

THE VICTIM DID IT FIRST

A Carne Cove Mystery

Honest Earning

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For the ones who kept growing.
And for the ones who should still be here.

*'The foxglove, if you know what to look for, tells you exactly
what it is.*

It does not pretend to be harmless.'

— Iris Marsh, in a letter never sent

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Chapter One

The estate agent's directions had included the phrase "*you can't miss it*," which Nell had learned, over thirty-eight years of being given directions, was the single most reliable indicator that she would absolutely miss it.

She missed it twice.

The lane that led to Cove Cottage turned off the coastal road between a farm gate and a postbox that had been painted over so many times the slot had nearly closed with paint, and it was the sort of turn that didn't so much announce itself as simply appear when you'd already passed it and were swearing quietly into your windscreen. On the third pass, Nell caught it, rattled down a track of loose gravel and grasping hedgerow, and came out the other side into a light so clean and particular — sea-brightened, bounced off water she couldn't yet see — that she stopped the car for a moment and just looked.

The cottage sat at the end of the track, half-swallowed by its own garden.

Which was, she supposed, one way to describe it. Another way would be: extraordinarily alive. Another would be: a complete structural disaster, botanically speaking, but spectacular. The front wall was barely visible beneath what she identified, even from the car, as a *Rosa filipes* 'Kiftsgate' — a climbing rose that anyone with any horticultural sense would have kept in check, and that someone had clearly allowed to do exactly as it liked for at least a decade. It had made its opinion known. Beyond it, in the narrow front garden, she could see the silver-green feathering of artemisia, great drifts of catmint still weeks from blooming, and what appeared to be a self-

seeded fennel colony that had annexed approximately a third of the path.

Nell sat with the engine off for a moment, listening to the sea she couldn't quite see and looking at the garden she hadn't expected.

She had known, theoretically, that her great-aunt Dorothy had been a gardener. She had not known, because nobody had mentioned it and she hadn't asked, that Dorothy had apparently been a gardener in the way that some people are gardeners — a little obsessively, a little devotedly, and with scant regard for anything that wasn't growing.

"Right," she said, to nobody, and got out of the car.

The smell hit her first. She had written, in print, that no description of a garden was complete without its smell, and she stood at the gate for a moment being professionally correct: fresh soil after last night's rain, the faintly resinous warmth of the artemisia, something sweet she couldn't immediately place catching on the breeze from somewhere deeper in the garden. Salt underneath all of it. The sea was closer than she'd realised.

She found the key under the third terracotta pot from the left, as the estate agent had promised, and let herself in.

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The cottage, inside, was exactly what you'd expect from a woman Nell had met perhaps four times and always at Christmas, always wearing the same green cardigan with a brooch that had a small chip out of it. Slightly cramped. Slightly overfull. Books double-stacked on every shelf, the inner row accessible only by removing the outer row and requiring a trust in one's own memory that Nell found both admirable and alarming. In the kitchen, a row of preserves lined a high shelf — gooseberry, sloe, something amber and unidentified. In the sitting room, framed botanical prints covered nearly every

available inch of wall, and in the corner, a writing desk bore a shallow glass vase holding what appeared to be the dried and pressed remains of something that had once been a very good foxglove.

Nell looked at it for a moment. *Digitalis purpurea*, first-year rosette if she had to guess, pressed before it had flowered — someone saving it from the garden before the weather turned.

She was about to carry her bag upstairs when the knock came at the front door.

She nearly walked into the woman on the step.

"I *thought* I saw a car," said the woman, with the tone of someone who had been proved right about something they were not remotely surprised to have been right about. She was small and fast-moving, in her seventies, with secateurs protruding from the pocket of her waxed jacket and garden gloves tucked under one arm with the casual authority of a person who had just come in from something important and would be going back out again shortly. "I'm Meredith Quill. I live next along — the white gate, you can see it from the kitchen window if you lean. I knew Dorothy for thirty years. I brought eggs."

She produced, from the other arm, a small cardboard box.

"Thank you," Nell said, and meant it. She'd eaten nothing since a petrol station sandwich at noon. "I'm Nell Hartley — Dorothy's great-niece."

"I know who you are. Dorothy talked about you. She said you knew your plants." Meredith's eyes had already gone past Nell to the interior of the cottage, making a swift and thorough inventory.

"Have you had a chance to look at the garden properly yet?"

"I've just arrived."

"You'll want to look at the garden." This was not a suggestion.

"Dorothy kept it beautifully, all things considered, and I've been keeping an eye — I came in twice in January to cut things back — but the Rosa filipes needs talking to, and the south bed has had a bit of a volunteer situation with the fennel. Lovely plant, but a bit of a land grab if you let it. I imagine you know."

"I do know," Nell said. She could feel the slight, specific pleasure of talking to someone who assumed, rather than doubted, her competence. Most people, upon learning she wrote about gardens for a living, asked her what her favourite flower was. "Do you want to come in?"

"No, no, I won't stay — things to do. But I wanted to say: if you have questions about anything, garden or otherwise, I'm just along. I know where everything is." A pause that seemed to be allowing the comprehensive nature of this offer to sink in. "Everything," she repeated, lightly, and handed over the eggs.

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The garden, Nell discovered over the following two hours, was as good as she'd thought from the car. Better, possibly.

Dorothy had been — the evidence suggested strongly — someone who planted with intention but left with freedom. The bones were thoughtful: clear structural planting, good bones in the hedging, the bones of a cottage garden done properly. But she had allowed things to roam, to reseed, to colonise small territories and call truces with their neighbours. The result was the kind of garden that professional garden designers spent considerable effort and money attempting to manufacture and rarely quite achieved: something that looked, improbably, both considered and wild.

Nell walked the paths with her hands in her jacket pockets, making mental notes. The sea was visible from the back, down a slope of

rough grass to a low stone wall and then a drop she couldn't see the bottom of. The light was extraordinary. She could hear gulls and, below them, the particular low conversation of waves against a rocky shore.

She spent a long time near the south bed, where the fennel had indeed staged an impressively organised takeover, and somewhat longer in the corner where — under a *Viburnum tinus* that had been allowed to become frankly architectural — she found several plants she wouldn't have expected in a coastal garden of this latitude. Someone had worked to grow them here. Someone had wanted them specifically.

She was kneeling to look at the base of one of them when she heard footsteps on the gravel path.

"You must be Dorothy's niece."

Nell straightened up. The woman standing at the gate to the back garden was perhaps fifty, slightly built, with grey-streaked hair worn loose around her face. She was carrying a small pot — something wrapped in brown paper tucked against her hip — and she had the weathered, particular look of someone who spent a great deal of time outside without caring overly much about it. Her hands, Nell noticed, were patient. The rest of her face was composed. Her eyes, when they met Nell's, were very still.

"Great-niece," Nell said. "Nell Hartley."

"Clara Marsh." She held up the pot. "I brought this — a *salvia nemorosa*, one of Dorothy's favourites. She divided the original plant with me four years ago, so it seemed right you should have a piece back." She smiled, and it was a warm smile, genuine. "I live at the far end of the cove. I kept a small garden — I knew Dorothy from the plant market, mostly. She was very generous with cuttings."

This has been a preview of

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and the archive, get the full book:

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