



IRENE HANNON

THREE-TIME RITA AWARD WINNER



OUT OF TIME

UNDAUNTED COURAGE

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IRENE
HANNON



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*To Jennifer Leep,
my editor for thirty-four books.*

*Thank you for taking a chance on my first suspense novel—
and for believing in Hope Harbor as much as I did.
It has been a joy to work with you.*

*I'm grateful beyond words for
the phenomenal run we had together,
and I will always cherish our friendship and partnership.*

May your star continue to rise!

ONE

HER DREAM SABBATICAL was *not* off to an auspicious start.

Easing back on the gas pedal, Cara Tucker frowned at the flashing lights in the distance as she rounded a bend in the two-lane, rural Missouri road.

Why was a police cruiser blocking the entrance to Natalie Boyer's secluded estate—her destination on this early September Tuesday?

Cara coasted forward on the deserted road and squeezed onto the narrow shoulder a dozen yards back from the squad car emblazoned with the county sheriff logo. When a deputy emerged from behind the wheel and walked back to join her, she lowered her window, cringing as a wave of late-summer heat surged in.

"Morning, ma'am." He stopped beside her car. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. The owner of this property is expecting me. What's going on?"

Instead of answering her question, he posed one of his own. "What's your name, ma'am?"

She passed it on. "Is Natalie all right?"

“Give me a minute.” He pulled out his radio, walked several yards away, and angled sideways.

Cara peered at him through the haze of heat. He appeared to be talking, but his words were indecipherable.

Not a surprise, but frustrating nonetheless.

She shut her window, cranked up the AC to compensate for the humidity-laden air that had infiltrated the car, and tapped her fingers on the steering wheel while she waited for the deputy to return.

A minute ticked by. Two. Three.

What was going on?

Had something happened to Natalie?

And if it had, how would she manage to pull off the project that had won her a prestigious fellowship for the fall semester? Natalie and her journals were key to the research.

At a sudden prod from her conscience, she winced. Banished those selfish thoughts. The safety of the older woman should be more important than career considerations. Rather than worrying about the feather this project would add to her academic cap, she ought to be saying a prayer for—

The deputy ended his conversation and strode back to her.

Gripping the wheel with one hand, Cara opened her window again and gave him her full attention.

“I just spoke with the sheriff, ma’am. He’ll meet you in front of the house. Give me a minute to move my car.”

They were letting her in.

Yes!

One hurdle cleared.

While the deputy returned to his cruiser, Cara rolled up her window and put her car in gear.

Once access to the driveway was restored, she rolled forward and swung in, tires crunching on the gravel as she traversed the long lane that wound among the pin oaks, sweet-gums, maples, cedars, and white pines that had been left to

grow in their natural state on the rolling terrain, with scant room for one car to get through.

Rounding the last curve, she gave the clearing ahead of her a sweep.

The house was just as she remembered it from her one visit back in April. Similar in design to the style favored by the Missouri French settlers who'd arrived in the area in the 1700s, it was slightly elevated off the ground, with a steeply pitched hipped roof, wraparound galérie, and a multitude of French doors and windows.

New in the picture were the squad car like the one at the entrance—and an ambulance.

Her stomach clenched.

Natalie had sounded hale and hearty during their phone conversation to finalize all the arrangements, but she was in her early eighties. And she did have long-standing physical challenges. While people developed workarounds for those sorts of things, health-related conditions could create problems on occasion.

Grimacing, Cara pulled to the side of the drive and set the brake. Been there, done that. Experience was an excellent teacher.

Hopefully whatever had happened in this house wasn't as bad as it appeared.

A fit-looking man in uniform exited through the front door, and Cara slid from behind the wheel to meet him by the hood.

"Cara Tucker, I presume." He extended his hand. "Brad Mitchell."

She returned his firm clasp. "I'd say it was nice to meet you, but I'm not certain that's the most appropriate sentiment under the circumstances. Is Natalie okay?"

"She claims to be. The EMTs aren't convinced yet."

"What happened?"

"According to her, she felt lightheaded, lost her balance,

and fell when she got up after her nap. The housekeeper heard the fall, found Ms. Boyer in a disoriented state, and called 911.”

“Did she hit her head?”

“She says she didn’t. I told her you were here, and she confirmed you were expected. Maybe you can convince her to go to the ER and get checked out. She hasn’t been receptive to that suggestion so far.”

