

Is it mercy or murder? Sisters Naomi and Louise try solving their grandmother's mysterious death. They search for motives in a family entwined by guilt. Does the truth lie in the forests of British Columbia or is it hiding in Oregon, Arizona or Europe? Told in the voices of the characters involved, Kindred Lives makes us privy to their deepest - and sometimes darkest - emotions.

Kindred Lives

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A Novel

KINDRED LIVES

Entwined by Guilt

WENDY HURLEY SMITH

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Chapter One

The fact that her grandmother may have been euthanized always bothered Naomi. Not the act of euthanasia itself, she just wished she knew for sure. Her mother had only alluded to it once and when pressed for details had shut off the conversation in a hurry. It was so like her mother to give you a small glimpse into what was on her mind and then retreat. There was a side to her mother that she never revealed, not even to her daughter.

Though the discussion took place a long time ago, Naomi remembered it clearly. They'd been discussing the Vietnam War. Knowing her grandmother died in 1964, when Naomi was four, she had asked if Gran had been aware that the war had taken place.

"Not really. She'd had a series of strokes," her mother explained. "She really didn't know what was going on."

"Could she talk?"

"No, it just came out garbled. It didn't seem to make sense."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He didn't come by very often; it was rural British Columbia, don't forget. The district nurse used to call though. She said it was to be expected at Gran's age."

"How old was Gran?"

"Seventy four or seventy five, I can never remember which." Her mother paused. "She had been ill for so long."

"Was she paralyzed by the strokes?"

"Only partially at first. Toward the end, she seemed to lose all muscle control."

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“I remember her not being able to move. What did she eventually die of?”

Her mother didn't answer right away. She seemed rooted in the past. The words, when they came, were spoken in a trance like way, as though she was still in that faraway place.

“Well, there was talk that they helped her go.”

Naomi was stunned at the confession. “Who?”

“The girls, they were watching her while Kath and I went bowling. It was their idea for me to get away for a while. When I came home she was gone.”

“You mean dead?” Naomi asked.

“Yes, just lying there in bed, looking for all the world like she was sleeping.” Her mother paused, reliving the memory of that night. “I couldn't believe she would die without me there. I had cared for her for so long.”

Naomi couldn't see her mother's face. Characteristically, she had turned away to hide her emotions. There was a prolonged silence between them as Naomi fought to recover from the shock of what she was hearing. All she'd known to this point was that her mother nursed Gran for a number of years. As the youngest daughter, and the last one left at home, the duty naturally fell to her mother. Some help came from a sister, Kath, and the other women in the family stopped by occasionally. But Naomi knew her mother bore the weight of the responsibility.

Pressing for other details, Naomi learned the “girls” were two of her aunts: Edna and Violet. Also implicated was Aunt Gwen, married to her mother's brother Bill. All three had been sitting with Gran the night she died.

“Mum, who said they thought Gran was euthanized?” Naomi asked.

“Euthanized?” There was slight astonishment in her mother's voice, as though the word had jolted her. There was a

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long pause; she was measuring her response. When it came, Naomi found it unconvincingly vague.

“Oh, I can’t quite remember. It may have been the district nurse or Mrs. Dukes next door. Perhaps it was another friend of Mum’s. I really can’t remember, Naomi.”

The tone of her voice signaled her mother’s reluctant to continue. There was so much more Naomi wanted to know: how had they done it, if they did do it, and why? She never found out. Over the years, she’d tried a few times to ferret out the information. Each time her mother refused to talk about it, and now she was dead.

The cat broke into Naomi’s thoughts. He jumped up between her and the computer screen, where she’d been sitting for an hour, unable to begin work. This was her second novel. The first was published to a modest success two years before.

“Oh, poor Spike, naughty old Mummy forgot to feed you,” she hugged the cat and carried him to the kitchen. “Brrr, it’s cold in here,” she said aloud, pouring food into Spike’s bowl. The house was cold. Naomi turned up the heat before putting on the teakettle.

With the kettle whistling, she almost missed the phone’s ring. It was her sister, Louise.

“Hi, sis, how you doing?” Louise was concerned about her. Their mother’s death had been hard on Naomi, coming as it did so soon after her divorce.

