, put on the coffee pot, and opened my laptop. My nose had been pressed to the screen ever since.

I started by searching Ron Wythe's name on various social media sites and online platforms. I intended to be meticulous, methodical, and relentless to uncover every scrap of data that I could. It wasn't every day that Doug asked for my help in an investigation and I was determined not to let him down.

The object of my thoughts came walking down the stairs, tying his tie as he went. He grabbed a mug and filled it with coffee, taking a swallow of the strong brew before he spoke.

“You’re up early. What are you into? Don’t tell me you’re already starting an internet search on Ray.”

“Mm-hmm. I couldn’t sleep so while the house was quiet, I thought I’d have a look. So far I’ve only started with the obvious social media platforms. Figured I’d start with Ron and see where the wedding announcement about him and Colleen was posted. I may phone Barb Williams too once she gets into the office and ask if she knows anything.”

“Guess that’s as good a place to start as any,” Doug commented as he searched the refrigerator for a container of yogurt. Finally finding a strawberry yogurt hidden behind the container of milk, he grabbed a spoon and took a seat at the counter.

I felt him looking over my shoulder, reading the screen as I switched from a blank Facebook page back to Google to try another search path. “I didn’t think Ron was on Facebook, but I wanted to be sure. Maybe I can see what type of digital footprint he has. Look...this is the Meadowood Chamber of Commerce web site. See Ron’s name listed among the chamber members. Hmm, each member has a hyperlink on their name. Let’s see where that takes me.”

“You’re really talented at this, Babe,” Doug said as he pressed a kiss to my cheek and got up to put his cup in the sink and the yogurt container in the trash. “Gotta run. Call me later, huh, if you find anything interesting.”

“Okay. Have a good day. I’ll be at the tea shop until three, then I plan on stopping in to check on Colleen.”

“Be careful. See you later.”

“Uh-huh,” I mumbled to him, my attention glued to the computer screen.

Hmm, looks like a profile page. Yep, that’s what it is. Let’s see... member of the Insurance Underwriters of America. I kept reading the information provided on Ron’s link. Curious, I decided to cross check with the national I.U.A. and see if Ray’s name would be listed. He did

say he also sold insurance. I kept drilling down on suggested hyperlinks until I pulled up a different national page called the National Association of Insurance Commissioners. It contained a directory of agents. I scrolled down the alphabetical listings until I found the letter “W” then searched for Wythe. Finally! I found Ronald Wythe of Ohio and a Raymond Wythe of New York. The association assigned each agent a star rating. I noted that Ron and his company received a five star rating, but next to Ray’s name and company, the rating seemed more questionable, only a two star rating.

Wonder why Ray had such a low rating? Glancing at the wall clock, I still had an hour and a half before I needed to leave. Plenty of time to throw on some clothes and maybe check one more website. LinkedIn contained Ray’s name, but his profile cross-referenced a second name, Robert Raymond Walker. Did Ray use an alias? How odd. The profile stated he was an insurance salesman in New York with the same company name listed on NAIC. It contained postings filled with pictures of factories and commercial buildings. I scrolled through the various pictures until I saw one with a group of men in a ribbon cutting ceremony in front of what appeared to be a new hotel. One man in the photo was definitely Ray, yet the caption beneath it read Robert Walker with Mario Sorrento and associates. I clicked to bookmark the page to show Doug later.

Think I had just enough time to make a quick call to Barb at Ron’s office before I needed to get ready for work. I dialed the number on my cell phone as I raced upstairs to search for an outfit in my closet. Tossing clothes onto the bed, I waited for the line to be picked up. After the third ring, I heard Barb’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Morning Barb, this is Merry. Did I catch you at a busy time?”

“No, I was just on the other line and Ron hasn’t come in yet. Sorry for the wait. What can I do for you?”

“This may sound like a strange question, but did you post anything online about Ron and Colleen’s wedding plans? I know Ron doesn’t

have a personal Facebook page, but maybe you run one for the business?”

“Well, we have a business page for the insurance office of course. Can’t be in business nowadays without something on social media. I try to keep information on it current but it doesn’t really get much traffic.”

“Do you recall any news going out about the wedding though?” I asked again as I wiggled into a pair of capris and placed the phone on the bed while I slipped a t-shirt over my head.

“I respect Ron’s private business and don’t gossip or post anything online without his permission, Merry. He trusts me to be professional,” Barb insisted.

“Oh, I’m sure you do. It’s just that Ron’s brother is in town for the wedding. I wondered how he knew about it because Ron never sent him an invitation and Colleen didn’t know he existed until the other day.”

“Oh, my goodness. I see what you mean. Let me check something... yes, just as I thought. Our web site for the office contains a calendar and I updated Ron’s schedule to show him out of the office for three weeks because of his upcoming wedding. Could that be it?” Barb asked, her voice filled with worry.

“I’m not sure. I wouldn’t stress over it. It’s not a big deal, really, just satisfying my curiosity. Thanks for the information. I’ve got to run. Pop into the tea shop for a scone if you can get away.”

“Thanks, I’ll try.”

“Talk with you later,” I said and ended the call. Well, that was one question answered. Maybe.



Later that afternoon, I waited on the front step and knocked again on Colleen’s door. I was humming one of those pesky tunes that pop into your head and you can’t get rid of it and you have no idea how it got there. Trying to recognize the lyric and put a name to it, I finally realized

the title as Colleen opened her door to me. *Strangers in the Night*. I must have heard it on the car radio or inside an elevator, except I haven't been anywhere with an elevator. Weird.

"Hey girl, how are you?" I asked as I gave Colleen a hug and entered her living room.

"Hi. I'm okay. Just trying to stay busy and keep my mind off of yesterday. I spoke to mom on the phone; she says she and dad are all right, but that's not what I heard in her voice."

I watched Colleen pace back and forth. "Hey, I think we'll all feel better with some well-deserved pampering. Are you ready for a luxurious girls' spa day tomorrow? After a nice massage, pedi and manicure, maybe even a soak in the hot tub, you'll feel so relaxed I'll have to pour you out of your chair."

"That sounds good," Colleen said as she stopped walking and plopped into a chair. "What time does our pampering begin?" she asked with a laugh.

"How about I pick you up around eleven? Anna's coming too but will meet us at Oak Meadow. Tell your mom to come down to the patio and join us for a light brunch before the four of us begin our spa treatment."

"That will be nice. Ron told me he's booked a round of golf for a foursome: Dad, Ron, Doug, and Ray. I think he said they're teeing off at noon."

"Great. Doug told me the guys were going to play golf with drinks and food inside the Buckeye Room later. Sounds like everyone will have fun."

I rose and gave Colleen another hug. "I've got to be going. Is there anything else that you need? Got the something blue, something new, old and something borrowed all covered for the ceremony on Saturday?"

Colleen gave a sigh and reached for a white satin bag. She emptied its contents. "I've got the blue garter you girls gave me at the shower and a lace handkerchief that was my Granny's. The new will have to be my white underwear, and mom is loaning me her strand of pearls to wear."

“Perfect. Now you just focus on Ron and the wedding and all will be well. Why don’t you and Ron have a nice romantic evening at home tonight and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks. Sounds like a great idea.”

“Stop worrying. Everything is fine.” I stated with a smile on my face.
I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Chapter Nine

Deadly Resort

Noon sun shone on the patio at Oak Meadow and even under the wide umbrellas, the temperatures felt intense. A light breeze carried sweet fragrances from surrounding flower beds and provided a slight respite from the increasing summer heat.

I relaxed in my chair, sipping a refreshing watermelon sangria and finishing the delicious fruit salad. We ate a light brunch that satisfied but wasn't overly filling, which was ideal since Colleen and I were both conscious of having to zip up fitted dresses tomorrow. Glancing over to Bridget Callahan, I was glad to see her chatting with Anna and helping herself to a second serving of the sweet berries. She appeared calmer today.

"Goodness," Bridget began as she dabbed a napkin to her forehead, "I hope the evening temperatures will be lower for the wedding. Good thing you scheduled the ceremony for six o'clock after the peak heat of the day."

"Thought you'd be used to high temperatures now that you live in Arizona," remarked Anna.

"Well, yes, but you don't feel it," Bridget said.

Then before she could get the words out, all of us chimed in, "It's a

dry heat!" We all began to laugh; it felt so good to just be silly and release pent-up emotions.

Colleen signaled to a waitress for the bill. When the gal turned around and approached our table, she hesitated and stared at Colleen, uncertain of her reception. It was Jenny from the other day. Colleen and I both exchanged looks then starting laughing again.

Colleen reached out a hand, touching the waitress' arm as she started to hurry away.

"Please. Wait. I owe you an apology. I'm sorry about the other day. I guess you could call it a case of mistaken identity.

Sorry for how I acted."

Jenny's expression was wary as she stood next to our table. "Er, is there anything else I can get you ladies?"

"Just the bill, please. And Jenny was it? I apologize again."

"Sure. No harm. I could tell the guy was a player. I saw him with another broad right before he hit on me. I'm sorry to have caused an argument between you two. I'll get your check."

Hmm, that was an interesting tidbit. Wonder who the other woman was? I noticed Colleen had already dismissed the waitress' words.

When Jenny returned, Bridget reached for the bill. Signing the ticket and adding a generous tip, she gave the folder back to the waitress. "Add this to my room, dear."

"Thank you mother."

"Yes, thanks for the treat," drawled Anna.

"Ladies, if everyone is done eating, our masseuse awaits," I said as I rose.

We entered the hotel and were directed down a connecting hall into a wing that contained an indoor swimming pool, a fitness center, sauna, and spa. A cute juice bar offered bottled water and refreshing cold juices located in an alcove between the pool and spa rooms.

"Wow, this is really nice," said Anna as we signed into the spa at a small receptionist desk.

Nodding in agreement, I took in all the lavish appointments meant

to indulge each guest, whether it be a personal massage, or a salt-scrub hydrating pedicure. The inn's manager had pulled out all the stops in creating a high-classed resort treatment to attract the most discriminating guest.

"This is certainly new," I commented as I walked around. "When we had the reunion here, none of this existed except the pool. I must say, I'm very impressed."

A spa attendant ushered us into adjoining dressing rooms and handed each of us a fluffy white robe to wear.

"We have two therapists and two nail technicians. We'll do two massages while the other two ladies receive their mani-pedi treatments, then switch. You can decide who wants to do what first," the attendant told us.

"Colleen, why don't you and your mother get the massage first? It might help you relax more after yesterday. Anna and I can go after you."

"Okay. Is that all right with everyone?" asked Colleen.

"Of course, sugar. I'm gonna enjoy soaking my feet instead of being on them and let this sweet gal make my toes pretty," drawled Anna.

We all quickly undressed and slipped on the soft terry-cloth robes then split up as Colleen and Bridget entered a private massage room and Anna and I headed for the cushioned seats with the bubbly, warm foot baths.

"Ahh!" a sigh escaped me as I closed my eyes and wiggled my toes in the frothy water. A gal could get used to this kind of pampering.

"I feel so guilty," I confessed after a few minutes.

"What do you have to feel guilty over?" Anna asked.

"I haven't thought of the boys at all in the last day and a half. Does that make me a bad mother?"

"You're not a bad mother. You care about the people around you and that's occupied your thoughts."

"Well, have you talked to Stevie since you dropped him off at camp?"

"Last night. He called us to tell Chuck that he and Johnny were

learning how to paddle a canoe. They're fine. Trust me, they're so busy, they sure aren't missing us. Just enjoy some alone time," Anna said as she relaxed against the cushions of the chair and gave herself over to the manicurist.

The nail technician, Suzie, handed me a ring with at least a hundred polish colors attached to it. I flipped through the multiple shades of red, pink, purple and teal then studied the shades of orange and peach until I found the one I liked. Separating the pale peach color tip, I showed it to Anna.

"What do you think? Will this look good with my dress?"

"Mm-hmm. Looks about the same shade as your dress. Should be pretty. You gonna do the same color on your toes and fingers?"

"Oh yeah. I've got the perfect strappy sandals and I want to show off my pedicure."

"Sugar, I want something dazzling on my toes that will glow in the night. Wanna make sure Chuck can find me in the dark," Anna chuckled, ending in a snort.

I laughed, certain that image was going to stick in my mind. Anna was such a character. Sometimes I wasn't sure when she was kidding and when she wasn't. Like now.

Glancing up at the clock, it amazed me that an hour had passed and I never knew it. Blowing on my fingernails, I waved my hands around to help the drying process.

"Hey, I'm going to get a bottle of water. Do you want one or a juice?" I asked Anna as we both slipped on flip-flops and shuffled toward the door.

"Maybe just a water. Thanks."

"Okay, I'll be right back." I walked toward the alcove with its little juice bar and refrigerator to get our drinks. Hearing voices, I paused and peered around the corner.

I spotted a heavysset man standing near the pool talking in a low voice to Ron or maybe that was Ray. I still couldn't tell them apart. I crept closer to listen unashamedly.

In a thick New York accent that made me think of the television show *The Sopranos*, the man sneered, "I've been lookin' for you, Ray."

I held my breath as I tried to get a better look at the thug. My confusion grew as I heard Ron/Ray answer him.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Ray said, feigning innocence. "My name is Ron. You've got the wrong guy."

The imposing figure stepped closer. "Don't play dumb with me, Ray. We know you're singin' to the feds. The boss don't take kindly to hold-outs and double-crossers. He wants his money."

From where I crouched, I could see Ray swallow hard and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. I was sure now that it was Ray and wondered what kind of game he was playing.

"Look, you got it all wrong," Ray protested, his voice quivering. "I don't know any Ray. I'm telling you; you've got the wrong guy. I'm just here for my wedding."

Vincent's eyes narrowed as he peered at Ray, clearly suspicious. "Weddin', huh? Well, ain't that cute. Remember what I said."

The sound of approaching footsteps made Ray and the mob enforcer, for that's definitely what he was, step apart. I looked over my shoulder and saw Anna coming toward me. If she spotted me hiding behind a potted plant, my cover would be blown. I was afraid of what would happen if the men knew I had overheard their conversation.

"This ain't over, Ray," threatened the man with a curt nod as he backed away and disappeared through an outside exit.

I watched Ray duck into the men's restroom before I straightened up and walked over to the juice bar.

"Hey, where'd you go for that water? Thought you were going to be right back?" asked Anna as she accepted a bottle of water from me.

"Sorry. I sort of got caught in the middle of something."

"Humph. Well they're ready for us in the massage room and Colleen told me to warn you that Hilda has strong hands. You don't want to ask for the deep tissue massage."

"Okay. Good to know. Let's see if the gal can work out the crimp

that I suddenly developed in my neck,” I said as we took our turn on the massage tables.



Our bodies felt as fluid as wet noodles after the expert manipulations of Hilda and Tessa. We fairly floated down the hallway on our way to the Buckeye Room lounge, where we'd agreed to meet up with the guys and share a casual supper.

Colleen led the way as she entered the dining room and spotted her father sitting with Doug at a square table. The waiter was busy arranging more chairs and pushing together two tables to create seating for the eight of us.

Liam gave Bridget a quick peck on the cheek and admired her polished fingernails. She smiled at his compliment and whatever he whispered in her ear.

I caught Anna's eye and nodded toward the older couple and she winked in return.

“How was your golf game, honey?” I asked Doug as I moved closer to him.

“Where's Ron?” inquired Colleen in a worried voice as we all gathered around the tables, choosing chairs and collapsing into them.

“He and Ray went outside to talk,” Doug said. I could hear an edge to his voice and raised my eyebrow in a questioning look. He gave me a slight frown and nod of his head; a look I knew from the past that implied he was concerned and standing by.

Angry voices carried into the room. Colleen jumped to her feet and turned to find Ron storming into the lounge. She paused, waiting for him to reach her then laid a comforting hand on his arm. I watched her speak softly to Ron and he took a deep breath, trying to calm down before he directed a half smile to us.

“Hey everybody. You ladies have a nice day?” Ron asked as he tried to make polite conversation.

“What’s going on, buddy?” asked Doug. He stepped over to Ron, intending to put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, but Ron suddenly shrugged his shoulders and pushed Doug’s hand away.

“Nothing that I can’t fix. My damn brother...”

He turned around and stomped out of the room, leaving all of us to stare after him in confusion.

Colleen’s eyes darted to her parents then back to me. Obviously embarrassed, she spoke in a trembling voice, “I’ll go get him. He’s upset. Please, go ahead and order your food. We’ll be right back.”

She ran out of the room in search of Ron. I glanced at Doug and squeezed his hand as we both turned our attention to Liam and Bridget Callahan. The poor dears sat silent, not knowing what to make of the drama between their daughter and their soon to be son-in-law.

I tried to make light of the situation and reassure them. “Wedding jitters! I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about; they’re just stressed with last minute details for the wedding. By tomorrow night it will all be over.”

A blood-curdling scream interrupted my speech. We looked at each other—it was Colleen’s voice.



In her search for Ron, Colleen walked back toward the wing with the spa and pool. Pale lights glowed around the tiled pool and reflected off the tall windows that overlooked the outside patio and golf course beyond. She didn’t see anyone lounging on the chaises along the pool border. The spa looked ominously dark and had closed for the day; the wing seemed eerily quiet.

As Colleen peered into the crystal-clear pool, her heart skipped a beat. A figure floated face down in the water, motionless. Panic seized her, and she gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth. She screamed as she looked at the features so dear to her.