Cara shook her head. “I doubt I can change her mind. Our one face-to-face meeting won’t buy me much influence.”

His eyebrows rose. “I got the impression you were friends.” Flattering, but a bit of a stretch.

“More like acquaintances. My association with her is professional. I’ll be spending weekdays here during the fall semester to work on an academic paper.”

She left it at that. The sheriff likely wouldn’t be interested in hundred-year-old journals written in a vanishing language. Even her siblings’ eyes glazed over if she went on too long about her research project.

“Are you a student?”

Her lips twitched in anticipation of his reaction. “No. Associate professor at SEMO. Historical anthropology.”

He did a double take.

Not surprising.

At thirty-four she still looked more like a typical undergrad than a professor.

But the sheriff recovered quickly. “Impressive. What sort of paper are you writing?”

She studied him.

Did he have a genuine interest in her project? Or was he simply being a thorough law enforcement officer and digging for more information about the woman who’d appeared out of the blue in the midst of a crisis?

Didn’t matter. A top-line answer would suffice in either case.

“French culture around Old Mines. Natalie has material that will be helpful to me and offered to assist. Since commuting two hours each way every day wasn’t practical, she also offered me a place to stay.”

“Interesting.” A beat passed as he considered her, but rather than follow up on that comment, he motioned toward the house. “Why don’t we go in? It’s too hot to stand out here in the sun. If you were able to convince Ms. Boyer to let you invade her turf, I’m still hopeful you may be able to persuade her to pay a quick visit to the ER.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“You can’t do any worse than we have. Shall we?”

He let her precede him up the walkway and the steps that led to the galérie but reached around to twist the knob when she arrived at the door, giving her a subtle whiff of an enticing aftershave.

As she entered the house, it was clear the activity was centered in the living room to her right.

“Ah. Cara.” Mouth contorting into a rueful twist, Natalie lifted a hand in greeting from her seat on an upholstered chair. “This wasn’t the welcome I had planned for you. I’m sorry for all the turmoil.”

“No worries.” Cara crossed to her, and the hovering EMTs moved aside. She perched on a chair beside the older woman, whose leg was propped on an ottoman. “Are you okay?”

“I feel fine now. I know Lydia meant well, but she overreacted. The lightheadedness has passed, and my leg will heal.”

Cara inspected the woman’s exposed black and blue knee. “Do you think it would be wise to have a doctor weigh in on that?”

“No.” Her tone was decisive. “I’ve seen too many doctors in my day. And I know my body far better than they do. I can’t explain my earlier fuzzy-headedness, but that happened before I fell. I did *not* hit my head. My brain is working fine,

and no harm was done to my knee other than a bruise. This is much ado about nothing.”

Cara gave the sheriff a slight shrug and telegraphed a silent apology. She was in no position to push the woman, who seemed in total control of her faculties and fully capable of making decisions about her health care.

He acknowledged the message with a slight nod and joined them. “Ms. Boyer, the EMTs will have you sign a form indicating you declined transport and further treatment. Once you do that, we’ll leave you in peace.”

“Thank you, Sheriff. I do appreciate your prompt response. I’m sorry to have wasted everyone’s time.”

“To tell you the truth, we prefer calls that end this way.” He smiled at her, displaying a killer dimple.

Cara’s pulse picked up as she gave him a closer inspection. Broad shoulders that seemed capable of carrying a heavy load. At least half a foot taller than her five-six frame. Toned physique, suggesting workouts were part of his regular schedule. Light brown hair, neatly trimmed. Green eyes the color of imperial jade. Strong jawline. Firm lips, softened now into an appealing flex, that looked like they knew how to kiss.

She blinked.

Where on earth had *that* fanciful notion come from?

As if sensing her scrutiny, the sheriff transferred his attention to her.

Warmth suffusing her cheeks, Cara shifted away on the pretense of watching Natalie converse with the EMT who’d handed her a clipboard while the other medical technician spoke into his radio. Ogling wasn’t her style, even if a man was ogle-worthy. Nor was it her practice to dwell on a stranger’s physical attributes.

Besides, getting carried away by a handsome stranger was foolish. Her focus this fall needed to be on her research, not

on the opposite sex. Just because her sister and brother had both found The One over the past eighteen months didn't mean the same kind of happy ending was in the cards for her. That was a reality she'd accepted long before Cupid came to call on Bri and Jack.