“Hi, Lou, I’m doing okay, but I just realized my house is damn cold. Kevin used to take care of things like that, so I tend to ignore them. Spike let me know he was cold and hungry. I’ll just have to establish a new routine for myself.”

“What were you doing not to feel the cold? Writing I hope?”

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“I was at the computer but hadn’t written a word. Mum keeps coming into my thoughts. I guess that’s natural when you’ve just lost a loved one.”

“I guess so, sis. Were you remembering when we were girls?”

“Yes, then I got to thinking about Mum and Grandma. You remember how Mum told me she thought Gran had died.”

“Oh, not that again, Naomi, please,” Louise sounded frustrated, “why can’t you leave it alone. Mum was just trying to get rid of the guilt she felt for not being there. Let’s not go down that path again, please Naomi.”

“I can’t help it Lou, something keeps bringing it back to me. Maybe it’s because they say I was Gran’s favorite. I don’t know. It’s strange really, I hardly remember her. I was only four when she died. You were older; it’s funny Mum never mentioned it to you.”

“Only two years older. I don’t think there was anything odd about it. You were the one who lived close to Mum. You spent much more time with her,” Louise explained. “I wish you’d drop it. It’s not like you’re ever going to prove it. They’re all dead now.”

“Well, we don’t know about Aunt Edna. She could still be kicking up her heels somewhere.”

Louise laughed. “They’d be pretty old heels by now. It would be nice to find out what happened to the old girl. Wouldn’t it?”

“See, you’re curious just like I am about Gran,” Naomi stuck her ground.

“It’s not the same, sis. I’m curious to find out how Aunt Edna lived, not how she died. You really need to stop thinking about death and get on with your life. How’s the book coming? Do you think you’ll have it ready for Spring ’97? That’s when they planned to publish, isn’t it? That’s less than a year away.”

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Louise had succeeded in steering the conversation in a different direction; she'd always been good at that. As the older sister, Louise in many ways seemed less mature than Naomi. But on occasion, she acted her role. There were only the two of them and they had a deep love for each other. Louise had an appetite for life that showed in everything she did. Naomi knew she'd never quite had Louise's flamboyance. Though there had been a time when she'd glowed with happiness. That was before Kevin left her, before the pressure of publishing deadlines, and before watching her mother die of cancer. Alone now, Naomi was trying to remember what it felt like to be happy.

Louise was doing her best to help. Before hanging up, she got Naomi to commit to visit soon, to take better care of herself now that she lived alone, and to get out more. Presumably, so she could find someone to replace Kevin. Happily married, Louise couldn't accept that Naomi was, for the time being, content to be on her own.

It felt so different. She'd married Kevin right out of college, going from home, to the dorm to Kevin. Now, for the first time in her life she was living alone. Partly it excited her. It was all the small details that sapped her confidence. First her mother, then Kevin had seen to the multiple chores that make a house a home. Naomi wished she'd paid more attention.

Catching sight of herself in the hall mirror, she spoke to her reflection; "It's just you and me now, baby. Don't mess it up."

Naomi studied her face. The years had been kind: her 36 birthdays didn't show. She'd inherited her mother's youthful skin and her father's blue, blue eyes. A guy in college had told her he felt he could swim in her eyes; they were so blue. They were, without a doubt, her best feature. She'd once toyed with the idea of darkening her hair to show her eyes off more. Her hairdresser talked her out of it. 'Dark blond hair is to die for,' she'd said. So, Naomi left it and it fell about her face, not quite

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curly, more tousled. It was an attractive face and she was happy with it. Now if only she could get rid of the worried expression she'd worn of late.

Late on a Thursday night, Naomi sat in the library parking lot frustrated beyond belief. Her car wouldn't start. It was Louise's fault. If she hadn't made me promise to get out more, I'd have done my research on the web, thought Naomi. Now here I am in a dead car, with the library closed.

The staff had ushered her out at closing time. By the time she'd organized her paperwork the parking lot was deserted. What to do now? In the old days she'd have called Kevin to come and rescue her. Well, scratch that, she thought, I'll have to fend for myself.

