

The Death of Amelia Marsh

A Sally Nimitz Mystery

(Book 1)

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

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

Chapter One

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“About three days.”

“Joel doing okay?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Have you eaten?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Such as?"

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

"Did you ask her about any family?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And the back? Refresh my memory."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you finally full?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sally! You do?”

No way out of this. “Yes, I do.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where is Judy, by the way?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Unless you come to see me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mrs. Nimitz? Follow me, please."

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

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

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

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

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

I smiled back. "Was I?"

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

I desperately searched my memory archives of labors and deliveries.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He nodded grimly.

Chapter Three

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go ahead, Miss Simmons."

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

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

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

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

Again I verified her information.

"Have you lived in The Hedges long?"

"Almost a year and a half."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Four

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

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

“What will you do with the leftovers?”

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

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

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

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

Barbara beamed happily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you going to the funeral?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Giggles. "You hav'ta guess!"

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

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

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

"Wrong!"

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

"Okay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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