So getting all hot and bothered about a man she'd met mere minutes ago and would have little or no contact with in the future was crazy. She ought to—

At a touch on her shoulder, she swiveled back to find the sheriff watching her with a quizzical expression.

Whoops.

She must have missed something he'd said.

“Sorry. Did you ask me a question?”

“Yes. Would you mind walking out with me while Ms. Boyer finishes up with the EMTs?”

Hard as she tried, she couldn't come up with an excuse to refuse his request short of telling him he discombobulated her. And that wasn't an option.

“Of course.”

She rose and followed him to the door, keeping her distance from the captivating aftershave that was obviously messing with her brain.

After letting her precede him onto the galérie, he took up a position near the railing. “Are you familiar with Ms. Boyer's situation here?”

A faint scent of spice and sandalwood tickled her nostrils, and she eased farther away. “Not in any detail.”

“Let me fill you in on what I know, which isn't much. She's a very private person. More so since she retired eight years ago. As I understand it, her housekeeper is only here two days a week. A groundskeeper who doubles as a handyman lives on the premises, but I doubt he interacts with her on a daily basis. He has a few . . . issues . . . and tends to keep to himself. You'll be seeing more of her than anyone. Falls at

her age can be dangerous, and injuries don't always manifest themselves immediately. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep an eye on her for the next several days."

The sheriff had a caring heart under his badge.

Nice.

"I'll be happy to do that."

"Good enough." He held out his hand. "A pleasure to meet you. Don't hesitate to call us again if you need any assistance while you're here."

"Thanks, but I'm hoping today's incident was the most excitement I'll experience."

"Hold that thought. Enjoy your stay out here. It's a beautiful spot."

With that, he descended the steps and returned to his patrol car, the EMTs on his heels.

Cara waited until the two vehicles drove off, then retrieved her purse from her car and locked the doors. No doubt an unnecessary precaution out here in the countryside, but it was hard to shake long-ingrained concerns about safety.

At the doorway, she paused to glance back toward the drive. A cloud of dissipating dust was the only evidence that Natalie's property had been visited by emergency vehicles today. And hopefully, they wouldn't return.

Even if she wouldn't mind seeing that hot sheriff again.

EXCELLENT NEWS.

Fingertips tingling, I lowered the cell from my ear, pressed the end button, and smiled.

Everything was falling into place with minimal effort on my part.

Slipping the phone back in my pocket, I walked over to the counter. Opened the cabinet that held the liquor. Hesitated.

It would be nice to celebrate with a scotch, but I had to keep a clear head going forward.

I poured a glass of iced tea instead, crossed to the back door, and slipped out. Heat shimmered in the air, suffocating and oppressive, and I took a sip of the cold liquid.

One episode of dizziness wouldn't help me accomplish my goal, of course—but if Natalie continued to have difficulties, it would be harder to write them off as anomalies. It wasn't uncommon for people in their eighties to begin to have health problems, after all.

A notion well worth exploiting.

A bead of sweat trickled down my forehead, and I took another sip of tea.

The key on my end was patience. Everything had to evolve naturally so no one got suspicious.

But patience was going to be a challenge now that the stakes had been raised and the clock was ticking.

The visiting professor was also a complication I hadn't expected and didn't need. If she became a hindrance, I might have to persuade her that hanging around Natalie wasn't in her best interest.

I tightened my grip on the glass.

Persuasion could get messy—and I didn't relish hurting anyone. This plan was supposed to be bloodless.

Sometimes, however, circumstances required a person to venture outside their comfort zone. Do things they wouldn't normally do.

So if it became necessary, I'd take whatever action I needed to. Carefully, of course, even if no one would ever suspect me. I'd played my role well for a long time.

A bead of moisture trickled down my forehead, and I retreated to the coolness inside.

Despite the air-conditioning, however, I continued to sweat—

thanks to the second thoughts that were hiking up my blood pressure and stress.

Backing out wasn't an option, though. I'd already considered the situation from every angle, and this was the optimal solution.

I finished my tea, set the glass in the sink, sat at the table, and booted up my laptop. Seconds after opening the Tor browser, I was on the dark web and diving back into my research.