“Oh, no,” she cried, her voice trembled. She couldn’t tear her eyes

away from the scene before her. Minutes stretched into an eternity. Her knees threatened to give way beneath her. Colleen clutched the edge of the pool, her heart pounded in her chest as she kept staring at the body floating in the water.

We found her like that as Doug and I rushed into the area. Doug quickly assessed the situation and called 9-1-1 to request an ambulance and authorities.

“Come away, Colleen,” I said as I wrapped a comforting arm around my dear friend. “Let’s go sit over here. Come on.”

She moved slowly, mechanically, as she mumbled, “Please, God, Ron can’t be dead.”

Sirens wailed in the distance; their approaching red lights flashed on the windows and reflected in the pool waters, making the body appear a macabre color.

Chapter Ten

Wedding Woes

Paramedics arrived and acted swiftly to pull the lifeless body from the pool. They performed their routine life-saving resuscitations, but to no avail. He was dead. The poolside was now crowded with resort patrons that had gathered to gawk at the drama.

Tears streamed from Colleen's eyes as she watched the paramedics' efforts to revive the love of her life. She moaned and cried again while her parents sought to console her and wrapped her in their arms.

Doug motioned us to step aside so they could bring in a stretcher. My heart went out to my sweet friend. I wished there was something I could do, but what? The whole thing made no sense.

Suddenly, amid all the chaos, a familiar voice was heard shouting to the rescue team and insisted he be allowed in. Ron Wythe rushed to Colleen's side and took her face within his hands.

Ron pressed a kiss to her lips as he attempted to break through her blank stare. "Colleen, it's me," he whispered. "I'm right here, baby. I'm okay. Please, look at me."

His own face was etched with worry and mirrored the shock that Colleen had experienced. Colleen's eyes opened wide as realization sunk in. The body in the pool was Ray – not Ron.

Ron stood next to Doug as he told the attendants in a hoarse voice filled with emotion. "That's my twin brother, Ray Wythe."

The tension in the air was palpable as Colleen clutched at Ron, her emotions spiraling. Her happiness at finding Ron still alive plummeted as she realized he had just lost a brother and must be grieving his loss. Even though they hadn't seen each other since they were boys, Ray was still his brother. The shock of finding Ray dead in the resort pool the day before she and Ron were to be married must be hard for Ron to bear. Colleen clasped Ron's hand in a firm grip. Whatever happened next, they'd get through it together.

Doug studied his friend. Several unanswered questions hung heavy in the air. Where did Ron run off to? What was he arguing about with his brother less than an hour ago? What did he really know about his brother?

"Ron, you better come down to the station with me now. The sheriff will have to begin an investigation. I'll do what I can to help you, but since we're friends and I'm part of the wedding party, I'll probably have to recuse myself. You need to answer some questions, not the least is where the hell have you been?" Doug inquired in a stern voice.

Ron nodded mutely as he held Colleen in his arms.

The medical examiner arrived. After he consulted with the paramedics and inspected the scene, he nodded to them to load the body into the ambulance and deliver it to the county morgue where he'd perform an autopsy. The doctor noticed Doug standing among our group.

"Chief Deputy Sheriff Gardner, I see you got to the scene quick enough. Anything you can tell me?"

"Hi ya, Doc. Actually, the deceased was a member of a wedding party that I'm in and we spent the afternoon playing golf and had planned on having dinner here. When he didn't show up, we went in search for him."

"Hmm, that so. I believe I heard some local gossip that Mead-

owood's lovely school principal, Miss Callahan, was marrying Ron Wythe. When is the ceremony?" asked Doctor Stone.

"Tomorrow evening. But I think that's not going to happen." Doug said with a look for me and a glance at Colleen. "Sorry, you two, but Ron might not be available for a wedding ceremony. I'm pretty sure the sheriff will want to hold him as our guest until we get to the bottom of this and of course pending the doc's findings."

Tony Dalton hurried over to Doug's side and with a few quiet words of instructions, Tony escorted Ron Wythe out of the hotel and into his waiting cruiser.

I stood transfixed, watching Ron and Doug leave then I remembered I hadn't told Doug about the thug I'd seen threatening Ray. I hurried out of the building to catch up to him, but he had already left with the other deputy. *Guess it will have to wait*, I thought as I returned to my friends huddled inside.

Colleen sobbed again and her mother collected her, insisting that she accompany her up to their hotel room where she could collect herself.

"Guess that means we should probably go home, huh?" asked Anna.

"Yes, I think it's safe to say our spa day has ended." I walked back to the dining room on sluggish feet to retrieve my purse and car keys. Our day of joyous celebration and anticipation for what was supposed to be a beautiful wedding had shattered and was now shrouded in uncertainty and grief.



Dust motes danced and shimmered in the shaft of sunshine coming through the window blinds behind Doug's head in his narrow office cubicle. The sunlight gave evidence of a new day bursting forward after a long night of nonstop questioning of Ron Wythe and even himself by Sheriff Edgar Simmons.

Where did Ron run off to? What was the argument about between

Ron and Ray that everyone heard right before Ray's body was found? Edgar kept pressing for answers. Doug didn't understand why his friend refused to answer. What was he hiding?

Doug hadn't had any sleep and had only taken enough time to change out of his casual clothes and dress in the spare uniform he kept at the office.

He rubbed his brow, trying to relieve the splitting headache that had developed behind his eyes. Stretching his arms above his head, he rolled tired shoulders. Edgar's words echoed in his mind as the sheriff voiced his annoyance with having someone from his office linked to a homicide.

The phone rang shrilly on his desk, ending Doug's brief peace and quiet. He answered in a tired voice, "Gardner."

The speaker identified himself, causing Doug's mind to leap to alertness. Grabbing a pen, he scribbled notes as the investigator from the O.B.I. rattled off information.

"Thanks. Update for you... Raymond Wythe was found dead late yesterday afternoon. Appears to be a drowning but we'll know more after the post mortem." Doug listened a minute longer than said, "Uh huh, promise to keep you in the loop. Right."

Sheriff Edgar Simmons stood in the doorway listening to Doug's side of the phone conversation. He leaned against the door frame with a coffee cup in one hand and half-eaten cruller in the other. His flabby belly hung over his waistline, hiding his belt from view, and his thin wisps of salt and pepper gray hair were combed across a balding crown. After last Christmas' health scare, Edgar was counting his time until retirement.

"What was that all about?" asked Edgar, taking a sip of his coffee. His face showed the strains of a long night too.

"The state forensic guys got a make and model on the paint found on Ron Wythe's damaged car. Jet black Cadillac 2022 or 2023, either an Escalade or XLT-5 SUV. Both of those bigger models offer a jet black with titanium accents. That's the closest they could match. Ron said it

was a big SUV that hit him but he didn't know what model. I saw one of those Escalades at Oak Meadow the day of the shooting and yesterday too."

"Tony! Come in here a minute," called Simmons. The young deputy hurried into Doug's office. "I want both of you to go out to that resort and take apart Ray Wythe's room. Search all his belongings, i-pads, laptops, anything. Run a search on all his cell phone calls. Tony, you take the lead on this one since Doug is personally involved, but Doug I still need you to supervise. Make sure we don't miss anything. Better get out there now before some housekeeping staff disturbs the room."

"You got it," Tony beamed as he grabbed his hat and gave the sheriff a quick salute. He ran out the entrance toward the car park.

Doug raised an eyebrow, shaking his head. "Guess I better catch up to super cop before he leaves me behind."

Simmons snorted. "Don't be too hard on him. Just make sure he's thorough. I remember when you used to be a young eager beaver too."

"Yeah, right. Do you plan on releasing Ron?"

"Not until after you get back from searching the deceased's room and belongings. We've still got a few hours we can hold Mr. Wythe as a person of interest. I want answers. Afraid he's gonna miss his wedding."

"He didn't give us much choice. There's going to be a lot of unhappy people in town, not to mention my wife," Doug said as he left the office.

Tony sat behind the wheel of the police cruiser, the engine revving. He anxiously waited for Doug to climb in so he could race to the Oak Meadow Inn.

Chapter Eleven

Federal Agents

“Hello, Teresa? This is Merry. Um, afraid Colleen and I need to cancel our hair appointments with you this morning,”

I held the phone away from my ear as Teresa shrieked, “What?! What’s happened?”

“The uh, wedding has been postponed. All I can tell you is that there’s been a sudden death in the family. Sorry. We won’t need our hair appointments today. Can you maybe spread the word and let folks know that the wedding is off?”

Asking Teresa to spread the word was a given. She was the biggest gossip in town. I knew that by the time I hung up and poured a cup of coffee that half the town would hear the news about Ron and Colleen’s wedding postponement.

“Roww,” Mittens demanded my attention as he stood next to his food bowl. He butted his head against my leg then cast his eyes up to me as if questioning what was wrong?

“Hey fella. Here you go,” I said as I poured a generous amount of kibble into his dish. I gave him a pat then walked back into the kitchen and went about cleaning up my few breakfast dishes while my mind considered the dilemma with Ron and Colleen.

My computer sat on the counter. I decided to have another look into Ray's background. Opening my laptop screen, my fingers hesitated above the keyboard as I searched for Ray's name plus his alias, Robert Walker, into various social media and internet sites. I came across an Instagram account under the name of Robert Walker with photos from various extravagant vacations and upscale parties. I identified pictures that showed him cruising on expensive yachts or Ray posing in front of enormous mansions and at New York Long Island estates.

I couldn't help but wonder how Ray could afford such a lavish lifestyle on an insurance salesman's salary. He must have some wealthy clients that treated him generously. His life appeared to be as big a mystery as his death.

Scribbling my thoughts into a spiral notebook, I clicked on a Facebook page created for Robert Walker. His profile details mimicked what Ray had revealed to both Ron and Doug. The home address seemed to be the same as Ray's. Once again, I found photographs posted that viewed Ray with his arm around an attractive woman or posing next to a flashy sports car. I clicked on the zoom key to enlarge a photograph of Ray standing in a driveway of a palatial estate. I squinted to study the figure in the background and tried to blow it up larger. Was that the same big guy who had confronted him near the pool? I wish I could see more detail, but the more I zoomed in, the fuzzier the pixels got and the face became a blur.

My mind swirled with the information that I had uncovered. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was peeling back layers of a deeply woven mystery around Ray's life. I wish Doug would get home so I could share with him what I'd found. Ray definitely seemed shady, but how dark was he? Every aspect of his life appeared to be the total opposite of his brother Ron's. It was like looking at good and evil, black and white, or yin and yang.

The phone startled me with its jarring ringtone. I glanced at the caller ID.

A breathless Barb Williams asked, "Is it true?"

“Is what true?”

“Is the wedding called off?”

“No, just postponed. How did you hear?” I wanted to know but had an idea.

“I heard it from Martha. She got it from Carol Goodwin who said Teresa told her at the beauty shop.”

“Yep, best communications system in town...telephone, telegram or tell Teresa,” I laughed. “There was some trouble yesterday. Ron’s brother was killed. That’s why Colleen postponed the ceremony.”

“Oh my goodness. I hadn’t heard that. Ron hasn’t come into the office but then of course I didn’t expect him to on the day of his wedding. I mean, what would a groom be doing at the office? That’s just terrible news. Poor Colleen. Oh dear, I’m rambling. Sorry. I’m so rattled. It’s just that I’m only here to collect Saturday’s mail and I didn’t expect to find the letter— you have to come, Merry. I don’t know what to do!”



Tony and Doug pulled up in front of the Oak Meadow Inn then marched directly to the receptionist desk with their badges in hand.

“We need access to Raymond Wythe’s room. Police business,” Doug demanded to the nervous reservation clerk. He turned as he heard approaching footsteps.

“Can I help you officer?” asked the manager Blake Garrett.

“We need to see the deceased’s room,” Doug told the manager.

“Certainly. I’ll accompany you since I don’t see a search warrant in your hand. Miss Johnson, what is the room number for Mister Wythe?”

The clerk checked her computer screen, scrolled down a list then presented a confused countenance to her boss. “I’m sorry sir, but we don’t have that name among our guests. Are you looking for the room of the gentleman that drowned last night? I have his room registration

under the name of Robert Walker, not Wythe. Would that be the same person?”

The alias name surprised Doug, but it had to be the same. He just didn't expect Ray to be traveling under a false name.

“Give me the key to Walker's room then, Miss Johnson. I'll take full responsibility for the guest's privacy and belongings,” Blake Garrett said as he received the master key.

“Of course, sir. Room number 301, west wing.”

“Officers... if you'll follow me.” Garrett walked toward the elevator bank and the three men stepped inside.

The elevator rose silently and smoothly opened onto the third floor. Tony and Doug followed Garrett down the carpeted hallway and stopped half-way in front of a door marked 301. The manager slid the key card into the lock slot then pushed down on the handle and opened the steel door.

Garrett paused; his mouth dropped open in disbelief as he surveyed the guest room. Doug and Tony pushed past him and were both equally surprised at the condition of the room.

“Holy cow!” exclaimed Tony as he looked at the ransacked room.

“Don't take another step, Tony, until you take a picture of this. Better put on a pair of gloves too. Someone's obviously been searching for something. Looks like a thorough job too,” Doug commented.

Tony snapped several pictures with his cell phone from all angles as the manager stood near the door and watched.

Garrett's face was a picture of dismay as he considered the expense of repairing the vandalism to his beautiful suite. He shook his head in disgust and took out his own phone, snapping photos and taking notes for his staff.

Doug viewed the empty dresser drawers laying on their sides, and clothes on hangars strewn across the bare mattress. A pile of bedding lay on the floor. The mattress had been yanked half off its box spring. Doug walked around the room. Wearing surgical gloves, he cautiously poked here and there at the disheveled mess. The contents of the mini-fridge

lay on the floor too, the door left hanging open. The bathroom appeared to be just as bad. Ray's shaving kit lay upside down; his razor and can of shaving cream dumped into the sink along with a bottle of after shave cologne. The lid had been removed from a prescription bottle of pills.

Doug looked at the label. "Hmm, Zantac. Guess Ray suffered from heartburn. Tony, be sure and bag up this personal stuff. We're gonna need the county forensics team in here to dust for fingerprints, though I doubt we'll find any besides Ray's."

Doug and Tony continued to catalog the belongings in the hotel room. All they saw were clothing and some toiletries, but no wallet. No papers of any kind were present. Doug thought that was odd. Everyone has at least a receipt from the gas station or a ticket from a toll booth, especially driving from New York to Ohio. Just as Doug was considering the lack of paper evidence identifying Ray, two men pushed past the manager and entered the room.

Doug immediately took in their Brooks Brothers suits and black Florsheim shoes, clean shaven jaws and trimmed hairstyles. He recognized the men for what they were... Feds. What would federal agents want at a small town homicide scene?

Chapter Twelve

Threats

Rushing into town, I managed to find a parking space in front of Ron Wythe's insurance agency, despite the usual busy Saturday traffic downtown. His office was only two doors down from Frannie's Frocks. I wondered if my Aunt Fran had heard the news yet. I absolutely needed to speak with my aunt.

Glancing toward her shop, I sighed then entered Ron's office.

"Thank goodness you came," Barb rushed toward me and enveloped me in a hug then drew back, continuing to clasp my hands as she pulled me forward into the office.

"What's this all about?" I asked as I watched her lock the front door after looking down the street in each direction.

Barb twirled the vertical wand to close louvers on the window blinds, casting the room in shadows and hiding our presence from any spying eyes.

"Read this," she said, thrusting a single typed sheet of paper into my hand. She held the torn plain white envelope. There was no address on the front of it.

I skimmed the content of the letter then I stopped and read it again more closely. My eyes widened as I read the threatening message.

“Where did you find this?” I asked her in a hushed voice, afraid to speak above a whisper.

“On the floor with the other mail. I think they slipped it through the mail slot in the door. I’m scared. I don’t know what to do.” Barbara started to cry and wrung her hands.

“I’m calling Doug. This is serious.” I pulled my cell phone from my purse and immediately pressed the speed dial for Doug’s office number. No answer. Where was he? I tried his cell phone then waited for what seemed forever although he picked up in only four rings.

“Merry, this isn’t a good time. I’m in the middle of an investigation.”

“You’ve got to get over to Ron’s office. I’m with Barb Williams and she’s scared to death. She found a threat to burn down the office,” I insisted in a panicky voice.

“Are you in any immediate danger? We’ll be right there.”

“Hurry. We’re inside and locked the door. Hey, I have to tell you about a creepy dude that I saw with Ray too and all the stuff I found on the internet.”

“Why haven’t you told me about this before? Never mind. I’m on my way,” Doug said.

I could hear the exasperation in his voice as he hung up the phone. Turning to Barb, I tried to calm her and reassure her, although I felt far from being reassured myself.

“Doug’s on his way. He’ll be just a few minutes.”

The knock on the door was quick and light, but it still startled both of us. Barb got up from her desk and went to the door. She opened the blinds before she cautiously unlocked the door. Doug nodded to her as he stepped into the room.

“How you doin’ Barb? Wanna tell me what this is all about?” Doug asked her in an even tone. He glanced over to me and I nodded my head for him to continue.

Barbara returned to her desk chair then took a deep breath. “Okay. Well, I unlocked the office about an hour ago to pick up the mail. Ron is expecting an important letter from the insurance commission. So, even though we aren’t normally open on a Saturday, I thought I’d stop in just to check the mail. I came into town to pick up some cupcakes from Martha and figured I’d stop at the office first.”

“Okay. Did you receive any phone calls or see anyone outside the building?”

