

Copyright © 2022 by Sandra Kay Vosburgh

Published by Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy and recording— without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotation in printed reviews.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-212-9

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-213-6

Editor: Susan Page Davis

Cover by www.bookmarketinggraphics.com.

All scriptures are taken from the KING JAMES VERSION (KJV): KING JAMES VERSION, public domain.

All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

The Death
COLLECTOR

A SACKETS HARBOR MYSTERY

SANDRA KAY VOSBURGH



Scrivenings
PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.

www.ScriveningsPress.com

And they lay wait for their own blood; they lurk privily for their own lives. So are the ways of every one that is greedy for gain ...

Proverbs 1:18, 19

1



Sheriff Leo Meriday leaned over the body pulled from Lake Ontario. He'd worn the badge for nearly three decades, yet a queasiness invaded his gut the same way it did when he faced down his first corpse.

A breeze toyed with the gray hair that lay matted against the ashen face. Blue lips, open mouth, she stared coldly at the gulls gliding above the water. In spandex jogging pants and an Adidas tee, the woman looked fit except for the fact that she was dead.

He straightened and drew in a calming breath.

Midmorning rays shot through the sprawling maples and weeping willows that dotted the bank, while blue lights flashed from the cruisers parked along the blacktopped lane of the retirement village.

At his feet lay a cocker spaniel, whining.

Meriday's jaw tightened. He called to his deputy scouting the shoreline. "Bidwell, take the mutt to Kroft. Tell him to find it a home."

“Sir.” The rookie tugged the leash and coaxed the dog away from his deceased owner.

Duncan Kroft sat on a bench at the top of the knoll, his shirt and jeans soaked from his plunge to retrieve the old woman’s body. Behind him hovered a woman with a black bouffant, towel drying his hair.

The deputy posted the dog at Kroft’s bare feet, then hustled back and began a search of the hedgerow near the edge of the lake.

Meriday turned at the smack of a car door. *Finally*. The coroner.

Dr. Fred Albright dipped his head in greeting then knelt beside the body, shoved his horn-rimmed glasses up the sharp slope of his nose, and opened his kit. “Any ID yet, Leo?”

“Nita Beavers. A resident here.”

The coroner studied the dead woman. “Wasn’t in the water long.”

An ambulance arrived without pulsing lights and sirens. Warning beeps sounded while the driver backed the vehicle across the grass.

Meriday chafed at the sound of mounting babble. A small crowd of Willowdell residents had gathered around Duncan Kroft. “Bidwell.”

“Chief?” Bidwell rose and brushed the grass from the knees of his tan uniform.

“Did you get a statement from Kroft yet?”

“Yes, sir, when I first arrived.”

“Then send him on his way along with the nosey parkers.”

The rookie dipped his blond crewcut and hiked once more up the knoll toward the village square. The dog darted at his approach.

The snap of latex gloves grabbed Meriday’s attention.

“Received a blow to the side of her skull,” Fred said, stand-

ing. “Could have happened before she went into the water, or she could have hit her head on the rocks when she fell in. I’ll let you know what I find in the autopsy.” The coroner cued the paramedics waiting at the open back doors of the ambulance.

Meriday moved to the spot where Mrs. Beavers likely went into the lake and examined the two-foot drop from the grassy bank to the rock-strewn water. What caused her to lunge into the lake?

He scanned the ground for evidence of a struggle.

The roots of an old maple jutted above the soil. Nita could have tripped while jogging. Or lost her balance when she reached the edge of the lake. Perhaps while looking down, she rammed her head into one of the low-hanging branches.

Slow and silent, the ambulance moved toward the front gate, followed by the coroner. With his hands on his hips, Meriday turned back to the water poppling golden in the late-morning sun. Seagulls cried and circled overhead.

To his left, the hedgerow bordered a wooded area marked with walking trails. To the right, the lake’s shoreline stretched uninterrupted except for the occasional willow dipping its tendrils into the water for a drink.

Willowdell looked peaceful. Just outside the village of Sackets Harbor, the senior living community seemed a perfect place to live out the retirement years.

“Sheriff?”

He spun around.

“May I have a word?” Ada Whittaker’s blue eyes narrowed beneath the pink straw hat that housed her ivory bird’s nest hairdo.

Meriday crossed his arms. His linebacker build towered above her petite frame. The retired schoolteacher never lost the tendency to correct everyone’s paper. He bristled. “Something on your mind, Miss Whittaker?”

“Yes, indeed.”

Of course. There would be.

She pointed toward the bungalows that lined the north and south sides of the Willowdell square. “My sister lives in number eight. The yellow one closest to the lake.” She looked at him. “Frances—”

“Frances Ferrell? She called it in. She’s your sister?” *Don’t tell me there are two of you.*

“Yes, she saw Nita Beavers this morning and has a theory as to what happened to the poor woman.”