It was amazing how much information you could find these days with the click of a mouse. The internet was a virtual smorgasbord for criminals.

Not that I was one of those. Not at heart. My ambitions were modest.

But it never hurt to be prepared in case the situation ratcheted up and I was forced to take a detour down a road that was dangerous . . . and deadly.

TWO

"LET ME GUESS. You want the Tuesday meatloaf special."

Brad arched an eyebrow at the fortysomething waitress standing beside his table. "Am I that predictable?"

"Not always. But I know you're partial to Chuck's meatloaf. You and half the town." Angie waved a hand over the crowded diner, wrote down the order, and stuck her pencil behind her ear. "I keep telling him it should be a regular menu item, but does he listen to me? Ha." She snorted. "That man can drive a body crazy. Talk about a temperamental chef."

Chef?

That was a generous term for the taciturn hash slinger who owned Chuck's Place.

On the other hand, the hearty fare the man whipped up was close to homemade—a godsend over the past three years. Plus, stopping in here for dinner was better than eating alone in a house that always felt too empty.

Brad shrugged. "I suppose you can be temperamental if you have a loyal customer base."

"Tell me about it." Angie rolled her eyes. "Say, I heard Natalie Boyer took a fall. She okay?"

No point asking how she'd heard the news. In small communities, gossip had wings—and ambulance calls were big news.

“As far as we could tell.”

“She’s awfully old to be living alone out there.”

“Micah lives on the property too, and Lydia’s there on a regular basis.”

Angie affected a shiver. “Micah gives me the creeps. I wouldn’t want him lurking around *my* house, let me tell you. And I doubt he’d be of much use in an emergency. Lucky for Ms. Boyer that Lydia was out there today. With the spotty cell service around here, I don’t know what she’d do if she ever needed help and no one was close by. ‘Course, she’ll have the professor on hand this fall. You get to meet her while you were there?”

“How did you hear about *that*?” Even Lydia hadn’t known about Natalie’s guest until late last week, from what the housekeeper had said earlier today. And a houseguest wasn’t in the same gossip league as an ambulance visit.

“Lydia mentioned it to her brother, who told his girlfriend, who passed on the news to my sister at the hair salon. Lydia had to make a special trip out yesterday to clean the guest cottage because Ms. Boyer’s cousin came down from St. Louis for the weekend.”

As usual, Angie was a font of information.

“We could use you as a detective if you ever want to switch careers.”

“Very funny.” She smirked at him. “It’s all a matter of keeping your ear to the ground. No special skill involved. I also picked up a few unrelated tidbits at the church picnic this weekend. You should have come.”

Brad averted his gaze, straightened his cutlery, and took a deep breath. The mere thought of facing the inflatable bounce house and slide, or the face painter and balloon artist, had unleashed an avalanche of memories best kept buried.

“I wasn’t in a picnic mood.”

Angie sized him up with the practiced once-over she used

on customers. “Well, you missed a good time. Father Johnson was in fine form in the dunking booth.”

The corners of Brad’s mouth twitched. “I would have enjoyed seeing that.”

“He drew quite a crowd—and raised a fair amount of money for the mobile rural clinic. So what’s she like?”

At the abrupt change of topic, Brad squinted at her. “Who?”
“The visiting history professor.”

An image of Cara Tucker materialized in his mind—early thirties, lithe and graceful, with wavy dark brown hair, a focused demeanor, and perceptive hazel eyes that radiated warmth.

“It wasn’t a hard question.” Angie inspected him.

He smoothed out the edge of his paper napkin. “She was pleasant and professional.”

“What sort of research is she doing?”

“Something to do with French culture around Old Mines.”

“Hmm.” Angie pursed her lips and tapped her order pad against her palm. “I wonder if it has anything to do with those old journals Ms. Boyer has. Paul Coleman’s been after her to donate them to the historical society.”

“What kind of journals?”

Angie hiked up her eyebrows. “You don’t know about those?”
“Should I?”

“No, I suppose not. I doubt many people do. But Paul mentioned them once while he was having lunch here. Let me get your order placed and I’ll fill you in on what little I know. Hang tight.”

She zipped off, detouring to top off coffee mugs at another table after a patron summoned her.

