

## Chapter Three

---



### *Liesl*

The following morning, Liesl stood shivering on the front porch, balancing a dented foil pie pan stacked with brownies.

“Do you know what your aunt did at the book club fundraiser a few weeks ago?”

“Actually, you told me about it.” She resisted looking at Mrs. Detmeier’s eyes. They looked cartoonish, magnified by her coke-bottle-bottom lenses.

“Well, we all sat around the table, when she ...”

Liesl mentally rolled her eyes. Although Mrs. Detmeier’s story was worthy of a chuckle at the visitation, it was less amusing the second go-round after the funeral. Faced with a third rendition, Liesl fought the urge to scream.

Poor Mrs. Detmeier. Her cheese was slipping off her cracker, and she was blissfully unaware of its imminent departure.

At least Aunt Suzanne had been fully alert until the end. Or

had she? Her strange ramblings that last day were so out of character. Did her sickness cause Aunt Suzanne to get confused? Talking about a killer and a *book*. Had her long search for Winnie Whitcomb's killer spun out of control at the end?

A red Chevrolet Suburban turned the corner and stopped in front of the house. Liesl's heart skipped, and she couldn't help smiling. A petite, brown-skinned woman jumped down from the car. She was saved.

Nicole shouted a greeting to the departing Mrs. Detmeier, then threw her arms around Liesl, taking care to avoid the perilous tower of brownies.

After their hug, they watched with morbid fascination as Mrs. Detmeier made her way to the Buick parked mostly in Aunt Suzanne's front yard. With a growl from the engine, Mrs. Detmeier threw the sedan into reverse, crushing a hedge and nearly sideswiping a hefty maple tree before she found the brick-lined street.

"That blue-haired land torpedo barely missed your Suburban, Nic." Liesl's breath showed in the frigid air.

"I'm going to call her son when I get home and insist he take away her keys. She's a lethal weapon behind the wheel."

Liesl smiled. "You always know when I need you."

"I *am* amazing like that."

Liesl chuckled. "You have great instincts."

"It was Lee. He asked me how you were doing. I figured I'd better see with my own eyes. How'd your meeting with Mr. Van de Berg go?"

"It was sad, but there was one good thing. I'm to inherit this house."

Nicole squealed with joy. "Oh, praise the Lord. Does that mean you're moving back home?"

“I’m leaning toward that, but I don’t want to rush my decision. I’ve really enjoyed living in Houston.”

“I know you have, but I’ve missed you. My husband, daughter, and I have a good life together. But I’d like my friend nearby.”

“Come in. Let’s have coffee and brownies for lunch.”

Nicole gave Liesl a wry smile. “Don’t you have any healthier leftovers? Perhaps the angel food cake Mrs. Williams made from scratch, swimming in her homemade strawberry preserves?”

“We also have the option of carrot cake with cream cheese icing, broken into large chunks over ice cream.”

“Vegetables. Now you’re talking.”

Liesl stowed the stack of brownies on the counter, already overflowing with homemade baked goods. They chatted while she brewed a fresh pot of coffee.

“Can you believe Aunt Suzanne ground her own coffee beans?”

“Sure.” Nicole removed her knit cap and fluffed her wavy brown hair. “She had good taste. Enjoying excellent coffee is as important as the new furniture she donated to the hospital waiting room. She was a connoisseur of life’s finer things.”

“For others. She hardly spent a dime on herself.”

“You’re right.” Nicole walked over and touched Liesl’s arm. “Are you doing okay? Really?”

Liesl gave Nicole a bowl of ice cream and cake. “I’m trying to get my mind around this. It was so sudden. She was fine when she came to Houston over Labor Day. We talked on the phone every couple of days. She never mentioned feeling bad.”

“Not a groan or an arthritic gripe?”

“Nothing. It shocked me when Doreen called to say she was so sick.”

“You sound as if you blame yourself because she came

down with a nasty virus. The flu is a serious threat to the elderly, as well as the rest of us.”

“Of course.” The chair squealed its resistance as Liesl pulled it out from the kitchen table. “I can’t help but believe I should have done more.”

They ate in companionable silence. Then Liesl asked, “When did you last see Aunt Suzanne?”

Nicole twirled her spoon in the ice cream. “Sunday. When she was leaving early service at her church. We were heading for our church. She was in the parking lot. I waved at her, and she waved back.”

“How’d she look?”

“She looked great. She wore that purple suit you bought her. At that distance, I couldn’t see more than her suit and her smile.”

Liesl grinned, remembering the bullying necessary for Aunt Suzanne to accept that suit as a birthday present. “It makes me happy she wore it near the end. That suit was my last gift to her.”

“I’m sure she loved it.” Nicole sipped her coffee. “This bowl of dessert is decadent, but an excellent change from my usual lunch.”

“Everything tastes better with ice cream.” Liesl launched a large spoonful to her lips.

Nicole sighed. “Be grateful you were raised by some of the nicest, godliest people I’ve ever met.”

Tears filled Liesl’s eyes. “You always say the right things. Aunt Suzanne loved to tell me how shocked she was when she found out she and Uncle Max were my guardians. My father talked to Max when I was born, and he’d agreed to it, never giving a thought to letting her know. She always claimed I was the best surprise in her life.”