“No, nothing like that. The carrier drops our mail through the slot on the door and it falls into this basket. See?” Barb pointed to the brass mail slot and the small rectangular basket hanging under it on the inside of the door. “I did a quick sort of the mail. Like I said, I was looking for the correspondence from the insurance commissioner. It wasn’t there but that’s when I found the plain envelope... no name on it, no address. I thought that was strange so I opened it. Here,” she handed Doug the letter in question.

He read the typed message to himself, turned the paper over and examined the torn envelope. He raised an eyebrow to me then read the letter out loud, “*Give me my money or I’ll burn your place to the ground. Don’t play games.*”

“Any possibility that letter was delivered yesterday? Could you have missed it in the mailbox?”

“No, I always clear out the mail first thing in the morning. The mailman delivers to Park early, especially with all of the businesses on the street,” Barb insisted.

“Was Ron in any kind of argument with a client or maybe someone who disputed a claim?” I asked.

“You know Ron; he’s so easy going. I can’t imagine him fighting with anyone and he’s more than fair when settling any insurance claim. People respect and like him. Who would threaten him like this?” Barb replied, tears beginning to well up again.

“Okay. I’ll take it from here. Why don’t you pick up your bakery

order and go on home? I'll have a deputy patrol the block and keep an eye on the building," Doug said.

The three of us left together after Barb closed the window blinds again and locked the office door. Doug rattled the doorknob, satisfying himself that the lock was in place. We paused on the sidewalk watching Barb walk toward Martha's Bakery then Doug took my arm and guided me over to my minivan. He glanced around to make sure we were out of earshot of any shoppers on the street.

"Now suppose you fill me in on Ray Wythe and what you found on your internet snoop. And who did you see at the spa with Ray. I can't believe you didn't tell me right away! You promised me you wouldn't run off and investigate on your own."

"I didn't do any such thing. Investigate, I mean. Honest. I was at the spa with the girls and all I did was walk over to the juice bar they had set up to get a couple bottles of water for Anna and me. That's when I heard Ray talking to some big dude. I wasn't sure it was Ray at first, but then after he pretended to be Ron, well, then there was no doubt."

"What did this guy look like? How did Ray pretend to be Ron?"

"Hmm, well, he was a big man, bulky with a gravelly voice. He talked about the boss and how Ray had double-crossed him. Oh yeah, he also told Ray that the boss wanted his money back or something like that. Ray kept saying he didn't know what the man was talking about and that he was mistaken. He kept saying that he wasn't Ray, his name was Ron and he was there for his wedding. I could tell the guy didn't believe him for a minute."

"What happened next? What did Ray do?"

"The big guy left but he told Ray he'd be back. Ray looked really rattled; he was sweating like he'd just run a 5K. After that, Anna came down the hall and I ducked out of my hiding spot when Ray left the area."

Doug stood silent as he processed the information; I watched him staring off into the distance as if he was visualizing the scene in his mind.

“Can you stop at the house for a minute. I printed off some weird stuff that I found on Facebook and some other sites. You’ve got to see these pictures; you’re not gonna believe it,” I said. My voice rose in excitement then I slapped a hand over my mouth and rapidly looked around me in case someone had overheard.

“Yeah, let’s get going. I’ll follow you home.”



I dashed into the kitchen and turned on my laptop, opening the bookmarked pages that I had previously saved. Doug placed his hat on the counter and stood looking over my shoulder. I enlarged the photographs with Ray on the expensive yacht and the other one with Ray in the driveway of an enormous mansion. There were other pictures with him standing next to flashy cars and elegantly dressed women.

“What do you think?” I asked him. “Oh yeah...see this shot of Ray at this fancy estate? Look at the man in the background. Let me see if I can blow this up bigger... yeah, that worked. See this big guy? I’m pretty sure he looks like the same man I saw arguing with Ray at Oak Meadow. Wish I could see his face clearer.”

“Send me that picture plus the other ones to my office email. I’ll see if we can enlarge them better and get an ID on that guy. What else did you find?” Doug asked me as he wrapped an arm around my shoulder. I cuddled against him for a moment before I brought up my notes about Ray’s other name.

“I found this listing for insurance agents. It’s a national register and both Ron and Ray’s names are listed on it. But then, and I thought this was strange, I found Ray’s picture but named as Robert Walker in a shot of him with a big investor. The article talked about his insurance company investing in this million-dollar property. I found another article from a New York newspaper that talked about a fire destroying the same commercial building that was shown in the other story. The

report speculated whether the property burned down because of arson for the insurance money and hinted at a mob connection. Do you think Ray was involved with gangsters? I feel like we've gotten ourselves smack into the middle of the Sopranos."

"We've definitely gotten into something."

Chapter Thirteen

Dirty Money

“I’m so tired, I can’t think straight. Look, I’m gonna lie down for a bit, maybe grab an hour or two of sleep, but then I’ve got to get back to the station,” Doug said as he trudged up the stairs.

“All right honey. I’ll call you in two hours.”

My poor hubby was exhausted. I watched in sympathy as it took all his energy just to climb the steps. I knew he hadn’t any decent rest since Thursday night. What with the bachelor’s party golf outing and then Ray’s death... add onto that a night spent with the sheriff grilling both him and Ron, well it was a wonder he could put one step in front of the other. I reached for the telephone and silenced the ringer bell and did the same on my cell phone. Let him have some sleep, without any noisy interruptions.

What a turn of events! And to top things off, I was losing a day of revenue because Anna and I had closed the tea shop since we’d both be busy with Colleen’s wedding. At least we were supposed to be. Our business was too new to afford hired staff, so it was just Anna and me. The shop was normally closed on Sunday, but a Saturday was usually busy with weekend shoppers. Oh well, hopefully, we’ll make up the lost revenue next week.

I poured myself a fresh cup of coffee then pulled out my laptop again and studied the information I had found on Ray. Questions spun through my mind like a whirling tornado. What was Ray involved in and who was that gangster looking man that had threatened him? Did that thug shoot at us? Is that who tried to run Ron off the road? There had to be answers somewhere; I just wish I knew where. I stared at the pictures of Ray again online.

Doug's cell phone lay on the kitchen counter next to his hat. It began to vibrate with an incoming call. I glanced at the screen and saw the caller ID display Sheriff Simmons. Picking up the phone, I answered in a soft voice, "Hello? This is Merry."

"Where's Doug?" The sheriff shouted, irritated at not finding his deputy.

"Um, he's asleep. Do you want me to wake him?"

"Damn right! Tell him to get back down here. We've got a situation here and a pair of demanding federal agents."

"Okay. He'll be right there." I ended the call and hurried upstairs. When I opened the bedroom door, I found Doug sitting on the side of the bed. His head hung down and his eyes were still closed. As I neared him, he opened one eye and gave me a bleary stare.

"Don't tell me; Simmons called."

"Afraid so. He told me to tell you that some federal agents were there. He sounded upset. Wants you back at the station ASAP."

"Ugh, can't say I wasn't expecting it. Don't hold dinner for me; I don't know when I'll get home. Sorry Babe."

I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a big kiss, then ran my fingers through his tousled hair and smiled at him. "Don't worry about me. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. Just forward those photos and stuff you found. I'll try to call you later." Doug tucked in his shirt tail and slipped on his shoes then went into the bathroom to splash some water on his face. Feeling slightly freshened from his catnap, he left the house.



The two Feds stood in front of Edgar Simmon's desk. Doug eyed the pair as he entered the office. The one with black hair wore a stoic expression while his partner, the blonde guy, spread his hands on the edge of the desk and leaned forward in an attempt to intimidate the small-town sheriff.

"What's going on?" asked Doug as he stepped past the agents and stood at Edgar's side. The one agent straightened up.

The sheriff glanced at the men then his deputy, as he sought to review the situation.

"It seems Ron Wyatt has a large quantity of money in his personal account; these gentlemen seem to think it's connected to a crime syndicate in New York." Edgar snorted and shook his head, implying that was hogwash.

"We followed the money and it led us here. It's obvious that the Wythe brothers were working together to launder money for the Sorrento crime family. Maybe there was an argument or a double-cross, and the one brother killed the other. We don't really care about your homicide; we just need the paper trail leading back to Sorrento. Mario is the big fish and we plan to reel him in," the taller blonde-haired agent stated. He sneered at the sheriff and his hick deputy.

Finally, the silent agent spoke up in a deceptively soft voice, "We need access to your prisoner to question him. We can either do it here the nice way or he can accompany us to Columbus to the federal facilities. Your choice."

"I think you're barking up the wrong tree, but you can question Mister Wythe here. I assume you'll allow the presence of his lawyer during your interrogation. I'd like the courtesy of my deputy attending, as well, to witness the proceedings," Edgar stated in a firm voice with an expression that showed his own resolve.

Doug gave the agent a tiny smirk as he watched his boss spar with

the belligerent younger man. Edgar might be a small- town sheriff, but he didn't take any guff.

Simmons nodded to Doug and Doug pulled the key ring off the wall hook and left the office.

"Follow me," he said as he led the two agents down the hall toward the holding cells. Ron jumped to his feet as soon as he saw Doug walking toward his cell. His look turned to one of confusion as Doug unlocked the iron door and two men entered behind him.

"Ron, these are federal agents. They need to talk to you. I'd advise you to have your attorney present before you say anything," Doug cautioned his friend as he stepped aside and pointed to the other men.

"Uh, yeah, federal agents? Um, can you call Dick Winters for me? See if he can get over here?" Ron asked. He glanced between the men and read the somber message in their eyes.

Doug led Ron out of the cell and into an interview room. Ron sat at one side of the table and the agents took seats across from him.

Facing the agents, Doug informed them, "You can talk to him, but I expect you to protect his constitutional rights while I phone his lawyer. Ron, as your friend, I would suggest you listen closely to what these men have to say, but don't comment until Winters is here." Ron nodded in silent agreement.

"I'm Special Agent Brown and this is my partner, Special Agent Grissom. We're with the FBI" the blonde-haired agent introduced himself.

Ron visibly gulped and his eyes widened as he looked at the two men before him. His eyes darted from one to the other, waiting to hear what this was all about.

"Would you state your name and address, sir?" Brown asked as he turned on a small pocket recorder.

"Ronald James Wythe. I live at 204 Walnut Street, in Meadowood, Ohio." Ron's voice shook slightly.

"What is your relationship to Raymond George Wythe, also known as Robert Raymond Walker?" Grissom inquired.

Before Ron could answer, the door opened and his attorney, Dick Winters, rushed into the room. Doug came in behind him.

“You haven’t questioned my client without representation, have you?” Winters frowned at the recorder laying on the table.

“Of course not. We only asked to confirm his name.”

Winters pulled up a chair next to Ron while Doug chose to stand in the corner behind him.

“All right then. Proceed.” Winters withdrew his own tablet of paper and pen, made note of the date and time of the interview and the agents’ names.

“To repeat...what is your relationship to Raymond George Wythe, also known at Robert Raymond Walker?”

Ron swallowed hard before answering, “Raymond Wythe is my twin brother. I’m not familiar with the other name, Robert Walker. I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“Three days ago a large sum of money, over five hundred thousand, was deposited into your business account at the Wells Fargo Bank. Federal Reserve notified the regional office of the FBI. The money in question had recorded serial numbers and was marked with a special dye only detected under ultra-violet light. The Bureau has been tracking that currency as part of a sting operation in New York.”

“I still don’t understand. That can’t be right. I didn’t make any deposits lately.” Ron looked questioningly at his lawyer as he leaned toward him and whispered in his ear.

Winters held his pen above the paper and studied the agents before making an inquiry of his own. “What evidence do you have that these funds were in fact deposited into my client’s account and transacted by him?”

Agent Brown tapped his i-phone and opened a video file then held it before Ron and the attorney. “We’ve got CCTV footage of Mister Wythe making a bank transaction on Thursday morning, June 8th at ten o’clock. Here’s the video.”

Ron and Winters studied the grainy video from the bank camera. Ron shook his head in denial.

“That’s not me. I tell you I wasn’t there. Had to be Ray, but why would he put money into my account?”

“You tell us. The teller swears she dealt with Ron Wythe. Why don’t you tell the truth, Mister Wythe? You were working with your brother to launder mob money. Why’d you kill him?”

“Can I see that?” asked Doug as he reached for the agent’s phone and scrutinized the image. “How was the transaction made? Was there any kind of signed form with the deposit? You said it was a cash transaction with marked bills. Didn’t the teller suspect anything?”

Grissom exhaled loudly, irritation in his voice, as he slapped his hand on the table and sneered, “It’s a small town. The bank teller identified her long-time customer as Ron Wythe. There wasn’t any deposit ticket due to the large sum of money. Stop playing around and admit you made that deposit, Wythe. Where did you get the money?”

Doug was losing his patience with the arrogant agents. The video didn’t prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it was actually Ron transacting that business. Although the local teller knows Ron, she wouldn’t have known he had a twin brother. It’s feasible it could have been Ray. There had to be a way to prove it.

“I want a copy of that video recording,” Winters insisted. “I need to examine that further and I’d like to consult with my client.”

“Mister Wythe is under Meadowood’s custody, with a pending homicide case. He stays with us,” Doug stated.

“You’ve got twenty-four hours and then we’re transferring Wythe to the federal facility in Columbus,” Brown insisted. Both agents stood. With one final glance at Ron, and a dirty look tossed toward Doug, they strode out the door.

After the agents had left, Doug turned to Ron and his lawyer. “Are you sure that you were not in the bank any day this past week? Can you prove where you were on Thursday morning at ten o’clock? I’d like to

help you Ron, you know that, but give me something to work with. This looks bad. It certainly gives you a motive for killing Ray too.”

“Oh my God, I can’t believe this is happening to me,” cried Ron. “I’m telling you the truth, Doug. I didn’t make that deposit and I certainly did not kill my brother.”

“Think. Where were you on Thursday? I’m sorry buddy, but it appears you’ve got to stay here a while longer for your own good.”



“Hey girl! I was hoping I’d get to see you today. What’s really going on with Ron and Colleen? I’ve heard nothing but rumors all day,” Fran said as I walked into her dress shop.

“Oh, Aunt Fran, it’s just terrible! Poor Colleen is besides herself. Ron is being held in jail. Doug is investigating the death of Ron’s brother Ray, and I don’t know what to do to help,” I cried. I moved toward my aunt’s out-stretched arms and accepted the comfort she offered.

I gave Betty, Aunt Fran’s sales clerk, a furtive glance then inclined my head toward the rear of the shop where we could talk in private.

“Betty, I’m gonna take a coffee break. I’ll just be in the back,” Fran said as she clasped my arm and led me toward her small kitchenette and employee break room.

When we were both seated at the small table, she raised an eyebrow that silently indicated for me to spill the beans.

Taking a deep breath, I began, “You must have heard by now about Ron having a twin brother who showed up in town a couple of days ago. Ron never mentioned he had any siblings, certainly not a twin. Doug said he didn’t know and Colleen didn’t either. She’s really upset that Ron kept that secret from her only to find out three days before the wedding. Anyway, we met Ray at Oak Meadow when he was flirting with one of the waitresses. You can imagine Colleen’s reaction; oh my

gosh, she thought it was Ron and was ready to call off the whole wedding until she learned differently.”

Fran slowly poured a mug of coffee from a pot sitting on a warming plate. I could always count on my aunt to listen to my woes and offer her advice or jump in and assist me with whatever hair-brained scheme I had cooked up. Now I waited to hear her reaction to the soap opera drama that had become my friend Colleen’s wedding plans.

“Barb Williams told me about him on Wednesday when she stopped in looking for some accessories to wear with her dress. I didn’t know about the flirting business. What reason did Ron give about hiding his brother?” asked Fran.

“I really don’t know what he told Colleen privately, but he explained to Doug and me that his parents divorced when they were kids and each parent took a child. Reminds me of that old movie *Parent Trap*. I didn’t think parents did that in real life; anyway, Ron said he hasn’t seen his brother since they were seven years old. Can you believe that? And they are both insurance agents. Surely they would have met at some insurance conference or something over the years? I kind of got the impression that Ron wasn’t telling us the whole truth.”

“Hmm, that is odd. So then what happened? I thought you and Colleen enjoyed a girlie spa day with her mother on Friday. Did you do that?”

“Yeah, we did, but that was after someone took a shot at Ron and then tried to run his car off the road as he drove home from the airport. Colleen and her parents were scared to death but luckily no one was injured. By Friday we all needed a soothing spa day.”

“My goodness, it’s worse than I thought. Why would anyone try to harm Ron Wythe? What did Doug say about all of that?”

“Well, we were with Ron and Colleen when the shooting occurred and ducked for cover, but we only saw Ron’s damaged car when we picked them up at the truck stop. Doug thinks it was a case of mistaken identity, like maybe Ray was the target and whoever was out to get him

mistook Ron for Ray. It's the only logical reason we could come up with," I said.

"That's frightening. Why am I only just now hearing about this? You could have been killed!"

"Doug and I were okay; it was Ron and Colleen who were in danger. We just happened to be nearby. Everything seemed to be going as planned on Friday; the guys played golf and like I said, we girls got pampered in the spa. It was later that I heard Ray arguing with some big lug and then right before dinner Ron and Ray had words and both stormed out. It seemed like tension was so thick, you could cut it with a knife. Shortly after that Colleen screamed when she found the body in the pool."

"That poor girl. She's going to need a therapist after all of this. Why is Ron in jail? Don't tell me that fool Edgar thinks Ron killed his own brother? That man needs to retire; he's losing his grip," Fran said with a snort.