Brad leaned back and scanned the street outside the window of the corner booth that let him keep tabs on the action inside and out. Tonight was quiet, though. Not many people had ventured out into the steamy weather. Despite the waning day, heat

still shimmered from the sidewalks, more intense now than it had been while he'd stood outside Natalie Boyer's house this morning talking to the professor he'd mistaken for a student.

He flinched.

That had been a major faux pas.

But her tank top and slim capris hadn't been stereotypical professor attire.

Fortunately, she'd seemed to take his gaffe in stride. Found a touch of humor in it even, if his reading on the tiny flex in her lips had been correct.

Her very generous, soft-looking lips.

He took a sip of his cold water and erased that image.

Strange that he was still thinking about her hours later. And blaming his musings on the prompt from Angie would be disingenuous. The truth was, she'd been on his mind since they met. Not just because she was beautiful, though she was, but also because of her intensity and singular focus. While they'd conversed, she'd given him her rapt attention. As if every word he said mattered.

There'd also been a unique quality to her speech. An accent, perhaps. Almost as if English wasn't her first language. What was the story there?

Whatever it was, there wasn't much chance he'd hear it. She'd be sequestered at Natalie's for the duration of her stay in the area, and he had no excuse to venture out there again.

Too bad.

Cara Tucker was an intriguing woman, and it was rare for intriguing women to cross his path these days. Not that he had any interest in her personally, of course, but she did pique his curiosity.

"Sorry. I had to straighten out an order with Chuck." Angie paused beside his booth and propped her hands on her hips. "Where were we?"

"You were going to tell me about the journals."

“Right. According to Paul, Ms. Boyer has some journals written in Paw Paw French by one of her relatives. Paul said they’re one of a kind, because as you know, Paw Paw was a spoken, not written, dialect, and unique to this area. Maybe the professor got wind of the journals and convinced Ms. Boyer to let her use them for research.” Angie lifted one shoulder. “I can’t imagine what else at that house would merit an extended stay.”

Brad didn’t try to hide his skepticism. “Unless the professor speaks the dialect, they won’t help her much.”

“But Ms. Boyer speaks it. Or she used to. I’m thinking the professor may have sweet-talked her into translating them for her. Why else would she be staying out there for the semester?”

It was hard to fault Angie’s logic.

“You may be right. But how on earth did she convince Ms. Boyer to let a virtual stranger invade her privacy?”

“You’ve got me. Either they clicked, or the professor charmed her into agreeing. Did she strike you as—” A loud *brrriinnng* sounded from the call bell, and Angie cast an annoyed glance toward the pickup window. “Oh, for pity’s sake. After all these years, does Chuck really think I’m going to let an order sit on the counter and get cold? Sheesh.” She smoothed out the apron she wore over her jeans. “I’ll have your food out in a jiffy, hon.”

“No rush on my end.”

“We don’t like to keep our customers waiting.” She winked and bustled off.

That was a fact. The service at Chuck’s Place was quick and efficient. If this visit ran true to form, his food would be out in less than ten minutes. And no matter how long he stretched out his meal, he’d be done far too fast.

He drummed his fingers on the table.

If he relieved one of the deputies on duty for an hour or

two after he finished, he could delay going home. Larry would grab the chance to run back to his house and play with the grandkids until bedtime. They didn't get down from St. Louis often enough to suit his senior deputy.

Of course, going on a patrol circuit would extend his already long day—but it beat wandering around his empty, silent house where the love and laughter that had once filled the rooms were only a distant echo in the recesses of his heart.

Outside the window, a couple strolled past hand-in-hand on the other side of the street, and Brad's stomach hollowed out.

Strange how the loneliness and sorrow and despair he'd learned to keep at bay felt more acute tonight.

Stranger yet?

He had the oddest feeling his melancholy state was somehow related to his encounter with Cara Tucker.

"THAT WAS A WONDERFUL WELCOME MEAL, Natalie." Cara set her napkin on the table. "But I wish you hadn't gone to so much trouble after all the excitement earlier today. A sandwich would have been fine."

"Nonsense." The older woman waved her concern aside. "I did most of the prep yesterday. Besides, I've dealt with far worse than a bruised knee in my day."

Hard to dispute that. For someone who'd suffered through polio in her youth and continued to live with the aftereffects decades later, a bruise or two would be nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

"At least let me handle cleanup."