First things first, I'll call for a tow, Naomi decided. Even as the thought entered her head, she gave a wry smile. The telephone was in the library lobby, now safely under lock and key. The cell phone was one of the few things Kevin had taken with him, saying he needed it for work and she didn't. Naomi hadn't bothered to replace it, just another luxury she could ill afford until she finished the book. There was a payphone a quarter mile away. The distance wouldn't bother her, but it was dark and rainy. She hadn't brought raingear and had to admit she was somewhat afraid. When the library was built in this out-of-the-way spot, surrounded by trees, plans were to build a community center adjacent. But funds had never been available, leaving the library in isolation.

A new thought occurred to her; did she have towing on her insurance? Rummaging through the glove compartment, Naomi came up empty. Kevin had given her the paperwork, saying, "Now put this one in the car." But she obviously hadn't. Who was her agent? Naomi didn't know, but she'd have to find out. One more thing she'd have to do for herself now. There were so

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many things to get used to. Louise said being married to Kevin was like having a wife; he took care of all the details, freeing Naomi to write. They made that agreement after the success of her first novel.

That success was largely responsible for their breakup. Writing her first novel had been fun. They'd scrimped and saved so she could work part time, then eventually quit to write full time. There was really no pressure then, just her desire to be finished and feel she was contributing. The elation they both felt when the novel was accepted for publication was something Naomi would never forget. The money didn't matter; they were both on top of the world.

All that changed with the second book. This time there was an advance and a deadline. Her time became more valuable. The rift growing between them was apparent, but Naomi was too busy to do anything about it. When the book was finished, she'd deal with it. But the book still wasn't finished. One day Kevin had told her quietly, "Naomi, I'm sorry; there's someone else."

It still hadn't hit her as she watched him pack. He did so with tears in his eyes, and had actually broken down and sobbed a couple of times. Naomi didn't cry. She just felt numb. Kevin didn't take much: the old mantel clock that had been his grandmother's, a woodcarving they bought in Montana, the Minolta camera and his telescope. As he went to leave, Naomi slipped the wedding band off her finger; the one he'd given her, promising to love her forever. Not a word passed her lips as she handed it to him. It had been his grandmothers. Why keep it? Kevin looked as though he was about to hug her, but she turned and walked away.

Still trying to make up her mind whether to be devastated by the breakup or angrier than hell, Naomi was sidetracked when her mother fell ill. There was no leading up to it: one day her

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mother was fine, enjoying life in her new condo. The next day she was dealt a death sentence. Naomi had talked to her the day before she went to the doctor. It was a happy call, her mother having just returned from a trip to Hawaii with some girlfriends. They'd all acted like silly teenagers, she'd told Naomi.

"That's great, Mum, but I hope you didn't get thrown out of anywhere."

Her mother giggled. "We probably came close a few times, but they would have looked at all the gray heads and decided we were harmless. By the way, hon, I can't come up tomorrow, I'm going to Dr. Wiseman. Jan noticed a place on my back she didn't like the look of. It's probably another skin cancer."

Dr. Wiseman was her mother's dermatologist. He'd already removed a few basal cell cancers from her mother's face and shoulders. Naomi saw no reason to worry. But the next day her mother's friend Jan called with the bad news: melanoma, growing rapidly. They would do what they could, but it didn't look good.

Louise and Naomi held hands in the hospital waiting room and prayed for a miracle. Dr. Wiseman couldn't deliver; it had grown too quickly. They hadn't been able to get it all. The doctor gave her mother two to four months at the most. Naomi was in turmoil, but her mother was surprisingly calm.

Four months later, almost to the day, her mother died. Seeing their mother in pain, the sisters had wished for the day to arrive. When it did, they were devastated. Their last parent was gone. A work accident had claimed their father many years before. Louise had her husband, Sam, and two sons. Naomi had only Louise.

The ensuing months were something of a blur for Naomi. Divorce from Kevin became a reality. Somehow, the property got divided. Naomi got the house and the mortgage, no alimony

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and the cat. Kevin got most of their savings, the cell phone and the newer car.

Now here she was in the older car, broken down in the dark. It was all too much. Naomi laid her head on the steering wheel and let the tears flow: tears of anger, frustration and sorrow. Her mother was dead, her marriage over, the book wasn't finished and her car wouldn't start. Sobs racked her body as she let out the emotions she'd been holding in.