"I think Ron is being questioned about the money. Makes him look guilty for Ray's death." I crossed my arms and began to pace the narrow room.

"Okay, now you lost me again. What money?"

"Ray deposited a huge amount of money into Ron's business account at the bank, but the teller thought she was dealing with Ron. Colleen and I are trying to prove it was Ray and not Ron at the bank. Doug agrees with us too; he's putting together evidence. I tell you, Aunt Fran, I think Ray was mixed up with the mob in New York...you know, like those gangsters you see on TV. I heard him threatened by this thug who talked about the big boss wanting his money back."

"So what are you doing? I know you must be involved somehow; you can't stay out of the investigation, especially when it concerns Colleen. You gals have been friends since grammar school."

"You won't believe it, but Doug actually asked for my help to research Ray online and learn everything I can about him. I've found some suspicious facts too and pictures of Ray with very questionable

people. Did you know the man even had a second identity? Who does that if you're not mixed up in shady business?"

I looked at my watch and stopped pacing then turned to my aunt. "I've got to get home. I don't know when Doug will be back but I want to make sure I'm at the house. I just really needed a sounding board. Thanks Aunt Fran. I love you so much. If you think of anything that can help Ron and Colleen, call me. Maybe you saw Ray in town or remember something he said or did. You never know when the tiniest comment is important." I kissed her on the cheek and left my aunt to ponder all that she had been told. She was still staring into space as I departed the store.

Chapter Fourteen

Gal Power

I had just closed the lid of the pizza box and tossed out my paper plate when I heard the kitchen door open and Doug straggled inside. The poor man was dead on his feet, but it was the look of utter despair on his face that worried me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as I rushed over to him and threw my arms around his shoulders.

“Aargh, those Feds! They’ve got film of Ron making a bank deposit using dirty money. The teller swore it was Ron but I’m thinking it may have been Ray.”

“That’s crazy. Why can’t you just show that bank teller a photograph of Ray and Ron and ask her which one she spoke to? How about finger prints? Don’t police always use stuff like that to prove somebody’s identity?”

“Do you have any idea how many people enter a bank every day? And now it’s been several days. There’d be so many set of prints, we’d never be able to prove it was or wasn’t Ron.”

“Gee, are you sure? The cops on TV don’t seem to have that kind of problem.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a big difference between TV stories and real life.

I'll find something. I've got to keep trying or Ron Wythe is going to jail for money laundering and possibly the murder of his brother Ray if I can't find the actual suspect." He dropped his hat and Sam Brown belt onto the breakfast bar before collapsing onto a bar stool. For the first time, he didn't bother to lock up his gun in the safe.

"It's okay honey, I know you'll solve it. Why don't you have something to eat? I've got pizza left over; let me heat it up. You'll feel better with something in your stomach." I gently massaged his neck and swiped a lock of hair off his forehead, hoping to offer what comfort I could as my mind continued to gnaw on what he had shared.

"You said the Feds had a video from the bank. Do you have a copy? Can I see it?" I asked. I kept thinking that maybe my eye could pick up something that Doug missed. Two sets of eyes are always better than one. Heaven only knows men don't always see what's right in front of their faces...like when they look for something in the refrigerator and it's behind the milk.

"Hmm? Yeah, I've got a copy on my phone. Guess it would be okay if you have a look."

"Perfect. Pull it up and let me see."

I hurried to warm up a couple pizza slices for Doug while he opened a file on his phone and found the video file forwarded by the FBI.

"It's less than a minute long. Here you go," said Doug as he slid the phone toward me.

I pressed the play button and watched an image of Ron stand before a teller window at Wells Fargo. The video did not record any audio but you could see him speaking with the gal; by the way he gestured with his hands, it appeared he was making an explanation or asking her to do something. Next, he held a briefcase in his right hand while he signed a form with his left. I watched the film show Ron place the attaché on the counter and open the lid. Neatly stacked bundles of cash were visible. It was difficult not to gasp at the sight of so much money. The overhead camera recorded him removing the money and handing it to the bank teller. He slid the bundles under the short grill that separated the teller's

space from the public. As he transferred the cash to the teller, he dropped one banded stack of hundred-dollar bills. It fell to the floor. Ron stooped to pick it up. I stared at the screen.

“Watch this!” I waved to Doug in my excitement, urging him forward to view the video.

“What? Spot something?”

“Let me back this up and pause it. Okay, press play and pay attention to what happens here,” I said as I rewound the video a brief second then started it forward again.

Doug and I peered at the screen. The tape showed Ron dropping the strap of money and bending to retrieve it. “Now look where his hand is,” I exclaimed as I pointed to the screen. “See him grab onto the brass rail under the counter to steady himself? Check out the angle of his hand. His thumb is underneath as he grips the rail. I bet there’s a good print of his thumb. How many people are likely to touch that spot? You’ve got to be able to lift a clear fingerprint from there.”

My excitement bubbled over as I stared at the video and the frozen action. Feeling pretty proud of myself, I watched Doug study the film; rewinding and forwarding it until it satisfied him that my reasoning was correct.

“Gosh! I feel just like Nick and Nora Charles on those old *Thin Man* movies. We make a pretty sharp team. There’s something else that bothers me too as I watch this but I can’t quite put my finger on it. Maybe it will come to me later,” I said.

“Hmm, well Missus Gardner, you may have found an important clue. I’m going down to the bank first thing Monday morning with a fingerprint kit.”

“You know, I saw an interesting documentary on PBS last month all about twins and how some are born identical and other twins are called fraternal, like when you have a boy and a girl twin. Did you know that twins share DNA traits but their fingerprints will always be unique? Pretty neat, huh? If that fingerprint is Ray’s, it will prove that Ron was telling the truth about the money.”

“Yeah it will, but it still doesn’t prove he didn’t kill his brother and it doesn’t give us any explanation why the money was put into Ron’s account.”

“Oh. I was hoping I had solved the case,” I pouted.

“Let’s just say you may have given us the first piece of the puzzle.” Doug stood up and stretched. He yawned widely then linked his arm in mine. “Let’s call it a night.”



Sunday morning and the house seemed painfully silent without the boys gobbling down their usual pancake breakfast while the TV blared cartoons in the background. I stirred scrambled eggs in the frying pan then took out a plate of bacon that I had cooked in the microwave. Dividing the food onto two plates, I waited for Doug to come down for breakfast.

“Meow,” Mittens sniffed the air and jumped onto the stool next to me to beg for a portion of my egg.

I scratched his nose and ran my hand across his sleek back. “Okay pal, I’ll share with you. C’mon,” I said as I separated a forkful of my egg and scraped it into his dish. For good measure, I gave him a small piece of bacon too.

I sipped my coffee and finished my plate of food while I reviewed the facts of the case in my mind. Scribbling some notes on a pad, I knew I had to share the information with Anna and Colleen. We girls had solved cases together in the past and maybe if we put our heads together, we could do it again.

Picking up my cell phone, I scrolled through my favorites in the address book and found Colleen’s number. The phone rang twice when Colleen answered. Her voice sounded anxious and trembled.

“Oh Merry, it’s you.” I heard her disappointment. “I was hoping it would be Ron.”

“He’s still at the jail. Doug told me last night they were keeping him

overnight. What are you doing today?” I asked then hated myself for asking such a stupid question. Today was supposed to be the start of her honeymoon. My dear friend must be heartbroken and here I was reminding her.

Colleen snorted over the phone. “Well, I can tell you what I’m not going to be doing. This thing is a mess. Mom and Dad have return flights today and they don’t know whether to cancel them or go home. I don’t know what’s happening with Ron. I’m so worried and feel so helpless.”

“I’m sorry sweetie. I don’t know what to tell your parents. Could they change the date of their return flight and stay a bit longer until the matter of Ray’s murder is solved? Can’t they check out of Oak Meadow and stay with you? I’m sure you’d rather have your mom close.”

“Yes, we’ve discussed that. I just wish I knew how long Ron was going to be held. It’s frustrating. I canceled so many wedding arrangements and lost so much money in deposits. Blake Garrett generously offered to hold our Oak Meadow deposit and reschedule our ceremony as soon as we know what’s happening. So I guess that’s a positive thing.”

“I was hoping me and Anna could come over in a bit. Would that be okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Let me give her a call and see if she’s free. Be there soon.”

“Okay. See you later.”

Twenty minutes later, Anna and I pulled into Colleen’s driveway. We rapped lightly on her back door then let ourselves in.

“Colleen! We’re here,” I called out to her as we entered.

She walked into the kitchen, wiping her nose and blinking away tears from red eyes.

“Hi. I just got off the phone with Ron. The sheriff allowed him a ten minute phone call. He sounds terrible.”

Anna wrapped Colleen in one of her mama-bear hugs and patted her back. “It’ll work out. You gotta have faith.”

We gathered around her kitchen dinette table. I jumped up to help place cups of tea and coffee on the table before broaching the subject.

Laying a pen and paper on the table, I glanced at the two women. "Okay. I've been thinking of the case and we need to get down to basics and figure things out."

"The case?" Anna questioned in her Texan drawl. "Since when do we have a case?"

"You know...the case of Ray's death and Ron's arrest. Let's review the facts," I insisted. Creating a column, I wrote number one on the top of the paper then turned to Colleen. "Did Ron tell you when Ray first contacted him about being in town?"

Colleen propped her chin in her hand as she considered my question then got up to retrieve a wall calendar hanging in the laundry room.

"Don't laugh. I know it's old school but I like making notes and writing down my appointments to view the entire month as a glance," Colleen explained. She pointed to the beginning of the week on the June page.

"Sugar, if you think this is old school, my record keeping must be ancient," laughed Anna.

Colleen pointed to the Monday date. "Ron told me about Ray after that embarrassing incident at the Oak Meadow café. But somehow, I can't help but feel he knew Ray was in town before that. I didn't see Ron very much on Sunday and what time we were together, he acted strange. Distracted like. It was obvious to me that his attention was centered elsewhere. I had wanted to share with him the shower presents from Saturday night, but he just hurried off uninterested."

"Hmm, that doesn't sound like Ron. So he may have been contacted by Ray on Sunday. And he never told you about his family or his brother before then?" I asked.

"No never. The first I learned he had a brother at all, let alone a twin, was Monday afternoon."

"I've been poking around the internet. Let me tell you gals what I found about Ray. First of all, he uses different names. Doug can't share

his police file with me, but I've heard enough and read enough stuff on the internet to know that Raymond Wythe also went by the name of Robert Walker. That's how he registered at the hotel."

I scribbled Robert Walker under number two and put a question mark next to the name.

"Anna, remember when you accused me of going to Timbuktu for that bottle of water at the spa? Well, I overheard Ray arguing with a big gangster-looking dude at the pool. He threatened Ray, but Ray pretended he was really Ron and tried to act like he didn't know him. Let me tell you, that thug wasn't buying that lie. He told him he'd be back. Maybe he did come back and that's who hit Ray over the head and dumped him in the pool! Oh yeah, almost forgot, I heard Doug discuss the autopsy report with Doctor Stone over the phone. Ray died from blunt force trauma, not drowning."

"Holy cow," drawled Anna.

Colleen's face blanched but she swallowed and tried to gather her reserves. "Do you think Ray was really the target of this mob guy or did he mean to kill Ron?"

"Oh honey, after what I've learned about Ray's business dealings, I'm sure Ray was the target. Ron's safe."

"Maybe it was that gangster who took a shot at Ron and also tried to run us off the road, especially if he thought it was Ray. Could that be possible?" asked Colleen as she gripped her napkin tightly, wringing the life out of the thin linen.

Anna frowned then glanced between Colleen and me. "Okay, so what about this deal with the money? What's that all about?"

"I'm not sure I understand about that but Doug told me there are two FBI agents who questioned Ron about money that belongs to a mob boss in New York." Anna and Colleen gasped at the idea of Ron being charged by the FBI. It didn't get more serious than that.

"I have to admit, sounds like Ron is involved with the Soprano family." I continued. "Ron, more likely Ray, made a deposit of over five

hundred thousand dollars at the bank. The teller thought she was dealing with Ron though and put the money in his business account. Doesn't make any sense to me why he'd do that, unless... where would you hide money in plain sight where the mob can't get their hands on it? The bank, of course. And if the money was dirty, like the agents described, then when you withdrew the money again, it would be clean...I mean, it wouldn't be the same exact bills, would it? The Feds think Ron was working with his brother and that he made the deposit. Doug showed me the video taken by the bank cameras. You can't tell by looking whether it was Ron or Ray, but then I spotted where he touched a brass rail and left a fingerprint. Doug is going to have forensics try to lift that fingerprint and that should prove who really made that deposit. I'm sure it was Ray."

"Holy cow, this is getting more complicated every day," Anna drawled. "Who was the teller at the bank?"

"I'm not sure. Don't tell anyone, but when I watched the video on Doug's phone last night, I sent a copy over to my cell. Here, take a look at this."

"Aren't you the sneaky one," said Anna with a grin.

Opening the email file, I pressed play on the short video as the three of us gathered around the image.

"Stop or pause that thing. Can you enlarge it a bit?" Anna asked.

I did as she asked then we studied the figures in the frame.

"Hmm, that looks like my neighbor's daughter, Ellie. Pretty sure she told me Ellie works for Wells Fargo. I bet she's home today since it's a Sunday and all. Let's go talk to her," Anna suggested.

"Great idea. Let's show her a picture of both Ray and Ron, see if she can tell us which one came to her window," I said.

Colleen's mouth curled into a smile; the first one I'd seen since all this started. "I've got a nice closeup of Ron on my phone. It was our engagement picture." She sniffled and blinked away a tear.

"Okay, let's go. It's been gnawing at me why a bank teller would do

business with someone, especially that amount of money, without proper identification or paperwork. Maybe Ellie can explain,” I said as I grabbed my purse and headed to the door.

We piled into Anna’s jeep and drove the two blocks back to her home, parked in the driveway, then walked next door to her neighbor. We knocked on the screen door.

“Howdy Mary Jane! Is Ellie home?” greeted Anna as her neighbor swung the door open.

“Well, yes, she is. Come on in. What a surprise to see you ladies today,” welcomed Mary Jane politely, while she glanced between the three of us. Her proper manners overrode her curiosity, although her expression showed she was dying to know what was going on.

Ellie entered the parlor and timidly greeted us. She wore a frown and her eyes darted suspiciously between all of us.

I stepped forward and smiled, hoping to calm her fears and nerves. “Hello Ellie. I understand you work at Wells Fargo as a teller. Is that right?”

Ellie nodded her head up and down in the positive.

“Well, this past Thursday you may have had a unique transaction at your window. That’s what we need to talk to you about. Don’t worry, we aren’t with the police or anything and you’re not in trouble. It’s just that we have a photograph we’d like to show you and maybe you can answer a question or two? It’s really important or we wouldn’t bother you on your day off.”

“Okay. What kind of photograph?”

Colleen pulled out her phone and brought up the closeup picture of Ron then held it for Ellie to see. “This is my fiancé Ron Wythe. It’s our engagement picture. We were supposed to be married yesterday.” Tears glistened in Colleen’s eyes.

I watched Ellie as she studied the picture and caught the look of compassion she gave Colleen. Next, I pulled open a photo that I had downloaded of Ray standing next to a flashy car; it was a good closeup shot. I moved closer to Ellie and showed her the picture.

“This is Ray Wythe, Ron’s twin brother. Does he look familiar to you?” I asked.

Ellie stared at both pictures; her eyes shifted back and forth between the two.

“My goodness. They really are identical, aren’t they?”

“Looking at these photos, can you tell which man you dealt with at the bank? Also, did the man give you a deposit slip or some kind of identification? I’m wondering how you would know what account to use for the deposit.”

Ellie swallowed the lump in her throat. “Um, well, uh...he told me he needed to make a deposit into the insurance agency account and that his secretary was out of the office that day. She usually took care of banking business. I mean, he said he was Ron Wythe and I recognized him as Mister Wythe. I’ve seen him around town all the time although I don’t know him personally and haven’t transacted any insurance business with him. I know I’m not supposed to take a deposit without proper paperwork but he said he worried about having that much cash unprotected and he did sign the bank forms. Is there a problem? Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no. We’re just trying to learn if it was Ron or his brother Ray that was in the bank that day,” Colleen hurried to assure her.

“Show her the video,” Anna suggested. “Maybe she can compare it with the photos and tell more which guy it was.”

I played the video to Ellie. She watched it then glanced back and forth between the still pictures. “I’m sorry, I can’t tell. Both men look like the one in the film.”

Colleen had watched the video again as it played for Ellie. She grabbed my hand and pointed to the image showing Ray/Ron signing the documentation.

“Look! He’s signing with his left hand.”

I stared at the screen. That nagging bug in the back of my mind clicked. Of course...that’s what was wrong. Ron is right-handed but Ray was left-handed. It wasn’t Ron who signed that bank form. Would that

Nancy M. Wade

be enough proof to clear Ron and release him in time before the federal agents arrested him? I had to get to the sheriff's office with our latest clue.

Chapter Fifteen

Brotherly Love – Or Not

Doug sipped his coffee as he read the latest reports from forensics. His eyes widened as he realized the import of the ballistics findings. As he studied the report, Edgar Simmons entered the office.

“Thought you would find this interesting,” the sheriff stated. He handed his chief deputy a typed message from the Ohio Bureau of Investigations.

Doug skimmed the brief missive. He paused in his reading then picked up the ballistics report. Holding both documents in hand, he came to the same conclusion as the sheriff.

