

## Chapter 1

Helen

Brattleboro, Vermont, September 2018

Sunlight shimmered through the branches of the ancient sugar maples as a gentle breeze tossed the leaves that carpeted the ground into a glittery whirl of yellow, rust and Irish Setter red. The dying leaves a reminder of her own fragility and the bleakness of a wintry future.

Helen stepped out of the Mercedes, its sporty carriage covered with a thick layer of brown dust. She had the sense to wear short flat-heeled boots and couldn't care less whether they were ruined.

Her throat felt dry and she swallowed whatever saliva she could summon, then took a few tentative steps, letting the car door close. The house was up a slight incline, beyond a weather-beaten fence whose gate hung crookedly between two posts. She started up the gravel path to her past . . . and her future. For now, she chided herself, her *present*.

She'd passed a newly painted sign when she turned off the road announcing Ainsley Hill Farm, and wondered if her aunt had it refinished for her sake. To make her feel like she was coming home. She was. Ordinarily this would be a happy occasion. A holiday, of sorts.

But life had taken a few wrong turns and she was back home to rest, to de-stress, her agent insisted, and to begin work on her next novel. Her twenty-second mystery.

Perhaps her last. Unbidden, her hand touched her head and a shudder ran through her. Peach fuzz. Her once thick and shining mane only now growing in again.

She turned to see her aunt descending the front porch steps and heading toward her. Her father's sister had gained weight but carried it well on her tall frame.

Helen hurried to meet the older woman, who leaned heavily on a cane as she came forward.

"Helen, my dear, you look wonderful."

Helen laughed. "You were never a good liar, Marie. But I love you anyway."

Helen pulled Marie into a satisfying, long embrace. Separating, the two women stared at each other across the years and liked what they saw. Both smiled and nodded, turned, and walked slowly to the old house, no words needed.

The porch creaked and the screen door had a tear in it. The house needed a new coat of paint. Several clapboards were broken and there was a thin crack in the front room window. Helen straightened her shoulders and realized, at that moment, she would be responsible for future care and maintenance of the old homestead. Marie, at eighty-seven, could no longer be its caretaker.

Well, she told herself, that might be just what you need.

"Your room is ready, Helen. As always. Waiting for you."

"Waiting for me? Come on, Marie. I haven't been back in, what, ten years?"

"Exactly. It's been waiting. Patiently." Marie pushed open the front door.

Helen followed her inside.

The front hall seemed claustrophobic. Low, thick heavy-beamed ceilings. Honey-colored, wide pine paneling on the floor. A steep wooden staircase on the left, its treads scraped and beaten with over two hundred-fifty years of hard use. The first few steps into the house was like traveling back in history.

Helen moved through the doorway to her left into the living room, or parlor, and felt grateful the sun was out, providing natural warm light into the room. Otherwise, it would be quite dismal. Unlike her condo in the City with its skylights and high ceilings and white and chrome furnishings reflecting an intensity of light so radiant, you needed sunglasses.

She sighed, wondering if this was a mistake. Could she live here again at this time in her life? Then her eye caught something outside the window and she stepped closer to gaze out the rippled glass. In front of the house stood her old friend. A glorious, ancient sugar maple. Two people could stand shoulder to shoulder on one side of the tree and never be spotted on the other. How wide was it? How old was it? Helen wasn't sure, but it was here when the house was built in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.

“What are you looking at?” Marie asked.

“The old maple.”

Marie smiled. “That old beauty has seen a lot in its days. Kind of like me.”

Helen laughed. “If only it could talk.”

“In some ways . . . it does.”

Helen raised an eyebrow.

“Shall we get you settled then?” Marie said. “Since my leg has been a bit ornery of late, I've moved down to the bedroom behind the kitchen.”

“I'm sorry,” Helen said.

“No, no, it's fine. Love it, in fact. It's the warmest room in the house . . . next to the stove, you see. I want you to take the big room upstairs. The master.”

Helen's chin came up. Her mother and father's room during her childhood. “All right. But before I get my bags, why don't we have a cup of tea?”

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After dinner, Helen unpacked and ambled out to the front porch. The evening air felt warm and thick, like a cozy flannel blanket. Birds sang, squirrels squabbled, and the buzz of insects transported her back to her youth. She sank into an old rocker, painted white many times over through the years. It squeaked with pleasure as if remembering its occupant.

In the distance she heard a dog bark. A bark that sounded familiar like the golden retrievers she had over the years. God, she missed them, missed them all. Speaking of God, what the hell was he thinking when he gave dogs such a short life span?