Her sobbing grew so loud; at first she didn't hear the tapping on the window. When she did, it startled her.

A man was calling out to her, "Are you all right?" Naomi nodded, at which he yelled, "Can I help?"

The rain and her tears prevented her from seeing well, but she noted he was riding a bicycle. A rain parka shielded most of his hair, which appeared to be gray. He didn't look threatening, but this was a secluded spot. Naomi rolled the window down a crack.

"My car won't start," she said with a catch in her voice.

"That's what I figured." His voice was gentle. "Will the engine turn over at all?"

She shook her head, "Completely dead. I don't know if I'm covered for towing." The tears started to well up again.

"Okay, not to worry. I can ride up to the store and call my sister. She lives close by and can come and give you a jump. If that doesn't work, she has a cell phone, so you can go from there. Sorry I can't do it. Not much help on a bike, I'm afraid. I'm late for an appointment or I'd come back. Don't worry though, Diana will get here soon."

Naomi sniffed a thank you, "Will she know what to do?"

The stranger broke into a big smile. "You haven't met Diana. Trust me, she knows how to do everything. You'll be in good hands, don't worry."

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Naomi gave a watery smile, at which he mounted up, called out good luck and was gone.

It seemed an eternity before an old pickup pulled into the lot. In reality, it was no more than 20 minutes. A very large woman got out; not fat, just large framed, tall. She introduced herself as Diana, and soon had everything under control. They jumped the car, but it wouldn't start. Diana suggested she take Naomi home to check her insurance before calling for a tow. Naomi reluctantly accepted a ride home, when Diana assured her it wasn't far out of her way.

Her rescuer proved to be a funny, big-hearted woman. When she smiled, her face lit up and had sincerity written all over it. If her brother told her he found Naomi crying, Diana didn't let on. She ranted about the unreliability of cars, the terrible lighting in the parking lot and her stupid brother for not using his car.

"Imagine living in rainy Oregon and riding a bike everywhere," she snorted, "It's not like he can't afford to drive. He says he doesn't need to add to the pollution." She shook her head. "Writers, they're a funny lot!"

"Your brother's a writer," Naomi perked up at this news.

"Yes, Ben Ferguson, you've probably never heard of him. He writes environmental stuff for academic journals and the like. It's all way above my head." She laughed heartily. "He's a good guy though. He'll probably call tonight to see if you made it home okay."

"I'm really very grateful to you both. I was in such a mess." Naomi swallowed hard to stop the tears from coming. She tried to explain herself, "I just went through a divorce, and I'm trying to adjust to taking care of myself. Not doing a very good job, am I?"

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“Hey, who knows about cars? Well, I suppose I do, but I don’t know much about anything else, except horses. So, if my car won’t start, I ride a horse.”

Naomi laughed; the tension was broken. They talked more and, before she realized what was happening, she poured her heart out to Diana: the divorce, her mother, and the book she was stalled on. By the time she finished, they were pulling into Naomi’s driveway. She looked at Diana and said; “I think I hit the bottom tonight.”

Diana switched off the engine and laid her hand over Naomi’s. “Let me tell you something, Naomi. I’m a good bit older than you, so don’t be offended or think I’m interfering. You’re a long way from the bottom. You’re looking at an empty cup, but it’s not really empty. I’m sorry you lost your mother when she was still so young. It’s a fact of life that we all lose our parents at some time. Now what you do is turn to your memories; that’s how we keep them alive and with us. You’ll learn, wait and see. It works for me.”

She paused for a minute before continuing. “I was so close to the folks. Ben and my sister loved them too, but I lived with them. It was so hard at first. It gets better, trust me. Do you have siblings?”

Naomi nodded, “Just one sister – Louise.”

“Are you close?”

“Very.”

“That’s good. I take it she doesn’t live here, since you didn’t want Ben to call her?”

“No, she lives in Redmond.”

“Redmond, Washington or Redmond, Oregon?”

“Redmond, Oregon. Just outside of town on the Deschutes River.”

“Great horse country.”

“She rides.”

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“I like her already. Now about the divorce: I may not be a lot of help there, never having married. It’s something you may never get over, but at least it wasn’t messy. I mean no children, right?”