“Columbus PD discovered an abandoned Cadillac Escalade in the parking garage of Port Columbus Airport. The damage on the vehicle matches the OBI analysis on the SUV that ran Ron Wythe off the road. According to this message, the car was registered to Robert Walker of New York and we know that was a name used by Ray Wythe.”

“No doubt about it. That was the SUV involved in the vehicular accident. Read that last line about the hidden weapon retrieved from the Escalade. It matches our ballistics report and the serial numbers on the gun links to a background report filed on its owner, Robert Walker,” the sheriff said.

“I didn’t see that one coming,” Doug said. He dragged his fingers through his hair as he realized the meaning of the evidence. “Looks like Ray Wythe may have tried to kill his own brother by taking a shot at him at Oak Meadow Inn, and failing that, tried to run him off the road. Why would he do that? Now the problem is, did Ron figure out it was Ray and that’s why he killed him? Hate to say it, but this creates a stronger motive for Ron to have murdered Ray...revenge or self-defense. Hmm, we better talk to Ron.”

The sheriff glanced at the wall clock. “We better do it fast. Those Feds will be back here in an hour and we’ll have to turn Wythe over to them unless we can prove he had nothing to do with that money deal.”

Both men started down the hall toward the holding cells when familiar voices in the front halted them. Doug turned to find his wife and Colleen Callahan storming into the station.

“We can prove Ron wasn’t in that bank last Thursday,” insisted Colleen as she rushed forward. Her face flushed as she spoke with determination.

Merry grabbed Doug’s arm and pointed to the paused video on her phone. The scene showed Ron/Ray signing a document in front of the bank teller.

“Look at how he is signing his name...with his left hand. Ron Wythe is right-handed but his brother Ray was left-handed. I saw Ray sign a food check at Oak Meadow and he used his left hand. That’s what kept bothering me when I saw this video. Colleen pointed out the difference. Once you get that fingerprint and this evidence, it’s got to be enough to prove that Ron didn’t make that deposit. He didn’t possess that brief case of money,” I said, anxiously stating my case.

“She’s right, Sheriff.” Doug said as he looked at the video then raised an eyebrow at me. I realized it had occurred to him that the image had somehow found its way onto my phone.

I rolled my eyes and gave him an innocent smile as if to say, *I don’t know how that got there*. Knowing Doug had caught me red-handed

with police evidence on my personal cell phone, I hoped the ends justified the means.

“I still want to question him about the shooting and what he knows,” Simmons stated as he headed toward the cells. “Call Harry Moore at home; he’s the manager of that Wells Fargo branch. Tell him to open up to allow our fingerprint guy into the bank today. You tell him I said he owes me a favor and this is an emergency. Can’t wait until Monday banking hours.”

“Got it. I’ll call him right away.” Doug faced Colleen and I, “Wait in my office. I’m trying to help Ron. I really am, but we’ve got some disturbing evidence that we’ve got to resolve.”

Colleen shot me a questioning look, but all I could do was shrug as we reluctantly turned and entered Doug’s cramped office space. Colleen and I took the two chairs facing the desk. Their hard seats and straight backs were not meant for comfort. After a few seconds, I couldn’t curb my curiosity any longer and jumped up to poke among the papers strewn on the desktop.

I gave up trying to read upside down and brazenly moved around the other side to study the reports from the forensic lab and the Ohio Bureau of Investigations.

“Holy cow! No wonder Doug and Edgar need to speak to Ron. This says the car that hit Ron was owned by his brother and probably the gun too that took a shot at us at the inn. Ray may have tried to kill Ron or maybe he only meant to warn him off, either way, it sure looks strange. Do you think Ron suspected Ray?”

Colleen’s face blanched as I spoke. She shook her head no. I skimmed a few other reports, but not seeing any other startling facts, I returned to my seat and pretended to be patiently waiting for Doug to return.



Special Agents Brown and Grissom strode into the Meadowood Sheriff's office. Deputy Tony Dalton jumped up from his desk and followed the two men like a frightened puppy as they demanded to see the sheriff.

Colleen and I exchanged worried looks as we heard the commotion outside Doug's door. Gingerly walking toward the door, I pressed my ear against it to listen then carefully twisted the doorknob, cracking it open an inch. Footsteps sounded in the hallway and stopped outside the entrance to Edgar's office.

"Time's up, Sheriff. We're taking Wythe with us."

"I don't think so, fellas. We've got additional evidence that proves Ron Wythe did not make that bank deposit. You can't link him to your laundered money," Edgar Simmons stated. He stood with his arms crossed and his feet apart as if he were prepared to guard the entrance to his cells.

"What evidence? Show us and then we'll decide if Wythe comes with us or not," Grissom voiced in an authoritative tone that meant to intimidate. Simmons was having none of it.

"All right, hot shot, step into my office where we can discuss this more fully."

Grissom looked at Brown, who nodded, and the two followed the sheriff into his private office. They took the seats in front of Edgar's desk and waited. Grissom tapped his foot impatiently while Brown glanced around the room, checking out the certificates and commendations hanging on the walls.

Edgar tapped the keys on his computer and brought up the surveillance video from the bank. He fast-forwarded the image then paused the frame. Swiveling the monitor so it faced the agents, he drew their attention to the screen.

"Okay. This is your bank video. We agree the person on camera is one of the Wythe brothers. The question is, which one? Now, notice his actions when he is transferring the currency. He drops one. See where

his hand is holding onto that brass rail? We plan on getting our forensic team to lift those fingerprints from that spot.”

“What’s kept you?” asked Brown.

“Um, well the bank has been closed over the weekend so we haven’t been able to get back inside,” Edgar admitted.

Grissom snorted. He didn’t have a high opinion of the small-town sheriff and his two-bit law enforcement office.

Simmons’ face flushed and he gritted his teeth, but he checked his own level of annoyance with the two federal agents and continued his argument. He advanced the film image again to stop at the frame with Wythe signing the documents. Again, he pointed to the image.

“Ron Wythe is right-handed and his brother Ray was left-handed. The gentleman signing the bank forms is clearly using his left hand. We believe this image plus fingerprint evidence will confirm that Ray Wythe, not his brother, made the transaction.

Grissom and Brown exchanged a silent communication as Brown leaned forward and studied the image on the screen.

“That doesn’t prove anything. Some people are ambidextrous,” Brown stated.

“Get that bank manager on the phone and tell him we’ll be there in fifteen minutes. He needs to open up and let our team into the bank. We can get that fingerprint and rush it to the lab for analysis. Let’s get to the bottom of this,” Grissom growled.

“Excellent. It’s time we joined forces and worked together on this case,” Simmons said. He smiled at the men and nodded his approval.

Chapter Sixteen

Undercover

“**H**ow long has it been?” I asked Colleen.

She checked her watch with the clock on the wall. “Three hours.”

“Oh my gosh! My foot has gone to sleep,” I said as I wiggled my foot and tried standing on it. “I’ve had enough waiting; I’m gonna find Doug.”

“I can’t stand this any longer. Do you think those FBI agents are still here? I need to see Ron.”

“C’mon. Let’s get out of here, if for no other reason than to use the restroom.” I opened the door and we stepped into the hall. I could hear voices coming from Edgar’s closed office.

Walking toward the front of the police station, we dashed into the ladies’ room to freshen up and gather our courage. A few minutes later, we peeked out the door and moved down the hall toward the holding cells. Colleen was adamant about seeing Ron and I couldn’t deny her.

Our footsteps echoed on the hard floors as we approached the locked cell. Ron jerked his head up at the sound and rushed to the cell door.

Colleen sobbed at the sight of him. She thrust her hands through

the bars to grasp Ron's and they stood like that, holding hands, whispering words of comfort to each other. I stood to the side and gave them what privacy I could.

Heavier footsteps and voices drew my attention as I heard Doug and Edgar coming toward us. I saw the surprise flash across my husband's face when he spotted Colleen and me standing next to Ron's cell.

"What are you doing here?" Doug asked.

"We got tired waiting in your office and Colleen wanted to speak with Ron," I said.

"Sorry. I forgot you were in there. We've been caught up with the Feds and things are moving in a new direction."

"Like what?" I asked as I moved next to him and made space for Edgar to approach the cell door.

Colleen and Ron broke apart as Edgar turned a key in the door and swung it wide. Tears of relief filled Colleen's eyes and Ron let out a held breath.

"You're being released on condition, Wythe," stated Edgar. "I'll explain in my office. Follow me."

I shot a questioning look to Doug, but he only shook his head and nodded toward the two men from the FBI still waiting. My eyebrows shot up as my mind raced, wondering what was coming next.

Edgar sat behind his desk while the rest of us crowded into his tight room. Colleen and Ron occupied the chairs in front of the desk. I tried to be invisible by standing in the corner next to Doug where I could study the faces of the federal agents across the room.

"What's going on, Sheriff?" asked Ron. Purple crescents under his eyes revealed his lack of sleep. Dark whiskers shadowed his tense jawline; he wore the same clothes from two days ago at the start of his incarceration. Ron crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair, waiting for an explanation.

Edgar started with a glance at his deputy, "I understand your frustration, Ron—"

"Do you?" Ron interrupted in a taut voice.

“Just hear us out,” Doug told his friend. He nodded to Edgar to continue.

“We had to follow the evidence before we could confirm that it was your brother Ray and not you involved with the stolen money. Now we have scientific facts produced by the FBI, like fingerprints and video tape, that will stand up in court, if need be, proving Ray made the bank deposit at Wells Fargo. We know you had nothing to do with that, but I have to tell you, it doesn’t clear you from suspicion of your brother’s murder.”

Colleen had been listening closely, but at the word murder, the color drained out of her face. She clung to Ron’s hand as they waited to hear the sheriff’s next words.

My heart went out to her as I witnessed the play of emotions and raw terror in my friend’s eyes. Surely Doug and Edgar didn’t really believe Ron killed his brother! I waited to learn the conditions the sheriff mentioned; my tension rose as one of the federal agents moved forward.

“We need to link that money back to the Sorrento crime family. The agency wants you to contact Sorrento,” Grissom stated. His eyes drilled into Ron.

“Just how am I supposed to do that? I don’t know any Sorrento. I keep telling you guys, you’re mixing me up with my brother.”

“Yeah, yeah. Leave it to us. We’ve got a C.I., confidential informant, inside the Sorrento organization. He’ll drop a hint about the money and you. You’ll be contacted,” Brown said.

“It sounds dangerous. Why does Ron have to meet these people? Can’t he just give the money back?” asked Colleen. Her eyes darted back and forth between the agents and Ron.

“Don’t worry. We’ll have agents nearby. Mister Wythe will be under surveillance the entire time,” Brown tried to reassure Colleen and Ron.

“Do I have a choice?” Ron asked.

“No. Not really. Do you want to clear your name and help your government? This is the only way.” Grissom was adamant in his reply.

“When does all this begin?” Ron inquired.

“As soon as we can set it up. We’ll be in touch,” Brown said. The agents exited the office and strode out of the station.

Colleen and Ron stood. I tried to reassure my friend with a hug.

“You’re free to go home. Needless to say... don’t leave town. Once we get the feds out of our hair, we can sort out what happened to Ray. Get some sleep. Relax. I’ll be over tomorrow to discuss some things with you,” Doug said with a pat on Ron’s shoulder and a quick handshake.

I stood by Doug’s side as we watched our exhausted friends shuffle toward the exit. Ron paused as he opened the door and turned his face to bask in the afternoon sunshine. He’ll never take his freedom for granted again.

“I feel so sorry for them after what they’ve gone through. We’ve got to do something more to help our friends. You know Ron wasn’t responsible for Ray’s death. Don’t you have any leads?” I asked in a quavering voice.

“I’m working on it. I don’t want to see Ron charged with murder any more than you do. Maybe we’ll get lucky with this mob connection. I still think Ray was killed because of dirty business dealings.”

I sighed in frustration. “I’m leaving. Will you be home for dinner?”

“Probably in another hour. Don’t cook. Let’s eat out some place quiet. I don’t want to deal with noisy crowds tonight,” Doug said. He pressed a kiss on my cheek as I gathered up my purse and left.



The tea kettle whistled and steam flowed from its spout. I picked up the heavy vessel and poured the hot water into a porcelain teapot filled with a flavorful blend of Earl Gray tea leaves and citrusy spice. Leaving the tea to steep a few minutes to bring out the rich aroma, I hurried to plate sandwiches and dessert offerings from today’s menu. Anna and I moved about the kitchen in a choreographed ballet as we prepared our food and beverages for waiting customers.

“Busy day! I think I heard a tour bus drive down Park and stop. I bet half our customers came off that bus,” I said as I pushed a lock of hair behind my ears.

“Now that school is out for the summer, we seem to have a lot more folks visiting our town. Did ya’ll hear from Colleen this morning?” asked Anna in her Texan drawl.

“Nope. Haven’t spoken to her since she and Ron left the jail yesterday. I hope they’re both getting some rest and time together.”

“What do Doug and Edgar intend to do about Ray’s murder?”

“Honestly, right now I think it’s a waiting game. The Feds told Ron to wait to be contacted by a guy from this Sorrento family then they plan some kind of sting operation. I don’t know. What if that thug from the mob is the one who killed Ray? Seems like Ron is being put into danger just to help nab these gangsters on the dirty money. I don’t blame Colleen for being worried.”

“We’ve got to do something,” Anna stated as she picked up a tray of food and carried it into the dining room.

“I agree. Feel like taking a ride after we close the shop today? I think we should have another look around Oak Meadow and talk to some folks.”

“What are you hoping to find?” Anna asked as we assembled a tiered tray of sweet treats in the kitchen.

“I don’t know, but I can’t help feeling that someone saw something before Ray ended up in that pool. Maybe we can speak to the waitress, Jenny. She spent time with Ray. She might know more than she let on.”

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

Chapter Seventeen

Mystery Woman

Guests filled the outdoor patio, leaving only one empty table as we approached the Oak Meadow Inn's alfresco dining area. Anna and I claimed the available table and waited for a server to acknowledge us. A young fella, wearing a black apron over a crisp white shirt and chino pants, smiled as he walked toward us with a friendly nod.

"What can I get you ladies?" he asked with order pad in hand.

"I'd love a strawberry daiquiri," I ordered.

Anna stared at me then with a subtle shrug, requested the same. After the waiter left, she whispered to me in a shocked voice. "Do you think it's wise for us to be drinking a cocktail?"

"Sure, we'll look more at ease and less threatening. Just sip it. Why'd you order one if you didn't approve of the alcohol?"

"Because you did."

I grinned at her and pretended to relax in my chair as I checked out our surroundings. My eyes scanned the staff bustling about and nodded to Anna as I spotted Jenny working.

"There she is."

"Uh-huh. Now what?" asked Anna. She smiled as the waiter set our drinks in front of us.

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“Anything else, ladies?”

“Would you mind asking Jenny to stop over? We just wanted to say hello,” I told him in a sweet voice.

“Uh, yeah, okay. I’ll see if she’s free.”

“Thank you!”

Anna and I sipped our drinks and openly people watched as we waited on Jenny to join us. Within my peripheral vision, I caught our waiter cornering Jenny and pointing to our table. Even from a distance, I could discern the surprise on her face. She shrugged her shoulders and paused before ambling toward our table.

“Hello Jenny. Do you remember me? I was with Colleen Callahan last week; you know, the bride who mistook the guy who flirted with you for her fiancé. Do you have a minute? I just wanted to ask you a quick question.”

Jenny glanced between me and Anna then spoke hesitantly, “Yeah. I remember you. What kind of question?”

“You told my friend that you pegged Ray as a player because you saw him with another woman earlier, before he spoke to you. I’m interested in learning more about that woman. Is she registered at the hotel? Do you know if she’s still here? What’s her name?” I asked. I tried to keep my voice low and conversational so as not to draw attention to us by other diners, but I couldn’t help feeling anxious.

Jenny looked around her before whispering, “I saw her around a couple times, slim woman with long dark hair, dressed kind of common. Know what I mean? Think she was staying here but I don’t know for sure. I only heard that guy say her first name. He called her Lola. They were really into each other, ya know? I saw her slap him, like she was mad, but then he pulled her onto his lap into a deep kiss and embrace that ended the argument. He left the inn and she went inside. That’s all I know. Look, I’m gonna get into trouble if I don’t get back to work.”

I pressed a ten-dollar bill into her hand. “Thanks for your time Jenny. If you think of anything, would you call me? Here’s my business card. You can reach me at the A&M Tea Shop in Meadowood.”

She took the card from me and pocketed it and the money.

“Yeah, okay.”

Anna and I watched Jenny hurry off. Leaning forward, I held my glass and swirled the frosty mixture, considering her story, before taking a healthy gulp. “What do you think?”

“Guess we need to find this mystery woman, Lola, or whoever she is. Do you think she knew Ray from New York?”

“I dunno, maybe. Would be interesting to find out.”



Doug rapped lightly on the door as he waited on the top step. Hearing footsteps approach, he stepped down when the door swung open.

“Hey Ron. We need to talk,” Doug said as he entered the townhouse.

“I’ve been waiting on you. Figured you’d be over as soon as those agents left. They did leave, didn’t they?”

“Yeah. They’re gone for the time being. Grissom said they’d be back to coordinate a sting operation as soon as those mob guys make a move.”

Ron led Doug into the kitchen and poured a mug of coffee for Doug and freshened his own. Both men sat at the counter. Doug glanced around, noting the sink full of dirty dishes and the take-out food packages filling the trash can.

“Where’s Colleen?” he asked as he sipped the hot brew.

