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Leo Meriday left the lake area and walked toward the square. Late spring blossoms colored the scattered flower beds, and a dozen or so cast-iron benches had been placed strategically near shade trees. In the center of the square, water glistened while it spilled over the rims of a three-tiered fountain surrounded by a patterned brick walkway.

Just beyond the square lay what resembled an elongated lodge, yellow sided, white trimmed. An open porch lined with Shaker style rockers ran the length of the building. On the many glass doors, black lettering read, *Gym, Pool, Clinic, Lobby, Café, Lounge, and Library*. A tall planter of mixed blossoms and trailing vines guarded each side of each door.

Meriday paused near a maple, debating whether to rest a moment on the bench. He'd been on his feet for hours. A few small branches lay in the dirt and grass under the tree. Could that be what happened? A rotted branch fell on Nita Beavers when she jogged by? Tragedy so often happened like that. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He ran a hand through his hair and moved on.

At number eight, the bungalow of Frances Ferrell, Meriday again resisted the impulse to sit. Like a picture from his wife's *Home and Garden* magazine, the porch invited him to rest on one of the padded swivel rockers set amid pots of flowers and ferns.

He stepped to the blue door and reached to prove to himself the white tulips in the swag were fake when the door opened. A woman of about seventy with smooth, chin-length white hair stood with one hand on her hip. Her eyes were dark with mascara and shadow, her cheeks forced to flush with rouge, and her thin lips stroked with deep rose lipstick.

Meriday straightened his shoulders and deepened his voice to counter his embarrassment. "Mrs. Ferrell?"

"Come in, Sheriff."

He found it hard to believe this woman and Ada Whittaker were sisters. Frances Ferrell wore glitz. A red silk blouse, white slacks, and fine gold jewelry around her neck and on her wrists. Ada Whittaker—from what he had ever seen—always wore a denim skirt, a plain, buttoned-up blouse, and what were called sensible shoes.

Mrs. Ferrell waved him to a crème-colored chair, then perched her tall, thin frame on the edge of the matching sofa and planted her feet squarely on the blue marbled rug.

He sank down in the soft leather. Relief flooded his aching feet.

"Someone pushed Nita Beavers into the lake." Mrs. Ferrell clamped her hands together. "I'm sure of it."

Ada came in carrying a frosted glass of lemonade and set it on the coaster beside him. "I made a pitcher this morning. With fresh lemons. I thought it best to have some refreshment on hand in case anyone stopped in to talk about the tragedy." She joined her sister on the sofa. "I do find people like to talk about tragedy, don't you?"

“Living at Willowdell now, Miss Whittaker?” She wore no makeup or jewelry, except a simple wristwatch.

“Mercy, no. I’m still on Fairfield Lane. But Gwen—you remember my secretary-slash-companion? I’m afraid she’s taken it upon herself to oversee the remodeling of the bathrooms. I couldn’t object too loudly to her proposal. The old Victorian is well over one hundred. Of course, the bathrooms aren’t that old.” She blushed. “I’m staying with Frances until the contractor is finished. Would you care for a chocolate?”

Ada lifted the lid off a small brown box with gold lettering that read *Hegler Chocolates* and held the box out to him.

The frown on Frances Ferrell’s face told him they were expensive. But what the heck, if she lived at Willowdell, she could afford it. He reached for one.

Mrs. Ferrell pinched her lips. “Sheriff, may I continue?”

“Please.” His mouth watered while he removed the gold foil wrapper. He chewed the chocolate cloud and fought to keep drool from leaking out the sides of his mouth. With his little black book in hand, he jotted down a note while she spoke.

“About eight thirty this morning, I heard Nita calling for Stanley to come back. Stanley is Nita’s dog.” She leaned forward. “That’s when I looked up from watering the ferns on my porch and saw Stanley racing toward the lake, barking. It struck me as odd.”

Meriday studied her firm jawline and sculpted neck and wondered if Frances Ferrell had undergone plastic surgery.

“In the eighteen months I’ve been living at Willowdell,” she went on, “I’d never heard Nita yell or seen Stanley run away from her. Probably chasing after a squirrel or a rabbit. Anyway, at the maple tree near the bank he stopped and barked at something in the tree. Or maybe at someone behind the tree.”

Meriday grabbed the glass and eyed the little brown box on the table near Ada.

“Are you listening?” Frances Ferrell squinted at him.

“Yes, ma’am.” Meriday shifted and forced himself to focus on her story. After all, the woman might say something important.

“Nita caught up, but she’d gone behind the tree. I couldn’t see her. The next thing, I heard a splash. Ever so faint, but nonetheless a splash. I waited. But Nita never came back into view. That’s when I called the office. I wanted someone to check on her.”

Meriday returned the empty glass to the coaster. “Did you see anyone besides Mrs. Beavers down by the lake?”

Ada picked up the open candy box and held it out to him.

Why not? He took a white chocolate this time and twirled the rich cream on his tongue while he waved for Mrs. Ferrell to continue.

“I saw no one. But someone must have been there. Crouching behind the tree.”

“Isn’t it possible”—he wiped his mouth—“Mrs. Beavers slipped on the grass, or perhaps tripped on a tree root?”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. Nita Beavers was a fit woman.”

“Oh my, yes,” Ada agreed. “Very active. Swimming aerobics. Hiking. Bicycling. Even tennis—and that’s so demanding.”

He had noted the toned muscles of the seventy-four-year-old victim.

“You see,” Frances said, “if Nita had tripped into the water, she could have easily gotten herself out. She had to have been incapacitated in some way, unable to assist herself. Do you see what I mean?”

More clearly than Frances Ferrell knew. But without an

eyewitness to foul play or, better yet, medical evidence, he chose to consider the woman's death an accident.

"Yes, ma'am. I appreciate the information. If you think of anything else or hear or see anything out of the norm, please contact the station." He rose from the chair, and before tucking his notebook into his shirt pocket he glanced at his only entry, *Hegler Chocolates*.

Ada walked with him to the door and spoke in a hushed tone. "You didn't take many notes."

"Yes, ma'am. That's true."

"Then let's pray a pop quiz doesn't land on your desk."

He tilted his head. "A pop quiz?"

"Yes, Sheriff. On murder."