Nicole nodded. “She told me. It’s a great story. Just think, if

you'd gone to one of your father's brothers or sisters, you'd have been one of many in a big family. Being raised by Mr. and Mrs. Schrader as their only chick gave you their complete attention. You've turned out great under their inexperienced tutelage."

Liesl nodded. "God has a plan. We might not understand it in the beginning."

"Exactly. Anytime you want to visit their graves or do something that hurts your heart, call me. We'll do it together."

"Thank you. You know I'll call." After a pause, Liesl added, "I thanked Aunt Suzanne repeatedly for the wonderful life she gave me. She worried that since her own mother was difficult to love, she wouldn't be a good mother, but she was wonderful."

Nicole wiped a tear. "I'm glad you did that."

"There's something I want to discuss. Just you and me."

"Talk. I don't have anything until"—she glanced at the clock—"one thirty today."

"Okay. When I arrived last week, Aunt Suzanne was rather delirious. She said something about a killer and finding a book." Liesl turned to Nicole. "I couldn't tell if she was hallucinating or lucid. It's haunted me ever since."

"I never experienced her being confused about anything." Nicole stopped eating, and her brow furrowed. "She was always talking about her friend's murder. What was her name?"

"Winifred Whitcomb. Aunt Suzanne called her Winnie. She was killed when Aunt Suzanne was in high school."

"Maybe someone has written a book about it. Or she wanted you to consider writing a book about it."

"I write romance, not nonfiction." Liesl swirled her spoon in her bowl. "But that's not the point. She specifically said,

‘You need to find my book,’ which means she’d either bought a book about the murder or had written one herself.”

Nicole pulled out her cell phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Searching for any books about Winnie.” After a moment, she shook her head and stowed her phone. “Nothing. I suggest you look around for a book your aunt was writing. You haven’t lived here for several years. You’ve written books. Maybe she wanted to do the same.”

Liesl pondered Nicole’s suggestion. Aunt Suzanne could have hired a ghostwriter or a historical researcher, or both. Her financial records would show payments or charges for that. The Historical Society might have information about the murder. They’d know if Suzanne had been there to look at their documents. Then a third option came to her. “Remember those appointment diaries Aunt Suzanne always kept?”

“Sure.”

“She called them journals, or just books. Maybe she’d found some new information about that murder and wrote about it there.”

“That’s plausible,” Nicole said. “She always had one in the butler’s pantry, by the phone, back when she had a house phone. Once she got rid of her landline, I don’t remember seeing those books around anywhere.”

“She brought one to Houston with her over Labor Day. Wonder where those are? Especially her current one.”

“Keep your eye out for them when you sort through everything. They’d be fascinating to read.”

“I’m not ready to go through her stuff yet.”

Nicole looked around the kitchen. “I figured she’d leave you this wonderful old thing. It’s your home, and I’d love to have you back in town, but don’t rush your decision. This has been a great shock. You’re gonna need time.”

“I need to take my mind off my grief.” Liesl’s voice shook. “Otherwise, I’ll dig myself into a deep depression.”

Nicole reached over and patted her arm. “I won’t let that happen.”

“Thanks, my friend.” Liesl rose. “More coffee?”

“Since you’re up, I’d love a refill.” While Liesl topped off her coffee, Nicole said, “My grandmother mentioned that murder occasionally. Winnie’s murder. Apparently, it terrified everyone. They thought some lunatic was in town intending to bludgeon all the young girls. Grammy said she wasn’t allowed to walk anywhere alone until she was an adult. It took years before the town returned to normal.”

“They never caught Winnie’s killer.”

When Liesl returned to the table, Nicole eyed her for a moment. “Would you consider writing a book?”

“Possibly. The murder’s interesting and might lead to a good story.”

“It has potential.” Nicole whittled another bite from her mound of ice cream.

Liesl considered the idea. “I wish I knew more about it. Aunt Suzanne didn’t talk much about it because it upset her. Did they ever determine any serious suspects?”

“Grammy believed it was a railroad hobo. The train station was relatively close to the house where she was killed. Grammy said ruffruff would wander through her neighborhood begging food.”

“Isn’t that a little random? A hobo hops off a train, beats a young girl to death, and then jumps on the next train out of town. And how did your Grammy know so much about town? I thought she was raised on a farm.”

“Gramps was the farm boy. Grammy was a townie until she married him.” Nicole changed the subject. “Your Uncle Myron gave a beautiful testimonial at the funeral.”

“Didn’t he? I’m sorry he had to fly back to California so soon. He promised next time he’d stay longer.”

“I figured many people would attend your aunt’s funeral. I had no idea the entire town would try to squeeze into the church service.”

“Not the entire town.” As soon as the snide comment burst from her mouth, Liesl added, “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Nicole frowned. “No, you’re right. I expected Kurt to be there. He should have been there.”

All of Liesl’s anger, pain, and humiliation at his slight against her aunt’s memory rose to the surface. She forced her lips shut but saw her emotions duplicated in Nicole’s eyes. When Liesl suffered, Nicole suffered.

The old-fashioned doorbell sounded before Liesl could change the subject again.

“I’ll get it,” Nicole offered and scurried away.

Liesl recognized the voice in the entryway. She stiffened and wished she could vanish as completely as Amelia Earhart.