“She left a little bit ago to return to her house. Her parents were worried and she needed to calm them. This whole mess hasn’t been easy on her but she’s been a trooper standing by me.”

Doug nodded and studied his friend. “I’m going to tell you some facts we’ve learned about Ray and I want you to tell me if you already knew them. The truth.”

Ron met Doug’s eyes, unblinking, holding his stare and not looking away. “What is it?”

“Ray drove a black Cadillac Escalade registered under his alias Robert Walker. According to the Ohio Bureau of Investigations, his car ran you off the road and tried to make you crash. I don’t know whether anyone other than Ray was behind the wheel.”

Ron sucked in his breath as he digested the information. “What else? Don’t hold anything back. I can tell there’s more.”

“The O.B.I. found a gun hidden in the car. It belonged to Ray and ballistics proved it was used to shoot at us in the parking lot. Your brother tried to kill you. Did you suspect him and confront him the day he died?”

Ron shook his head then in a steady voice, he answered Doug’s inquiry. “I wondered. Part of me didn’t want to believe that my own brother, my twin for God’s sake, would want me dead. It was something he said while we were out on the golf course, that made me put two and two together. I confronted him on the way back into the inn. He laughed and denied it, of course. We argued. I couldn’t imagine that after all these years he held it against me for living with mom while he struggled living with our father. I promise; I didn’t know my dad was a drunk or lived in poverty. My mother never talked about them; it was as if Ray didn’t exist.”

“What happened next? Where did you run off to while we were in the Buckeye room?”

Ron reached for his coffee mug. His hand shook as he continued his story. “Ray turned on me. His eyes blazed hatred. Doug, I have to tell you that in that moment I actually feared for my life, but I didn’t kill my brother. I swear. I left him by the pool and went outside to calm down and consider all the things Ray told me. There’s more. I demanded he explain why the insurance commissioner contacted me about his business dealings. I asked him what he was into but he told me to keep my nose out of his life.”

“Tell me about the insurance commissioner. Was that the important letter you were waiting on? Barb told me she stopped at the office on Saturday just to check the mail.”

“Yeah, it was. About a month ago, I started seeing odd claims posted against one of my accounts. I knew I had not filed those claims and when I looked into them, they were filed on properties in New York.”

“Did you know Ray operated an insurance business in New York?” Doug asked. He studied Ron’s reaction.

“No. That is...not at first. When I researched the property claims that were hitting on my accounts, I found the Wythe name. It only took a few minutes to pull up the NAIC and find his name on the national listing.”

“Okay. Then what? Do you believe the claims were deliberately posted on your agency or could it have simply been a computer error with both agencies having the Wythe name?”

“Honestly, Doug, I don’t see how it could be an error. Every agency has a state code and identifying number. Even with Wythe being the name on each office, there would be the different codes since we’re in different states. Seems odd how a mistake could happen assigning claims records on separate agencies. I think Ray tried to hide the transactions from the commissioner. From what I found in my research, Ray was being accused of fraud on a couple of high dollar claims.”

“Did you know Ray was in town before Monday when we saw him at the lodge?”

Ron paced the kitchen floor, scrubbed his freshly shaved jaw with the back of his hand before he turned to face Doug.

“Yeah. I got a text message from him on Sunday. Surprised the hell out of me. I met him at a bar in Pottstown.”

“Was he with anyone? Must have felt weird seeing your brother after so many years,” Doug said as he studied his friend’s face.

“It was weird. I guess he was alone. I mean, when I first walked in I noticed a woman sitting at the bar next to him but she got up and left. Could have just been a bar fly if you know what I mean. Good-looking gal in a rough sort of way,” Ron said as he held his coffee cup between his hands and tried to focus his memory.

Doug got up and poured out the remaining liquid from his cup into the sink. He turned and faced Ron.

“This is important. Why did Ray suddenly show up in Meadowood? It had nothing to do with the wedding, did it?”

Ron shook his head and raised worried eyes to Doug. “He said he was in trouble and needed a place to hide. Ray told me some bad people were after him. I didn’t know what to do. Just because I hadn’t seen him in years didn’t make him any less my brother. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I understand. What I’m trying to find out is how much help you were willing to give him. Did you confront him about the insurance claims and the commissioner’s report? Are you sure you didn’t know what he was planning when he deposited that money into the bank? Swear to God, Ron; you’ve got to tell me the truth.”

“I swear, Doug. I did not know about the money or the mob connections. It was the insurance fraudulent claims that appeared on my accounts made me suspect Ray was in trouble with the commission. That’s all. I’d never go along with anything illegal. For Pete’s sake, I thought you knew me better than that!”

“I’d like to think so too, but I had to ask.”

“After our golf outing, I confronted him about the bogus records. I needed to be sure the source of those claims on my accounts before I accused him of fraud. Ray wrote policies covering expensive commercial properties that on the surface appeared legitimate, but on closer inspection did not appraise for the high values. The ink was barely dry on those policies when the properties suddenly went up in flames and claims filed for total loss. The New York Fire Marshal began arson investigations and although I don’t think Ray actually set the fires, he was part of the fraud scheme.”

“That’s what you argued about on Friday night?”

“Yes. I told him the NAIC commissioner already suspected him and that his license would be revoked at the minimum plus he could be in trouble with the police. He laughed and told me the police were the least of his worries.”

“You should have come clean and told all this to Sheriff Simmons and me from the beginning. You’ve got yourself in an awful mess. Only way out is to cooperate with the Feds to help trap these guys. Just do what they want and we can clear your name at least of any fraud tied to Ray.”

“Okay, Doug. I promise. I just want all this behind me so Colleen and I can get married.”

Chapter Eighteen

Cat and Mouse

Doug and Ron shifted through the file folder full of papers, reports, and photographs spread across the conference room table in the Meadowood sheriff's office. The array of documents portrayed a checkered history of Ray's life. Doug read through one report generated from the insurance commissioner's office that questioned several cases of insurance fraud and suspicious claims.

"Looks like Ray had used a series of aliases over the years but mostly the name Robert Walker."

"That's what I saw too when I started cross-checking the claims filed on my office accounts. It took me several weeks before I determined that someone had hacked my accounts and infiltrated protected identities," Ron said as he laid a report down.

"Well, I appreciate you taking the time to help decipher this insurance stuff for me. The more our office can piece together about Ray's life, the clearer the picture will be of who might have had a motive to kill him."

"It's like looking at a stranger, not my own brother," admitted Ron.

"Appears several properties tied to Ray either by ownership deed or insurance policies were connected to a string of fires labeled as arson.

They all had hefty insurance payouts. No doubt, your insurance commissioner flagged them.”

“I’ve been able to isolate my infected accounts and have changed all our computer passwords to protect my office,” Ron said.

“Good. That’s smart. From what the FBI has shared and these files, I hate to say it, but your brother was definitely involved with the mob in New York. His life is a web of suspicious money transfers, encrypted computer messages, and a digital footprint on the dark web that even our computer techies couldn’t break. He was really in over his head. Scary stuff.”

Tony Dalton rapped on the doorframe of the conference room. “You’ve got a call Doug. That FBI dude.”

Doug glanced at Ron. “Okay. Be right there.”

He walked swiftly to his office and picked up the blinking line. “Gardner.” He held the receiver to his ear and listened carefully.

“Right. Got it. Yeah, Wythe is here right now. I’ll fill him in. You better meet him here and not the resort. Anybody watching would be tipped off if they spotted you. You, uh, federal agents stand out like a sore thumb in a small town like this.” Doug couldn’t keep the amusement out of his voice as he spoke to Agent Brown.

He hung up the line and returned to his waiting friend. Ron’s normally carefree expression was gone, replaced by doubt and worry that narrowed his eyes and made his heart race.

“It’s tonight,” Doug stated as he entered the room. “Meet here at seven-thirty and the Feds will go over the details and hook you up with a wire. We’ll be listening to everything you say.”

Ron gulped then nodded. “Okay. Let’s get this over with.”



As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting an ominous hue over the Oak Meadow Inn, Ron Wythe, a lump in his throat, awaited the arrival of Vincent Sorrento. Ron adjusted the wire concealed beneath his cloth-

ing, its presence a constant reminder of the high-stakes operation at hand. The hushed whispers of the wind through the surrounding bushes seemed to echo the tension building around the dark gazebo where the covert meeting was set to take place.

Vincent emerged from the shadows, a large silhouette against the fading light, his presence ominous. Ron took a deep breath, attempting to steady his nerves as he prepared to face the enforcer of the notorious New York crime family. They exchanged nods in an unspoken acknowledgment as they warily circled each other.

Ron cleared his throat, beads of sweat formed on his forehead despite the cool dusk. "I know all about the laundered money, the insurance fraud, the arsons. My brother, Ray, hid that money; I know where it is. If the mob wants it back, now they're gonna have to deal with me."

Vincent's gravelly voice sliced through the evening air. "Is that right? Do you know who you're talking with? You're playing a dangerous game, my friend. You don't want to wind up like your brother."

Doug pressed the earpiece closer to his ear as he listened to the conversation playing out in the shadows below. He crouched behind the sheer window curtains of the second story balcony suite alongside the two federal agents. The gazebo sat below them and a few yards away. With telescopic lens, they silently watched the action and recorded the conversation between Ron and Vincent Sorrento. The audio came through loud enough but scratchy in places where the wire rubbed against Ron's clothing.

Ron swallowed, and with a surge of false bravado, faced the tough guy. "I want to clear the Wythe name. You want that money and I want my life back. We can make a deal." Ron held his breath as he waited on a response.

Vincent's face remained inscrutable, but Ron could sense the weight of consideration in his silence. Ron tried not to glance around at the surrounding bushes with the concealed law enforcement agents, ready to intervene if the situation spiraled out of control.

Vincent's eyes narrowed and his brow wrinkled. "What kind of deal?"

Ron pressed on, his voice earnest. He shrugged his shoulders to shift the concealed wire beneath his clothes.

"I'm working with the FBI, Vincent. We've got enough evidence to put an end to this. I'm offering you a way out, a chance at witness protection. Help us bring down the boss, and you'll be safe. Think of yourself, man."

Vincent's expression darkened, and a low, menacing chuckle escaped his lips. "Witness protection, huh? You think I'd betray the family for a chance to hide? You're dreaming, Ron."

Upstairs, Doug listened and worried for his friend's safety as he tried to project his thoughts. *Don't push him too hard. Stick to the script; don't show all your cards.*

Ron, acutely aware of the risks, pressed on. "Vincent, it's a chance to start fresh, away from this life. You know Mario Sorrento won't hesitate to tie up loose ends. I'm trying to save you from that fate."

Vincent took a step closer, his tone turned menacing. "You're playing with fire, Wythe. The mob doesn't forgive, and it certainly doesn't forget. You better find that money before things get ugly."

Ron's mind raced as he weighed his words. "Vincent, you've seen the FBI's reach. They can protect you, but you have to help them. Give up evidence on the boss and make a deal. If you don't, you'll go down with the rest... it's just a matter of time."

A sinister smile played on Vincent's lips. "You're more naive than I thought, Ron. But I'll play your game—for now. You get that money and I'll consider my options but only if I get my cut from that \$500K."

As Vincent retreated into the shadows, leaving Ron standing alone in the fading light, the entire Oak Meadow Inn released its collected held breath.

Doug disconnected his earpiece and raced downstairs to join his friend. Let the Feds analyze what they'd just heard and draw their conclusions.

Chapter Nineteen

Reunion

“**Y**ou did fine. I worried what that big guy’s reaction would be when you brought up the FBI, but you played it just right. He’s gonna think over your words. Maybe we’ll get lucky,” Doug told Ron as the four of us huddled together in the living room at Ron’s apartment.

Colleen held Ron’s hand and he squeezed it affectionately as he tried to reassure her. They sat close on the sofa across from us in the two club chairs.

Sitting next to my husband, I watched the interplay between my friends. The strain of the past days weighed heavily on them. Colleen’s porcelain skin showed dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep and wrinkles furrowed Ron’s forehead. My heart went out to them.

“What happens next?” I asked.

“Well, I guess, now we wait. Ron is still a person of interest in his brother’s murder until we can find new evidence that points to someone else.” Doug dragged his fingers through his hair and crossed his right leg over his left knee. He leaned back in his chair and scrutinized his friend.

“Don’t you think Vincent could have killed Ray? Merry did say she heard him threaten Ray earlier in the afternoon,” Ron pointed out.

“He’s a definite possibility, but think about it... why would he kill

Ray before he learned where the money was? Vincent made it pretty clear that all he wants is a cut of that loot. I can't see him hurting his chances of getting his hands on it," Doug reiterated.

"Hmm, see what you mean."

"A man like Ray was bound to have made enemies. There've got to be lots of folks who might have wanted revenge for wrongs done to them. Maybe one of his past clients killed him. Sorry Ron, but from everything I've read on the Internet, you're brother was a con man. He swindled a lot of people," Merry declared.

"Unfortunately Merry, you're right. It gives me no pleasure to admit that my brother was a crook. We may have been twins, but he was a stranger to me. I've read the arson reports associated with some of his business deals... my God, a woman died in one of those buildings."

Colleen's hand covered her mouth as she gasped at Ron's words. "How horrible!"

"I didn't know that. Definitely expands possible motives for wanting him dead. Were there charges filed for her death?" Doug inquired.

"No, not from what I read. The insurance commissioner and the fire marshal reports indicated criminal charges were pending. I think the fire marshal is still gathering his evidence. Maybe those FBI guys should work to link Sorrento to murder and not money laundering. Wouldn't that be a stronger case?" asked Ron.

"Gosh, this case becomes more complicated and gruesome with every moment," I said. Trying to change the subject to one more agreeable, I directed my next question to Colleen. "How are your folks? Have they decided how long they're staying with you? I bet your mom loves spending time with you at your place."

Colleen smiled as she rose from the sofa and walked into the kitchen. She placed her glass in the dishwasher then stood gazing out the window above the sink. "I guess they'll stay until after the wedding. Dad has been puttering around in my flower beds; they've never looked so good and free of weeds. I think my mom has cleaned

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my kitchen three times already, including the inside of the refrigerator.”

I laughed. “They’re just trying to stay busy. Helpful. This mess is hard on them too.”

“I know. You’re right.” Colleen’s expression softened as she looked over to Ron. “We’ll get through this together.”

“That’s the kind of attitude I like to hear. Hey, with all of us working to solve Ray’s murder and clear Ron... you know it will be okay.”

As Colleen and I stood talking in the kitchen, the discordant ringing of the telephone startled us. Ron stepped over to his corner desk and picked up the offending implement.

“Hello?”

We watched as his eyes widened, and his mouth fell open. Colleen rushed to his side. Ron kept listening and only uttered a single word in reply. Twice he nodded, as if the caller on the other end of the line could see his response. He hung up slowly. His hand shook.

“Who was it?” asked Colleen in a tremulous voice.

“My father,” Ron whispered. His knees buckled, and he sank onto the chair.



The strong cup of hot coffee helped to stimulate my numb brain cells as Doug and I ate a light breakfast and tried to make sense of this crazy puzzle. Everyday uncovered a hidden fact or introduced a new player that only led to more confusion. I stared out the window, watching a pair of robins chirp and hop around on the deck while Mittens swished his tail to and fro eyeing the feathered pair. My mind wasn’t on the aviary drama, but returned to the scene in Ron’s living room as he announced the news that his father was in town and on his way to Ron’s home. We left him and Colleen to deal with the reunion of father and son after thirty years. I couldn’t imagine the emotions galloping

through Ron's mind and heart. The fact that Gerald Wythe was even in Meadowood added to the mystery.

"Has the coroner released Ray's body yet for the funeral? Did Ron mention anything to you if the services would be here or in New York?" I wondered as I licked the end of my spoonful of yogurt.

"I did get a notice from Doc Stone that the body could be released for burial. Honestly, I don't know what Ron's plans are."

"Did Ray have any family back in New York other than his father that we don't know about? Who's going to claim his body?"

"Maybe that's why Gerald Wythe is here. I dunno." Doug's thoughts returned to the case as he replayed in his mind the facts that he knew, and considered the handful of suspects his office labeled as persons of interest.

"Well, I can't stand the suspense any longer. I'm gonna call Colleen," I said as I dug into my purse and pulled out my cell phone. Less than a minute later, I listened to the ring tone and waited for my best friend to answer. I almost ended the call when I heard Colleen's soft voice reply.

"Hello Merry," she whispered. "Hang on while I go outside to talk."

I could hear her light footsteps and the movement of the sliding door, which told me she was still at Ron's apartment. Colleen didn't have sliding glass doors at her place. I waited for her to resume the conversation.

"Sorry. I didn't want to wake Gerald. He's still asleep on the couch."

"Is everything all right between Ron and his father? Doug and I didn't want to intrude on their reunion last night."

"Let's just say it has been a long night. After so many years with Ron never hearing from his father or his brother Ray, well tension just hung in the air. Between the shouting, the accusations, and the crying—I never heard such anguish."

"Oh my gosh, you poor thing. How are you holding up? Did you get any rest?"

"Don't worry about me. I slept in Ron's bedroom and I think he

Nancy M. Wade

crawled into bed about three in the morning. I got up about seven and made a pot of coffee and tried to straighten up a bit. I'm getting ready to head back to my place for a shower and a clean set of clothes."

"Can I do anything to help you and Ron? I feel so useless."

"I don't think there is anything that anyone can do. Ron and Gerald just have to work this out. To say their father-son relationship is strained is an understatement. The man ignored one of his sons for almost thirty years and suddenly shows up on his doorstep in time to bury the other one. How would you feel?"