"Now that I won't argue with. Much as I enjoyed cooking while my father was alive, I must admit I never liked the pot-scrubbing part."

"Why don't you give me fifteen minutes to take care of the

dishes, and then we can discuss our schedule for tomorrow. Shall I meet you in the living room?”

“That will be fine. And don’t rush on my account.” Natalie pushed herself to her feet and grasped her cane. “I’ll crochet a few more rows on my latest project while I wait for you.”

As her hostess limped toward the doorway, Cara assessed her. While her gait did seem a tad stiffer tonight than it had during their visit back in April, the other woman would never move with agility or grace. How could she, with one leg shorter than the other? Even with a brace and heel lift to help compensate for the discrepancy, she had to use a cane for stability. In all likelihood, her awkward carriage had more to do with the lingering effects of polio than her fall today.

Cara sighed.

So many people had challenges the able-bodied never stopped to think about.

She began clearing the table as the woman disappeared through the door.

Was that why Natalie had contacted her after the interview in the Cape Girardeau newspaper? Any story about twentieth-century French culture around Old Mines would no doubt catch the woman’s eye, but perhaps Natalie had also sensed a kindred spirit when the interview briefly took a personal turn. Had that compelled her to extend a helping hand?

Hard to know for certain. All her benefactor had offered was that the project would give her the incentive to follow through on the promise she’d made to her father to translate the journals.

Whatever the motive, it was foolish to look a gift horse in the mouth. There were amazing resources under this roof, and she didn’t intend to waste a second of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

After restoring order to the kitchen, she joined Natalie in the living room.

“That was fast.” The woman paused in her crocheting.

“I try not to linger over disagreeable chores.” Cara smiled and motioned toward the pile of pink yarn on Natalie’s lap as she took a seat at a right angle to her. “Pretty.”

“Baby afghan. I crochet them for a pregnancy resource center. It’s a worthwhile use of my spare hours.” She finished a stitch and put down the hook and yarn. “Before we talk schedules and routines, are you certain the guest cottage is adequate? I don’t get out there often, and while my cousin never complains when he comes to visit, men tend to view accommodations through a different lens than women.”

“It’s perfect. Spacious and clean and welcoming. I also caught a glimpse through the trees outside the back window of a lake in the distance. Is that on your property?”

“Yes. I should have mentioned that when I gave you a tour of the house earlier. Feel free to wander about on the grounds. Micah keeps a walking path cut that Steven, my cousin, likes to use.”

“Who’s Micah?”

“My groundskeeper. He lives in a tiny cabin not far from the lake. You won’t see much of him if you ramble around. He keeps to himself. And you met Lydia earlier today.”

“Yes.” Not that the housekeeper had been very amiable. While Natalie napped after the emergency crew departed, the housekeeper had gone about her work with quiet efficiency. Her responses had been polite, but she hadn’t initiated any exchanges.

A taciturn groundskeeper whom the sheriff said had issues, a reticent housekeeper, and a woman who spoke an arcane language that would be extinct once the handful of remaining older people who could converse in it were gone.

It was quite a cast of characters.

Natalie picked up the conversation. “In terms of our schedule—what we discussed last week is most acceptable. We’ll work on my aunt’s journals from nine until eleven each morning, which is all these old eyes can handle of faded, antique handwriting. You can record as I translate. The rest of the day will be yours for further research and writing, and I hope a bit of relaxation. Is the desk in the cottage adequate? It’s the one I used until my father died and I took over his study.”

“Yes. Much nicer than the desk in my condo in Cape.”

“I’m glad it’s sufficient. Not that you have to confine your work to the cottage, of course. My father collected books related to the history of the area, many of them long out of print. You’re welcome to borrow any you think may be helpful. You’ll find them in the study. I typically work there in the mornings, but now that I’ve taken on the journal project, I’ll work after my post-lunch nap from about one to three. Otherwise, the room is yours to use.”

Natalie worked? On what—other than baby afghans?

Since the woman didn’t offer any details, and probing would be rude, Cara let the remark pass. “Thank you.”

“Not at all. I’ve also alerted Paul Coleman that you’re here and may be in touch. I know you two are acquainted from your previous research.”

“Yes. He was very helpful.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. He lives and breathes Old Mines history. I think he spends every spare minute volunteering at the historical society. That man is a treasure trove of knowledge. We’ve had many a fine chat about the old days during his frequent visits. In fact, he was here last weekend. Feel free to reach out to him if you need anything from the historical society archives.”