Naomi shook her head.

“They say that helps,” Diana said. “Okay, Naomi, what are you left with? Your talent, that’s what. You take that cup you think is empty and fill it with your writing talent. Throw yourself into the book, and everything else will fall into place.”

She reached into the glove compartment for a notebook and pen. “Here,” she instructed Naomi, “write out your phone number and I’ll give you mine. We’ll keep in touch. I want you to be able to tell me I was right.”

She makes it sound so easy, Naomi thought, switching on the hall light and calling to Spike. Diana seemed to have an answer for everything. She could see what Ben meant when he described his sister. Naomi had to admit she did feel better.

She picked up her cat and gave him a hug. “Sorry old buddy, I came up against an obstacle. Don’t worry, I’ll find a way around it. Now let’s get you some dinner.”

Chapter Two

The package arrived on a Saturday. Naomi would always remember, because she was loading plastics in her car when the mailman arrived. Plastics recycling day was the last Saturday of the month.

It had been three weeks since the library incident. Her car, a whopping \$297 later, was now running perfectly. She now knew her insurance agent, having established contact with him. She did have towing. Kevin added it when he signed the car over to her. How could she hate him?

She had spoken to Diana again and really liked the woman. It occurred to Naomi that Diana had the same gift as Louise: talking to them always made you feel better, more confident.

“It’s a good thing you’re here; it’s a bit fat for the box,” said the mailman, handing her a well-stuffed manila envelope. Uttering thanks, she turned the package over and noted the New Zealand postmark. She leaned against her car studying the name of the sender, Robert Hillman, but couldn’t place him. Her mother had a friend in New Zealand. She’d recently written to tell her of her mother’s death, but this name wasn’t right. She mulled it over and over before the obvious occurred to her and she said aloud, “Open the darned thing, Naomi!”

Naomi sat on the living room floor, the contents of the package surrounding her. She had identified the sender: the son of her mother’s friend, but from a first marriage. He had enclosed a short note, thanking her for passing on the news of her mother’s death. His own mother was now in the middle stages of Alzheimer’s, so wouldn’t be responding. In clearing

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up her estate, he found a number of items of interest to Naomi—including photographs of her mother—and was including them. There was also a letter in her mother's handwriting. Part of it was missing, he explained, but he thought Naomi would like to have it.

This is too much fun, Naomi thought as she surveyed the pile. She needed time to enjoy this—the plastics would have to wait. She made a cup of tea and sat down to slowly go through it all. This is going to bring back some memories, she thought. Diana would be happy about that. Naomi vowed not to let it make her sad.

The five photographs beckoned first, and she savored each one. One showed her mother with her friend Mamie. They looked to be around twenty, arms entwined, mugging for the camera. It was their clothes that Naomi enjoyed, typical forties suit with enormous shoulder pads and lapels. And the hair! They both sported pageboys with big rolls on top. Along with the high heels, the hair made her mother, a tiny woman, look tall. The picture would have been taken around 1947, shortly before her mother's friend married and left British Columbia for New Zealand. The ever-present pile of logs was visible in the background. Both girls' families were loggers. A notation on the back read, "May and Mamie, ain't we cute."

In another photo, the two girls were much younger—around ten or twelve. Their mothers could just be made out in the background. There was no doubt where this one was taken; the Spruce Creek Logging Company sign was clearly visible. Almost everyone living in the small hamlet of Spruce Creek worked for the company in those days. The company owned the town. Scrawled on the back of the photo, Naomi could just make out: "Mamie with May Cavenish, Mum and Mrs. Cavenish in back."

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The telephone interrupted Naomi. She barely recognized her sister's voice, "Louise, you sound dreadful!"

"I know, I've got the flu and I'm feeling really sorry for myself," Louise sniffed, "Sam has taken the boys to the river to get them out of my hair."

Louise had two sons, Craig and Brian, eight and ten respectively. They were the only children in Naomi's life and she adored them.

"How are my nephews? I take it they aren't sick?" Naomi asked.

"No, they're healthy little tykes, just a bit of a runny nose, but not enough to keep them down. Sam doesn't feel too hot though. I expect he'll be next. How's the book coming?"