"Hard to imagine. About the funeral... will Ron be making the arrangements for a service here?"

"Probably. That's on our list of things to do today."

"Promise to call me if you need anything."

Chapter Twenty

Past Secrets

Wagner's Funeral Home was located in Meadowood within a prominent Victorian structure painted a somber gray with black trimmed windows, and complete with turrets and gables on its three-story high roof. It had once been home to a wealthy investor in the late 1800s. Like many expansive older homes, they were impossible to heat or cool and wound up being sold for some type of commercial use. The gothic designed house could be spooky enough in daylight, but at night, it seemed like a place straight out of a Stephen King novel. The only thing missing was a gargoyle atop one of the gables. Today, with the diffused early evening light and the pungent fragrance of summer marigolds planted along the walk, the gothic structure seemed less menacing.

As Doug and I approached the front entrance of the building, I sniffed the floral scents and tried to calm my nerves. I must admit, as many times that I've attended services at Wagner's, I still can't shake the chill that crawls up my spine whenever I enter the main visitation room. We walked across the plush slate gray carpeting. Heavy navy-blue brocaded draperies were drawn closed across the room's triple-wide window. Several rows of folding chairs had been set up in the middle of the spacious room

flanked by comfortable sofas and brocaded side chairs. The perfect setting to lure the New York cockroaches from their holes if Doug's plot works.

The dimly lit funeral home hosted an air thick with curiosity more than grief and the awkward tension of fractured family history. Ray Wythe's closed casket lay at the rear of the visitation room with his framed photograph atop, ironically, the snapshot of Ray standing next to his flashy sport car. A few somber floral arrangements were placed nearby.

Mourners filed in to pay their respects. I attended the funeral as both Colleen's friend and in my role as amateur detective. I felt determined to stay on the lookout for any suspicious activity as I exchanged glances with my husband. The room buzzed with murmurs of sympathy and whispers of town gossip.

Ray had been a stranger to Meadowood, but his brother Ron was a trusted member of the community. Therefore, the community turned out to show support for one of its own. Most of the Chamber of Commerce members arrived to deliver their token condolences. From my corner location, I noted the new arrivals.

Frances Andrews walked in and signed the memory book, accompanied by her sales clerk, Betty Jones. She waited in the receiving line to speak with Ron and Colleen. Fran schooled her face to hide the surprise she felt at seeing Gerald Wythe standing next to the couple. She remembered him well; the gaunt face had aged and wizened, but the eyes were the same. Fran began to speak with Gerald then paused when she heard her name called.

"Aunt Fran, who's minding the store? I noticed Betty's here too," I remarked as I sidled next to my aunt.

"Closed up the shop early. It's not a big deal so don't make one out of it."

"Oh, well... guess not." My jaw hung slack. Her sharp tone surprised me. I frowned and studied her expression, trying to read what was going on in her mind. She wasn't acting like herself. Strange.

Fran moved through the crowd toward the entrance. I watched her stop to speak to a few neighbors and wondered again what had sparked her ire. My aunt rarely displayed her temper and certainly not to me. I glanced back toward Gerald Wythe standing rigidly next to Ron and Colleen and wondered anew what past history lay between him and my aunt.

Agents Brown and Grissom, stern figures in dark suits, made their presence known to both Ron Wythe and his father Gerald. "I understand this is a difficult time, but we need your cooperation. Just remember the plan and stick to it."

"Don't worry; I told you I'd go along with this." Ron nodded to the men as they blended into the crowd.

Gerald raised a questioning eyebrow to his son. "What was that cryptic message all about?"

"I'll tell you later. Not here," Ron replied in a low voice as his eyes scanned the room.

Only a half hour remained of the formal visitation period as Ron studied the remaining handful of people. Colleen had excused herself to claim one of the brocaded upholstered chairs, begging respite from too tight high heels. Ron smiled at her then raised his eyes to spy Vincent Sorrento striding into the building. He glanced about for Doug or the FBI agents among the gathered people as his mind raced to compose something believable to say to Vincent.

Doug discreetly observed the room, watching for any signs of unusual behavior. Only Merry and a handful of law enforcement knew that this funeral, meant to be a solemn occasion, was actually a backdrop for an unsettling investigation. Doug spotted Vincent moving purposefully. He hastened to close the distance between the mobster and Ron.

"Thank goodness you're here," Ron whispered to Doug between clenched teeth. "What do I say to that guy?"

"Let him do the talking. Follow his lead. I'll be right behind you."

Doug took three steps to Ron's left and took up a position next to a basket of lilies resting on a tall stand.

The big man shouldered his way closer to Ron. His eyes widened, the only sign that he recognized and was surprised by the elder Wythe standing next to the coffin.

"Vincent," acknowledged Ron with a nod of his head.

"We meet again. Do you have my money?" growled Vincent.

"Have you thought about my offer? We need to talk, but not here. This isn't the right place or time," Ron tried to keep his voice level. He caught the nod out of the corner of his eye from Doug.

"Yeah, I've thought about it. As they say, talk ain't cheap, it comes with a price. Them Feds want my testimony, they gotta pay up front."

"I hear you, but that's not my decision to make. Um, let's meet up tonight to discuss it."

"Yeah. You be at Oak Tavern, outside of town, at ten o'clock," ordered Vincent. With a glare tossed to Gerald Wythe, he pushed his way through the remaining visitors and exited the building.

"Why are you mixed up with that low-life thug?" asked Gerald as soon as Vincent had gone.

"I'm trying to make right the wrongs my dear brother caused," Ron sneered. "What do you know about the Sorrento mob? Maybe you're the one who ought to be questioned." Ron's voice cracked with the exasperation and nervousness that he felt.

Doug stepped forward to face the elder Wythe.

"I'm Chief Deputy Sheriff Douglas Gardner. We haven't met yet. I'm also a very close friend of Ron. Please believe me when I tell you, we are working diligently to find the person who killed your son, Raymond. We're also trying to resolve unfinished business that Ray and the Sorrento family were involved in. Maybe you can shed some light on certain New York properties and a few mysterious fires?" Doug stared at the elder man, waiting for a response or crack in his closed expression. He got it when Gerald closed his eyes and lowered his head, shaking it back and forth.

Doug grasped the elbow of the older man and led him toward a pair of secluded chairs and with a wave of his hand, silently directed him to sit.

“Suppose you tell me what you know about Ray’s business dealings.”

After watching the scene between the four men, I motioned to Colleen to join me near the double doors and podium holding the memory book. A small group of folks stood chatting among themselves. Colleen and I approached them.

“Thank you so much for coming out tonight,” I said with a smile.

Colleen, taking my lead, followed up. “Ron and I appreciate your thoughtfulness in stopping by. Let me walk you to the door. Thank you again for your kind condolences.”

With a gentle hand on a shoulder or a touch to an arm, the two of us herded the handful of people toward the doors of the funeral home. As soon as the last person exited, I turned to one of Wagner’s directors and asked him to lock the doors.

Time for Gerald Wythe to spill his secrets.

Chapter Twenty-One

Confessions

“I’m going home with Ron and his father. We’ve got a meeting with Sorrento at ten tonight. I’d rather that you and Colleen weren’t part of this and please don’t give me any arguments,” Doug said. He walked me to our minivan in the now empty Wagner parking lot.

“Okay. Maybe I’ll stop in at my Aunt Fran’s and have a chat. Colleen will probably go back home with her parents. Promise me you’ll be careful around that thug. Don’t take any chances and I want to hear all about it when you get home.”

Doug chuckled and reached out to tuck a lock of my hair behind my ear. “I promise. Wouldn’t want to keep my own Nancy Drew in the dark. Just promise me that you’ll stay out of trouble. Don’t go running off on some crazy idea.”

“Why would you even think something like that? I’m only going to visit my dear Aunt Fran and get caught up. We haven’t had a chat for a while.”

“Uh-huh, I hear you. Give me a quick kiss; I gotta get back.”

I dutifully lifted my face to his and received a very pleasant smooch then climbed into my car and tossed my purse on the seat. With a quick wave, I left with one destination and thought in mind.



Doug sat across from Gerald and Ron; he studied the old man's face as he sipped his second cup of coffee, the caffeine intake beginning to make him feel wired.

Gerald had the shakes. His hand trembled as he set his mug on the table and glanced nervously between his son and the cop. Watching him, Doug didn't attribute it to caffeine.

"I don't know where to begin," Gerald murmured.

"Start at the beginning," Doug suggested. "What brought you to Meadowood?"

Gerald, his face etched with grief and a hint of guilt, spoke reluctantly. "I haven't been a very good father... not to Ray and certainly not to you, Ron." He swallowed audibly and in a gruff voice, he continued, "the fact is...I'm an alcoholic. A drunk, dead broke. Ray had a rough childhood. I can say that now but I admit I didn't see what I was doing to him until it was too late. Ray left me as soon as he turned eighteen and never looked back. He made his own way and I was proud of him when I glimpsed his picture on some billboard or heard his name mentioned on TV news. But then he changed his name and I learned he was doing business with the mob." Gerald gulped a deep breath, the effort of telling his story exhausting.

"Did you know Ray's business committed fraud and was involved with arson?" asked Ron.

Gerald silently nodded. "You've got to understand, we weren't close. Ray was living in a ritzy world and I was barely surviving as a homeless person. There was a large warehouse down near the riverfront; some of us that lived on the streets used to sleep in there. Got us out of the bad weather and out of harm's way, or at least that was the idea until one night that building went up in flames. I saw one of Sorrento's henchmen torch the place." Tears silently rolled down his whiskered cheeks as he continued his story in a low voice.

“Nobody was supposed to be in there, but Maria was. She had been sick and asleep in a huddle of blankets and canvas tarps that smelled of kerosene or paint thinner. Maria died in that blaze. I couldn’t save her. Her screams mixed with the inhuman shrieks of the dying building and the flames that licked the wood to feed the monster.”

“Could you identify the man that started the fire if you saw him again? Would you testify to that?” asked Doug.

“Maybe. I was worried about Ray mixed up with Sorrento and knew he’d be tossed aside as soon as he stopped being useful. I’d heard rumors—talk about money gone missing and that Ray was on the lam. Vincent roused me once from a shelter that I stayed in, looking for Ray, and then like a miracle, some mail caught up with me. Your wedding invitation, Ron. You sent it to the address of a lady friend where I’d stayed a couple of years ago. She knew where to find me and brought me that invitation. It felt like a second chance to find the son I had lost and maybe make amends. My minister bought me a Greyhound bus ticket to Columbus and I hitchhiked the rest of the way.”

“How long have you been sober?” Ron asked as he reached for his father’s hand.

“After Maria’s death, I stumbled into an AA meeting at the church and they helped me find my way. It’s been one year, three months, and nineteen days since I’ve touched the booze. Every day is a struggle. I don’t mind telling you, I’d sure like a whiskey right now, but I know I can’t stop with just one.”

“Well, you’re home now. You can stay here and after Colleen and I marry, this place is yours. We’ve got a lot to catch up on. I’m sorry I didn’t make more of an effort to find you too years ago. I let mother’s bitterness about the divorce influence me,” Ron admitted in a voice filled with raw emotion as he and his father clutched each other.

“Do you feel strong enough to go with Ron and me tonight when we meet Vince? I’ve got a call in to Grissom and Brown to join us too. If a deal is going to be made, they’ve got the authority to make it. Not me,” stated Doug.

Doug glanced at his watch then carried their mugs into the kitchen. *Merry would be proud of him for cleaning up.* The thought drifted into his mind and for a second he wondered what she was doing at her aunt's house. He knew his wife well enough to realize she had a purpose for her visit tonight.



“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” asked Aunt Fran as she opened the door to me.

I stepped into her beautiful living room with its tranquil ocean paintings and pale turquoise color scheme. My aunt's home had such a Zen feeling to it.

“Nothing. Can't a gal come visit her favorite aunt?”

“What's the real reason you're here, Chickie? As much as I love seeing you, I know better.”

“I was worried about you, that's all. You seemed a bit on edge earlier when I saw you at Wagner's. Is everything okay?”

“C'mon in and have a cup of tea and something to eat. If I'm going to bare my soul, I need sustenance.”

I raised my eyebrows at that statement but followed her meekly into her crisp blue and white tiled kitchen and took a seat at the table.

The tea kettle simmered on the stove top, almost as if she were expecting company. I waited while my aunt set cups and saucers on blue and white gingham placemats along with a plate of cinnamon rolls that I suspected came from Martha's bakery.

Fran was the first to speak. “I didn't realize Ron and Colleen were expecting his father to visit.”

“They weren't. Ron had mailed a wedding invitation last month to him but Colleen told me Ron wasn't even sure his dad still lived at that address. I think Gerald surprised everyone when he called and showed up on Ron's doorstep two days ago.”

“It must be close to thirty years since he lived in Meadowood. He

left right after Miriam filed for divorce.” Fran sipped her tea and stared out the window at the night sky.

“Did you know him then? Ron and Ray were kids. Funny to imagine them that young.”

Fran sighed and returned her attention to me. “Yes I knew both Miriam and Gerald Wythe. It shames me to admit this, but I was the reason for their divorce.”

My mouth fell open, crumbs of cinnamon bread fell onto the table. The shock of her statement left me speechless—no small feat.

The wisp of a smile curled Fran’s lips as she took the chair across from me and reached for my hands. She shook her head lightly; her blonde hair danced around her shoulders.

“Gerald Wythe was a handsome man back then and I thought I was madly in love. It was all innocent at first... running into each other at the bowling alley or down at the lake. The attraction built and we gave into our feelings with no worry or thought of others. We were young and selfish; I admit it. One time, that’s all it was. One moment of rapture in a secluded spot in Fox Run Park, only it wasn’t as secluded as we thought. Someone saw us and ran to Miriam with the tale. She and Gerald argued in a screaming match that was heard all over the block. He admitted to the affair and Miriam threw him out demanding a divorce. Your grandmother was ashamed of my actions and by then I guess I was feeling some remorse too. She packed me up and hustled me off to California to finish college. Of course, that’s where I met your uncle James. He swept me off my feet and the rest is history, as they say. My fling with Gerald Wythe was just a summer time, school girl crush but it tore a family apart and I’ve regretted my role in that tragedy all my life.”

“Did Ron know about you and his father?”

“No, I don’t think so. He and Ray were just boys. I don’t think they knew what really happened between their parents. I’ve tried to lessen my guilt over the years by telling myself that they didn’t have a strong marriage anyway and Gerald had a wandering eye; if it wasn’t me it

would have been some other young girl. Who am I kidding? If those boys had grown up together in a normal family, how different would their lives be today?”

“That’s a heavy burden you’re carrying on your shoulders. As you said, Gerald played his part in the equation. He’s a weak man with his own demons. You weren’t the only guilty party.”

“You’re disappointed in me, aren’t you? I think I just fell off that pedestal you’ve had me up on. Seeing him tonight made all those old memories and feelings of shame come rushing back.”

“I love you Aunt Fran. You’ll always be an inspiration to me as a kind and generous woman who loves her family and friends. Don’t be so harsh on yourself; you are only human and as you said, that happened a very long time ago. Thank you for telling me.” I squeezed her hand then leaned across to press a kiss on her cheek.

“I don’t know how I’m going to face him again, or for that matter, the whole Wythe family.”

“Honestly. You’re just going to face them, honestly.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Injustice

Agents Grissom and Brown waited with Ron Wythe and Doug Gardner. The men were all dressed casually in jeans and polo shirts to blend in with the tavern clientele. Gerald Wythe had taken a nearby corner seat to observe the action as he sipped a ginger ale. Only a handful of people gathered at the bar or at a few tables on the late Wednesday night. A single woman with long brunette hair and dark clothing silently sat in a far corner of the bar, unnoticed.

“Did you withdraw the money from the bank?” asked Brown.

“Yes. I got it out this morning as soon as the bank opened. I wanted to avoid being seen with that kind of money,” Ron answered in a low voice.

“Where is it now?”

“Locked up in the safe at the sheriff’s office. Simmons will release it to you whenever you say,” Doug informed the agents.

“Okay. Then we’re good to go. The Bureau is ready to make a deal if we get full testimony and like what we hear.”

Ron nervously looked around the room and visibly jumped when the door opened and Vince sauntered toward them.

“Got all your buddies with you tonight. Whatcha afraid of?” Vincent snarled.

Doug eyeballed the tough guy and met him stare for stare. “You want to make a deal? These are the guys that can make it happen. Why don’t you sit down and listen to what they have to say?”

Vincent dragged a chair over and squeezed into the group. He raised a hand to the bartender and mouthed “beer.”

An awkward silence hung over the group until the barkeep placed a frothy stein of beer in front of Vincent and left.

Brown cleared his throat and leaned forward to speak directly to Vincent. “Okay, this is what we know... Raymond Wythe insured properties for the Sorrento family with inflated values then paid out six-figure claims when those properties mysteriously burned to the ground. We know the fire marshal is investigating the arson and we know that a woman died in one of those fires. An eye witness will testify it was a Sorrento employee that set the fire. Unless you want to be included in those charges, you better start talking and fill in the gaps.”

Vincent took a gulp of his beer then shifted his gaze to Brown and Grissom. “You’re asking me to sign my own death warrant if I give up the boss. What’s in it for me?”

“A new life with a, shall we say, severance pay to see you comfortable,” Grissom told him.

Vincent grinned. “How much?”