“I will.”

“As for the rest of our daily schedule, unless you prefer to eat dinner in your cottage or go to town, I thought we’d share

our evening meals. I can't promise dinners like tonight's on a regular basis, but if you're satisfied with simple fare, you're welcome to join me."

That was an unexpected bonus. There'd been no discussion about eating together during their prior meetings. Otherwise, she wouldn't have stowed a week's worth of frozen dinners in the fridge in the cottage along with juice, bagels, and lunch fixings.

"I'd enjoy that. I eat alone most nights, except for a monthly meal with my siblings. It would be a welcome change to have company."

"For me as well. In general, dinners have been quiet affairs since my father died."

On impulse, Cara leaned over and touched her hand. "I just want to say again how grateful I am for your generosity and hospitality. The resources and expertise you offered gave me an edge for the fellowship, and I'll never be able to thank you enough. This project will help pave the way toward a full professorship."

"Let's hope so." Natalie patted her hand. "I believe there's worthwhile content from the pages I've skimmed here and there, but I can't guarantee how much of it will be useful to you."

"Primary sources are always valuable. A first-person account will give me a unique glimpse into the world of Old Mines during a transformative era and could offer fresh insights into the history here."

"And as an added bonus, it may also put a family mystery to rest."

Cara cocked her head. "How so?"

"My aunt died on this property. The official ruling was that she fell off the rocky outcrop at the top of the hill on the eastern edge of the land and suffered massive head injuries along with a broken neck. My father never wanted to talk

about it, nor did my uncle, but from what I gathered, there were rumors of suicide. Even murder.”

“Didn’t anyone investigate those?”

“I suppose they did, to whatever extent they deemed feasible. Apparently, there wasn’t any obvious evidence of foul play. Her journals weren’t discovered until many years later, in a box in the attic of the original house that was on the property, and by then interest in the circumstance of her demise had waned. There also wasn’t anyone willing or able to tackle the translation. But I’m thinking we may discover a few clues to her death as we work through them.”

“You’ve just added a touch of intrigue to our project.”

Natalie waved that aside. “I’m much too old for intrigue. I’ll be happy to learn a bit more about my family history while fulfilling my promise to my father to translate the journals.”

“Why didn’t he translate them himself? He spoke the language, didn’t he?”

“Yes. But his eyes were damaged in World War II, leaving him with compromised vision that would have made working with old, faded handwriting impossible. Besides, he never wrote the language. No one did. My aunt was the rare exception.”

“You must be one too.”

“No. My father and I used to converse in it often to keep our skills sharp, but I’ve never written it.”

What?

Cara frowned. “Then why did you . . . how can you translate your aunt’s journals?”

“I speak standard French, and as you know from your research, Missouri French is an amalgamation of Old Norman French, Native American languages, and frontier English. Some of my translation will be guesswork based on context, but I believe I’ll be able to decipher the gist of the text. My

French skills remain quite strong, thanks to my years at the Sorbonne and my continued use of the language.”

Cara stared at her as she absorbed that news. “You went to the Sorbonne? In Paris?” Why had her research on the woman not revealed that? As far as she’d been able to determine, Natalie had worked as an administrative assistant her whole life for a lawyer in a nearby small town.

“That would be the one.” Natalie leaned back and looked into the distance, a tiny smile playing at her lips. “Oh, I had grand plans for my life, despite the limitations imposed by my bout with polio. I was studying literature, aiming for a PhD and a university teaching career, like yours.” A shadow passed across her eyes, and she dropped her gaze. “But that wasn’t to be. I became ill near the end of my junior year with a serious case of mono accompanied by debilitating fatigue, and I had to come home. By the time I recovered, Papa had health issues of his own, and he needed me. I never went back.”

The poignant note in her inflection even after the passage of decades tightened Cara’s throat. “I’m so sorry you didn’t get to realize your dream.”

“Not every dream is meant to come true. But perhaps I can help someone else realize hers.” Natalie sent her a smile, then set her crocheting aside, rose, and gripped her cane. “I believe I’ll make this an early night. You’ll be all right on your own for the rest of the evening?”

“Yes.” Cara stood too. “I’m used to entertaining myself.”