The bark sounded closer now and more insistent. Helen stood and looked around. She stepped down from the porch. There, at the gate by the drive a golden retriever stood and stared at her, tail wagging. A ripple of something akin to joy ran through her. Silly, it's just a neighbor's dog. Helen walked slowly to the animal.

“Hey, puppy. Are you lost? I bet you're just looking for a handout, hmm?”

The dog sat and gave a soft woof.

Helen moved closer, hand out. “What's up, honey?”

The dog bounded up and raced full tilt at her, buried its nose in her knees.

Helen stooped over, afraid to kneel for fear of not being able to get up. “What's up, honey? Are you trying to tell me something?”

The dog sat back and stared up at her.

“Ahh, you're an old girl, aren't you? Look at that gray around your nose. Old, right. Like me.” Helen smiled. The dog gave a short happy bark.

“Where’s your collar? No tags? Maybe Aunt Marie knows who you are. In fact, I bet she feeds you and that’s why you’re here.” She straightened and walked to the house. “Let’s see what she has to say.”

The dog followed her to the porch.

Marie stepped outside. “Now, who is that?”

“Oh. You don’t know?”

“I’ve never seen her.”

“Uh oh.” Helen turned to the dog. “Well, we’re going to have to find your owners, aren’t we?”

“She’s not from around here,” Marie said. “I know all the folks and their animals for a few square miles and she’s not one.” She paused. “Sweet, though, isn’t she?”

Helen looked at the dog. “Tomorrow, honey, we’ll check out your family. Somehow.”

“Honey?” Marie said.

“Fits her coloring and personality, don’t you think? I’ll call her that for now.”

Marie smirked. “For now, right.”

“What?”

“Don’t get too attached, dear. You’re not good with loss.” Marie turned and went back into the house.

Not good with loss, Helen mused. She’s right about that.

Honey turned and ambled off the porch to the bench in the grass under the ancient maple.

“You love that tree too, don’t you?” Helen followed her and sat down on the bench. The golden curled herself up at Helen’s feet and let out a deep sigh.

“I hope that’s a sigh of contentment.” She breathed out her own sigh as she leaned her back against the gnarly bark. Within a few minutes, Helen dozed off, exhausted from life’s vicissitude. Country girl to city girl. Copy editor to famous author. Married woman to widow. Healthy to sick. Years ahead of her, now years behind her. And back to the beginning. Country girl.

Honey barked. Helen jolted awake.

The dog jumped up and barked again.

“What?” Helen asked. She stood, turned around expecting to find someone walking toward her. Honey seemed focused on the tree. She moved closer to it, sniffing, circling the trunk. A second time. Suddenly she leaped up and put her front paws on the tree trunk, stretching as far as she could.

“Is it a squirrel?”

Helen knew right away this was something different. She had lots of experience with dogs chasing squirrels up trees.

“What is it, Honey?”

Helen moved closer to the tree, following the line of Honey’s paws. That’s when she saw them. Letters carved in the bark. SM-AR, with a heart etched around them. The letters were crude, carved with a knife or chisel, and coated with moss. Old. The letters were old. Who were SM and AR? No one in her family that she could remember. How long ago were these etched?

“It’s all right, Honey. Just two lovers who carved their initials into our tree.”

Honey looked at her and sniffed the tree again.

“There’s a mystery here to solve then, isn’t there? Maybe it would make a good book? I mean, maybe those lovers lived here when the house was new, when it was an

Inn during the Revolutionary War. Hey, right.” She stared up at the thinly leafed branches towering seventy feet above her.

Suddenly tired from the fuss, Helen turned and sank down onto the bench again. The movement made her dizzy. She squeezed her eyes closed, willing her mind to return to neutral.

Honey jumped up and started barking once more. In a split second, the dog was attempting to climb the tree again.

“Oh, come on, Honey.”

But the dog would not quit until Helen joined her once again.

“It’s just a squirrel . . . it’s . . .” Helen’s voice dropped an octave. She pushed Honey off the tree and stepped closer for another look. She squinted, took a few steps back to improve her vantage point. Then she ran her hands over the initials, or where she believed the initials were carved. She kept looking at and feeling the bark.

“What the hell?” Helen walked the circumference of the tree and even stood on the bench so she could get higher and closer. “This is crazy. I must be crazy. It’s the light.”

The daylight was fading, but the sun still cast its last watery glow on the tree. “It has to be the light,” she murmured, unsure.

Helen stared at the spot where she knew the initials to be. But now all she saw, all her fingers touched . . . was the craggy bark of an old sugar maple.

The heart and initials were gone.