“We’ll decide that when we hear what you have to say. We need facts: times, places, and names. You link Mario Sorrento to these fraud schemes and laundered money and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

Ron listened to the negotiations between the agents and Sorrento but it didn’t answer his burning question. He interrupted Brown with a raised hand and faced the mob enforcer.

“Did you kill my brother Ray?”

With a snort, Vincent leaned forward, his stale breath inches from Ron’s face. “No, I didn’t. If I had, I wouldn’t have left him in a stupid pool.”

Ron got up and walked outside. He needed some air. No one was interested in finding his brother's killer. The Feds just wanted to solve their case and take down the mob. What about Ray? He wasn't an outstanding citizen, but he was still his brother. Was he the only one who cared?

Gerald joined his son. He stood listening to the summer breeze swaying the leafy branches overhead and the tiny movements of night critters in the woods. Placing a hand on Ron's shoulder, he tried to offer what comfort he could. He heard his question to Vincent and felt his frustration and anger.

"That friend of yours seems like a good man. He'll sort out what happened to Ray. Guess we just have to let him do his job and have faith. I never thought I'd say that. Me and the cops didn't exactly have a cozy relationship most of my life. But well..."

"Thanks Dad. Yeah, Doug is a good cop, persistent. He won't give up. It just galls me to see someone like that thug walking away with a pat on the back and pocket full of cash," Ron said with an exhale of breath. He rubbed his knuckles against his bristled jaw. "Guess we better get back in there."

Neither man saw the dark brunette slip away through the night after spying on them.

Doug nodded to Ron as he returned to the table. The FBI agents seemed to be satisfied with their agreement and Vincent promised to appear downtown in the morning to give evidence. It would seem everyone was happy. Ron shook his head, disgusted.

"C'mon, Dad, let's go home."



Anna and I sliced fruit and vegetables to prepare for the day's menu offerings. The early morning humidity portended a sticky hot summer day ahead. The lighter salads and sandwich choices seemed to be the wiser choice to offer customers.

“I brewed two pitchers of iced tea today. One has a citrus flavor and the other a bit of a sweet floral accent,” Anna told me as she scraped chopped celery into a plastic container.

“Sounds delicious. Let’s hope our air conditioner unit holds out through this heat wave.” I wiped beads of perspiration from my forehead with a napkin and returned to my task. “Doug and I sat up until after midnight discussing last night’s powwow with the mob guy and Ron. Poor Ron, he’s still a person of interest in Ray’s death and now the Feds have just given this thug a green light to go his merry way.”

“Hmm, doesn’t seem like there’s any justice in this world.”

“Well Colleen and Ron can’t go on like this with Ray’s death hanging over their heads. How can they begin their life together with Ray’s murder still unresolved? Ray crossed too many people in his life; there has to be someone out there that we missed. Someone who wanted him dead.” I said as I moved about the kitchen of our tea shop.

With a glance at the clock, Anna walked to the front door to flip the sign to open. As she adjusted the thermostat on the wall, she prepared for the day’s business.

“Have faith, sugar. It’ll work out.”



Gerald Wythe walked into Frannie’s Frocks and approached the woman behind the cash register. Fran looked up to meet his questioning gaze then took a deep breath.

“Hello Gerald. How are you?”

“It’s nice to see you again Frannie. The years have been kind to you; you’re still a good looking woman.” He smiled at her as he shifted his stance, his hands behind his back.

The shop was quiet. Business had dropped off late in the afternoon as most people headed home to fix their evening meal. There was no need to worry about being overheard yet Fran still felt the need to speak in a whisper.

“I’m sorry Gerald for the trouble I caused and the heartache Miriam suffered. I should have apologized to her years ago while she was still alive. Guess I was a coward. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive, girl. I’m the one that broke my marriage vows. I knew what I was doing. I just wanted to see how you were. Ron has asked me to stay in Meadowood. Town this small, we’re bound to run into each other. Maybe we can be friends.” Gerald shuffled his feet from side to side. He spoke haltingly as he waited on her reply.

“You’re being kind. I’m glad you and Ron have reconciled. Our lives have both taken different paths over the years; we moved on, but we can certainly still be friends.”

Fran smiled back at him, seeing once again the young man who had occupied her youthful mind.

“How about a cup of coffee?” offered Fran.

“I’d like that.”



Colleen drove toward the setting sun and the outskirts of town. I gripped the passenger door handle as she accelerated around a curve. Speeding down a country road was totally out of character for my friend, but understandable given her state of mind. I didn’t question her motives as we raced toward Oak Meadow Inn. The resort seemed to draw us constantly like a magnet as our lives became intertwined with the drama and danger encountered there.

“Are you sure you heard him agree to come here?” I asked as we crept across the golf course greens toward the rear of the Oak Meadow Inn. Orange and golden colors blended with deep purple to paint the dusk sky above the lush green lawns.

We had left Colleen’s bright yellow Mustang parked near the pro’s hut, hoping to conceal it in the shadows. I tried the door to the golf instructor’s shack. Locked. I wish I had brought a golf club or some-

thing to defend ourselves. Goosebumps crawled up my skin and it had nothing to do with the evening temperature.

"I don't know who was on the phone, but Ron said he'd be right there. He acted strange and lied to me, telling me he was going to the gas station, but we just filled up his car yesterday. I didn't know what to do, that's why I called you," explained Colleen.

"I'm glad you did. Good thing we followed him. Why didn't Ron tell Doug what he was doing? Where was Gerald during all of this?"

"I don't know. It makes no sense why Ron would go running off by himself like some comic book hero. What's he trying to prove?"

The setting sun cast an eerie glow over the darkened poolside of the inn, the water reflecting shadows that danced with the night breeze. No one was about and this side of the building was cloaked in obscurity. Colleen and I, guided by a mixture of concern and instinct, had followed Ron to the secluded area then lost sight of him. He couldn't have gotten that far ahead of us. Where was he? The night air held a heavy silence, broken only by the distant sounds of crickets.

As we rounded the corner, my eyes widened at the sight of Ron lying prone by the pool, his figure barely visible in the dim light. A woman stood nearby. Who was she? The first thought that came to my mind was that it could be Lola, the person the waitress Jenny had described. Even in the faint light, I could see she looked to be the right height and features.

Colleen grabbed my arm as we halted and hid behind a stack of pool lounge chairs. Her attention focused on Ron lying still but shifted suddenly to the woman who stood menacingly with a gun in her hand. Colleen gasped out loud, causing the gal to turn toward us.

Lola's eyes, wild and consumed by a desperate rage, fixated on Ron as she muttered incomprehensible words. The tension in the air became palpable, and a sense of foreboding hung like a shroud.

I raised slowly from behind the chaise. Keeping my voice steady, I tried to reason with Lola. "Lola, put the gun down. We can talk about this. You don't have to do anything rash."

Lola jumped, startled by my use of her name. "Do I know you? How do you know my name?"

I crept forward, my hands visible at my sides as I motioned to Colleen to stay back.

"I saw you here. You were with a handsome guy." I tried to keep her attention and keep her talking. Anything to keep her from using that gun.

"I was with Ray."

"Did you know Ray in New York?" I asked.

"Yeah, we met at Clancy's Bar. He was so vain. All I had to do was smile and come on to him and he fell for it. I pretended to be his girlfriend, even convincing him to bring me with him on this trip. Stupid man. Did he think I would let him and all that money out of my sight?" Lola sneered and her face distorted as she remembered.

"He had a suitcase full of money. Is that what you wanted?" I tried to inch forward without alarming her.

"No, not really. I waited months to gain his trust, but I took care of him." She laughed in a hideous cackle that rose in the night air like a banshee.

Lola's eyes, filled with a twisted sense of purpose, darted to Ron lying on the ground. She moved between Colleen and me as we approached.

"Put down the gun, Lola," I pleaded again.

"You don't understand! Ray's back. He killed my sister Maria. Fire was everywhere. Flames leaped into the night. She was trapped in that burning building. All she wanted was a place to sleep off the streets." Her face mirrored the horror of that night.

Trying to remain calm and reassuring, I edged closer. "Lola, we can help you. You can trust us. But you can't hurt Ron. He's not Ray. He's not the one you're looking for."

"Yes he is. I killed him but he's back. Why won't he stay dead? He needs to pay for what he did."

With a sudden movement, Lola swung the gun toward Ron, intent

on shooting. Her expression became a mix of anguish and determination. "He is Ray! I know it. I have to finish what I started."

"No!" screamed Colleen. The love of her life lay prone. She'd fight for his life with every ounce of her strength.

Lola turned and struck Ron on the head with the butt of the gun, sending him further into unconsciousness. Colleen cried out and leaped to his side. Her sudden movement startled Lola, making her step back, and gave me the chance I needed.

Fueled by a surge of protective instincts, I lunged forward in a flying tackle aimed at Lola that an NFL linebacker would have been proud of. Knocking her off her feet, I fought to wrestle the weapon away from Lola. The struggle was chaotic.

We rolled around on the concrete surface. Twice I thought our tangled bodies would fall into the water. Our chorus of female voices grunted and screamed, shattering the stillness of the night. The poolside darkness served as a backdrop to our desperate fight for control of the weapon. My heart raced as I grappled with Lola, each movement a dance of strength and desperation.

"Help!" I screamed as Lola bit my hand. I drew back my fist and punched her in the face, my knuckles glanced off her jaw bone resulting more in stinging my hand than subduing Lola.

Colleen jumped to her feet, leaving Ron moaning softly. She joined the fray, and together, we disarmed Lola. The gun clattered to the ground and I kicked it out of reach. Breathing heavily, we held Lola down by sitting on her legs and back. Our combined weight pinned her to the cold pavement. Lola's cries echoed in the night as we added our voices to call for help.

Blake Garrett ran out of the building, drawn by the crashing sounds and raised voices. He threw a switch to bathe the area in brilliant flood lights. The look of amazement on his face was priceless. I wished I had a camera handy to capture it.

"Phone 9-1-1. Get my husband out here. Tell him we caught Ray

Wythe's murderer. She's not going anywhere, but he needs to hurry," I shouted to the shocked manager.

In the midst of the chaos, Ron began to stir, oblivious to the danger that had befallen him. He moaned again and rolled over.

Poor Lola ceased squirming and lay on the pavement. Her eyes glazed over; her grip on reality had unraveled into a web of revenge and despair. She was one more victim of Ray's greed and corruption, as surely as her dead sister lost in the horrific blaze.

As our small town nightmare reached its conclusion, I reflected on the lives ruined by greed, alcohol, and evil. That's how Doug found me, still sitting on top of Lola, when he rushed onto the crime scene with deputy Dalton in tow and a huffing and puffing Sheriff Simmons.

Edgar began laughing at the sight as he tried to catch his breath. Doug joined in as he offered me his hand and pulled me to my feet. After Edgar helped Colleen gain her balance, he placed handcuffs on Lola. Lola's face was a mask of confusion as her sanity slipped another notch. Hopefully, the courts will see that she receives the mental health care that she needs.

Colleen tended to Ron's head wound as we waited on the paramedics to arrive. She pressed clean linen napkins to staunch the blood while firmly holding his hand. Ron's expression seesawed between confusion and admiration as he glanced between Colleen and me.

Facing Ron, Colleen asked, "What made you drive out here?"

"That's what I was about to ask," Doug said.

"I had a phone call. She threatened to kill my father if I didn't show up at the resort. I thought it was one of the Sorrento mob. Dad wasn't anywhere to be found. He doesn't have a car so he couldn't have gone anywhere on his own. It seemed plausible someone had abducted him."

"You lied to me," Colleen accused Ron.

"I'm sorry, Baby. I didn't want you in danger."

"Looks to me, you were the one in danger and the girls saved your bacon, my friend. Next time, give the station a call and let the police handle the problem. That's our job," Doug insisted. He tried to look

stern but the twinkle in his eye gave him away. Cocking an eyebrow and shaking his finger, Doug turned to me. “And you, madam, should not have run off taking matters into your own hands. Why didn’t you call me?” Doug chastised me as he wrapped me in a warm embrace.

“But where is my father?” asked Ron while the medics treated him. They insisted on bandaging his head but accepted his promise to check into the hospital for an Xray instead of transporting him immediately.

My cell phone jingled a text notification that made me grin. Holding my phone for all to see the message, I informed Ron and Colleen. “Your Dad is having supper with my Aunt Fran. She says he couldn’t reach you but he’ll be home later.”

I hope history isn’t repeating itself, I mumbled under my breath.

“What did you say?” asked Doug as we walked away.

“Hmm? I’ll tell you later,” I said with a smile.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Wedding Bliss

Sunlight reflected off the delicate hues of peach daisies and white roses that adorned the elegant gazebo at the Oak Meadow Inn. The descending sun cast a warm, golden glow over the ceremony. Even the weather was on its best behavior as pleasant temperatures drifted on a light evening breeze.

Colleen, radiant in her flowing white lace and chiffon bridal gown, stood beside Ron, her handsome groom wearing his gray suit. Dressed in my lovely peach bridesmaid dress, I beamed with happiness as the best man, Doug, and I stood beside the happy couple. My eyes sparkled with joy.

The ceremony was intimate, filled with the soft whispers on a summer breeze and the sweet fragrance of the carefully chosen flowers. As Reverend Kilgore pronounced Ron and Colleen husband and wife, a wave of relief and joy washed over them. The weight of recent events had lifted, and they embraced, sealing their vows with a kiss that spoke of love and resilience.

Anna and Chuck, Aunt Fran with Gerald, and Colleen's parents comprised the small gathering of family and friends nestled in the

enchanting surroundings. They erupted into cheers as the newlyweds, hand in hand, made their way down the aisle.

Blake Garrett had kept his promise to allow Ron and Colleen the use of the gazebo for their wedding ceremony whenever they were ready. However, Colleen's dream reception wasn't going to be possible in the banquet room. Previously reserved parties couldn't be juggled on the calendar to allow the Wythe reception to go forward. But at least they were able to be married.

After discussing the problem with Doug and our friends, we decided to host the reception in our home. It was truly a community affair as everyone chipped in their time and efforts to transform my backyard into a fairyland.

"Everyone follow us home," I announced as I clapped my hands following the ceremony. "Reverend Kilgore, please join us too!"

The celebration continued as we entered our backyard. The deck and lawn were a lively scene of twinkling lights, laughter, plus the aroma of delicious food. White cloths, decorated with peach and white flowers, adorned small tables to mirror the wedding theme. People roamed the grounds or relaxed at one of the various tables.

Wearing the dual hats of bridesmaid and host, I approached the newlyweds with a wide smile. "Colleen and Ron, congratulations! This is your special day. You deserve all the happiness in the world."

Colleen, her eyes brimming with happiness, replied, "Thank you, Merry. We appreciate your kindness. All this is magnificent. Your home is the perfect setting for our reception."

Ron, a mix of gratitude and joy in his expression, added, "And Doug, thanks for being the very best *Best Man* a guy could ask for. You stood by me in thick and thin."

Doug, raising his glass in a toast, teased, "We Buckeyes stick together. Here's to love, laughter, and a future filled with happiness for Colleen and Ron!"

The evening unfolded with the easy cadence of good company and shared moments. Friends gathered around as most of Meadowood

Nancy M. Wade

turned out to congratulate the happy couple. Anna and Martha, who had poured their culinary talents into making the reception a feast of flavors, filled plates with their delicious offerings.

As the night deepened and the stars emerged overhead, the community celebrated the union of Colleen and Ron. Ron had lost a brother but had gained a father he'd thought gone forever while Gerald received a chance to build a better life with his new family. The day was filled with remembrance of dear ones passed and the thrill of new memories to be created. Bonds of friendship and family ties wove the backdrop for a love story that had weathered trials and found its perfect summertime moment in the warm embrace of those who cared most.

Author Biography

A resident of central Ohio for over 40 years, Nancy M. Wade and her husband now claim the hills of N.E. Tennessee as home. Nancy is an active member of the Lost State Writer's Guild in the Tri-Cities of TN/VA.

Determined to complete a personal challenge, Nancy went back to school at the golden age of 69 to complete her bachelor's degree. Graduating in 2022 with Summa Cum Laude honors from East State Tennessee University, Nancy concentrated in criminology and film studies.

An avid lover of western movies and books, Nancy developed the *Circle-D Saga* — a western action adventure tale of love and hatred. The story begins in 1885 in "Endless Circle" with generations of three families: Dunlap, Logan, and Hartman. The saga follows the families during WWII in "Moment in Time" and the 3rd book in the trilogy called "Gun for Hire" tells the tale of gunslinger Cody Jarvis and his connection to the dynasty.

Based upon her years of living in the mid-west, Nancy wrote the small town, cozy mystery series: *A Meadowood Mystery* that showcases the antics of amateur sleuth housewife, Meredith Gardner, with "Scarecrows and Corpses", then added her adventures in "Reunion with Death", "Deadly Bones", "Deathly Wedding Woes", and the holiday tale "Berry Little Murder".

Nancy's latest cozy mystery series is *A Maddie Brooke Mystery* with "Invitation to Murder" – a ghostly cozy murder mystery set in the Magnolia Blossom Inn, a historic southern bed and breakfast inn.

She is also the author of a rich family drama, “Reflections: A Sentimental Journey” inspired by the courtship and early married years of her parents; a colonial historical romance novel, “Frontier Heart”; and a contemporary short story called “Courtship of Laura”.

All her work is available in both paperback and Ebook formats.

Follow Nancy’s upcoming projects on her web site: <https://nancymwadeauthor.com> and on her social media links.