“No young man in the picture back in Cape?”

Cara blinked.

That had come out of nowhere.

“No.”

Natalie exhaled. “Men can be very foolish—and short-sighted.”

“It sounds as if there’s a story there.” The comment popped

out before Cara could stop it, and she cringed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Don’t apologize. I asked you a nosy question, and turn-about is fair play. But no, there’s no unrequited love in my past. My physical issues were off-putting, as were my face and figure. Men don’t tend to be attracted to homely, big-boned women who limp.”

“I’m sorry.” What else could she say in response to such a starkly honest statement? “And I do understand what you’re saying about the difficulty of appealing to the opposite sex.”

Natalie’s features softened, and she touched her arm. “Not the homely part. You’re a beautiful woman.”

If she was, her limited dating history would suggest that her appearance wasn’t sufficient to compensate for her other issues.

“Thank you.”

At her perfunctory reply, Natalie smiled. “Your time will come. I have a sixth sense about these things. Just focus on your career for now and let nature take its course.” She started for the door. “There’s a flashlight on the kitchen counter to use for your walk back to the cottage, since our dinner was delayed tonight thanks to all the excitement. The path can be rather dark. Good night.”

Cara returned the sentiment as her hostess disappeared through the door, still digesting their unexpected and enlightening exchange.

Who would have guessed that a woman who’d spent most of her life deep in rural Missouri had gone to the Sorbonne, spoke fluent French, and had journals that potentially held not only useful anthropological information but also family secrets?

And what had Natalie meant about her continued use of standard French?

This project was becoming more fascinating by the minute.

Cara wandered into the kitchen, picked up the flashlight, and pulled out the key ring Natalie had given her. After exiting onto the galérie that encircled the house, she flicked on the light and followed the winding stone path toward the compact guest cottage tucked among the trees fifty yards away.

Thank goodness she had the flashlight. Otherwise, she'd have been feeling her way. Who knew nighttime in the country meant utter and absolute darkness? Not this city girl. But the stars were unbelievable.

She stopped, lowered her beam until it pointed toward the ground, and gaped at the diamond-strewn heavens. The stars in Cape were a pale facsimile to this glittering display. It was a shame she didn't know more about astronomy. It would be fun to identify—

A sudden flash of light, much closer to earth, redirected her attention, and she peered into the dark woods ahead.

Nothing.

Had she imagined that momentary bright flicker?

Maybe.

But the sudden shiver that rippled through her despite the lingering heat of day wasn't reassuring.

Aiming her flashlight at the path ahead, she picked up her pace and tamped down her feeling of unease. Logically, there was nothing to fear here. Natalie had lived on this land for decades with nary a problem. If the light had been real, it was probably the groundskeeper she'd mentioned—though why he'd be roaming around in the dark was a mystery.

Whatever the explanation for that terrestrial light, however, she could avoid future unsettling sights by going back to the cottage before nightfall.

She stopped at the door, key in hand, and scanned her surroundings. All appeared calm.

After slipping inside and sliding the lock into place, she flipped on a light in the single-room structure and surveyed

the furnishings. A queen-sized bed with what appeared to be a handmade quilt. A tiny kitchenette and café table. A comfortable reading chair, with a lamp beside it. And the generous desk Natalie had once used. All more than adequate for her needs as she and her hostess dived into the journals that would hopefully offer her a unique peek into the culture that had flourished in this remote, isolated area for almost two centuries, until the world intruded.

A surge of excitement set off a tingle in her nerve endings, and her mouth bowed as she crossed the room and pulled her sleep shirt out of the dresser. Only a historical anthropologist would get pumped at the prospect of spending a fall delving into old journals.

One thing for sure. Her work here would never be great fodder for scintillating, date-worthy conversation, even if a dating prospect was on the horizon.

An image of the sheriff appeared unbidden in her mind, and she huffed out a breath. Thinking about him in dating terms was silly. In all likelihood, the man had a significant other. And she wasn't here to date, anyway.

Nevertheless, meeting a handsome man in the first few minutes of her stay had been a pleasant surprise.

And Natalie's revelation about her background had been fascinating, capping off an unexpectedly eventful day.

All of which led her to ponder one question as she prepared for bed.

What other surprises lay in store for her during a research trip that was shaping up to be not only a career booster but an adventure?