He clipped his thumbs in his belt and splayed his fingers over his weapon. “I prefer the coroner’s theory.”

The old woman raised an eyebrow and spoke firmly. “There’s no denying that, but if you are interested in the truth, and I assume you are, I would urge you to speak to my sister.” She stared him down, and he somehow knew she had maintained control of her classroom.

With an inward groan, he yielded. “Give me a minute.”

Meriday rubbed the nape of his neck while Ada Whittaker marched toward the yellow bungalow. He detected an ill wind. Ever since that scandal at Stonecroft, it seemed whenever Ada Whittaker stuck her nose in something, she’d pick up the scent of murder.

Maxwell Bailey tucked a book under his arm, grabbed a mug of coffee and a bag of yogurt-covered pretzels, and headed toward the back patio of his bungalow. At the kitchen door, he paused at his reflection in the smudged glass.

His hair poked from his head like gray spikes, while dull, dove-gray eyes looked back at him. His fleshy cheeks and jawline attested to weeks of comfort feeding.

He mumbled, “Whatever,” and opened the door.

In a cushioned chair at the patio table, Maxwell opened the sci-fi novel he had picked up in the Willowdell library. He munched pretzels and slipped deep into the storyline.

Minutes later a lake breeze swooped in and tossed the pretzel bag. Maxwell reached to retrieve it and became aware of the increasing volume of sirens. Their screams chilled the retirement village. Residents trickled from their bungalows, all astir and chatty, and toddled toward the lake and the flashing blue lights.

The coroner’s car arrived, and he wondered who bit the dust.

The impulse to run to the scene and offer spiritual aid and comfort had left him the moment the elders plopped him on the curb outside Westlake Community Church. His pastoring days were over. He no longer concerned himself with the matters of others.

Maxwell returned to his beige walls, barren except for the WCC calendar hanging on a nail in the kitchen. Unwashed pans and baking dishes filled the stainless-steel sink. Amid the clutter on the granite countertop sat a new stack of paper plates and a ream of Styrofoam cups he’d ordered online.

Maxwell pulled a brownie mix—also ordered online—out of the pantry and within minutes placed the batter-filled baking pan in the oven and withdrew to his bed.

Stretched out on his bedspread with pillows propping his head, Maxwell stared at the five-tiered bookcase holding his choicest volumes. The remainder of his vast library lay boxed in climate-controlled storage two miles away, at SafeSpace Storage in the village of Sackets Harbor.

For thirty-five years he collected Bibles, commentaries, study guides, and biographies of great men and brave women. For thirty-five years, he prepared sermons and stood behind

the pulpit of Westlake Community Church. Faithful to his call, preaching the gospel, he gave himself unceasingly to the work of the ministry.

What had it all come to? Five tiers of shelved theology.

The scent of warm chocolate lured him to the kitchen. The timer sounded the same moment he put a K-cup in the Keurig. Blowing on a plate of double-chewy brownies, he stepped out onto his porch, sat in one of the wicker chairs, and placed his mug on the table in front of him.

Oh, blissful moment ...

The irritating voice of his next-door neighbor reached him. “Yoo-hoo. Max.” Gladys Blumm stood on her porch flapping an arm. “Do you like them?”

He frowned. How could Gladys see the plate in his lap from thirty feet away?

The tall, stout woman with hair the color of pale butter pointed a finger. “The geraniums I put by your pillars.”

Two large flowerpots holding a mix of red geraniums and silver fox had been placed near the two front pillars of his porch. “Wow,” he mumbled. The woman had crept onto his property and left him with something that required work to maintain.

He called out, “That’s very kind of you, Mrs. Blumm.”

“Call me Gladys. We’re friends.”

He groaned.

“Look in the front.” Gladys Blumm’s wrinkled face glowed.

Reluctantly, Maxwell set the plate on the table and moved off the porch. Next to an azalea bush, a garden flag waved in the breeze. A frog sat on a lily pad beneath an umbrella. It read, *Welcome to My Pad.*

Oh, Lord ...

“Remember, Max. F-R-O-G. Fully rely on God.” She smiled and waved, then went back into her gray bungalow.

He wiped his forehead with the napkin in his hand.

A dog whimpered. *Oh, no. She didn't...*

Maxwell turned to see Stanley sulking about the square, his leash dragging in the grass. That was odd. Why would he be out wandering by himself? Maxwell looked up and down the sidewalk, then crossed to the square with a crinkled brow.

He knelt by the dog and stroked its mahogany coat. “Where’s your lady, Stanley? Huh, boy? Where’s Miss Nita?”