"You'll be happy to hear I'm making some headway. In fact, I'm doing so well I was taking the afternoon off. Thought I'd take the plastics to recycle, but I was just leaving when I got an exciting package."

Louise asked excitedly, "What, what? Don't tell me it's just something you ordered on the web."

"No, Lou, do you remember mum's old friend Mamie? The one who lived in New Zealand?"

Louise did remember.

"I wrote to tell her about Mum, but she's got Alzheimer's and is in a home," Naomi explained. "I got a package of stuff from her son."

"How nice. What kind of stuff?" Louise asked.

Naomi started telling her about the photos. "I haven't looked closely at the others yet, but it looks like they were all taken in Spruce Creek or Powell River. There's also some high school stuff, I can see a dance program and something about the hockey team. There's a letter or part of a letter mum wrote to Mamie. That should be interesting."

"Is there a date on it?"

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“I can’t see one.”

“Let me know what it says.”

“I will when I get to it. I’m enjoying the photos first.”

They chatted on for a few more minutes, before Louise declared she was dying and needed to soak in a hot tub. Naomi promised to call back later if she discovered anything exciting.

Two more of the photos were similar to the others. Another one showed May and Mamie with Naomi’s Aunt Kath. The youngest of her mother’s sisters, Kath was the only one Naomi and Louise had remained in contact with.

The last photo sent her rummaging for a magnifier. It was a group shot of her mother’s family. All the children were there along with Gran. Her mother and Kath stood on one side of Gran. On the other side, she realized, were the three her mother suspected of taking Gran’s life: Edna, Violet and Gwen. It gave Naomi a jolt to think about it. Edna had her arm around Gran. Uncle Bill stood behind Aunt Gwen. The only one missing was Violet’s husband, Ralph. Naomi knew it was taken after World War II, because that’s when Uncle Bill brought his Welsh bride home. Perhaps it was a homecoming photo. She would have to scan it, and try to enhance the image. Right now, she was anxious to get to the letter.

Naomi read the letter three times trying to make sense of it. Not only was there a page missing; one page had a chunk torn out of it. Most of it was chatty stuff about May setting up house in Oregon. Her mother’s death had finally freed her to join her husband. That dated the letter to after 1964, Naomi realized. May related to her friend how wonderful it was for Louise and Naomi to see their daddy every day, not just once a month. The paragraph that held Naomi’s interest was the one with the tear.

“ Thank you for the flowers you sent for Mum’s funeral. They were lovely, especially the carnations.

No, I haven’t gotten over losing Mum yet. I feel so

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guilty for leaving her that night. She had seemed quite well for a few days. I quite thought she was going to live. So you agree with me that it all seems a bit suspicious. I was glad to get away from there, I could only look at the girls. Edna showed up in fancy new clothes. She said she's going to leave soon and return to London again.

How about the money. I never did hear from you. I remember you telling me about it. I don't know about Edna's accident, but it obviously wasn't hers. I don't know about the others about it. Edna's the oldest now. Of course if she's getting the papers now. Of course if she goes to London, Violet will probably take over. I wonder how much it was supposed to be, what sizeable means? You..."

The following page was missing.

Naomi was perplexed. What on earth were they talking about? She didn't have a clue. Perhaps Louise would know.

Louise sounded very groggy. She had contemplated not picking up the phone, but guessed it would be Naomi.

"Well, did you pick up any family gossip from Mum's letter?"

"Not exactly gossip," Naomi said, "but listen to this." She read the letter out to Louise, trying to explain the missing part. "Lou, did you ever hear about any money? I thought our grandparents were poor."

"They were: dirt poor. I don't know what on earth Mum was talking about. It wouldn't have been an insurance policy on Granddad, he'd been dead quite a few years." Louise paused, "It's funny, Aunt Kath and I were close but she never mentioned it. Why would Mum be writing to her friend about it? It almost sounds like the friend told Mum about it. I don't know; it's a mystery, sis."

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“It sure is. I’ll e-mail you a copy. See if you can fill in the blanks. I’ve been trying. Boy, I wish that last page hadn’t been missing.”

“So do I. There’s no one left who could tell us about it.”

“Except maybe Aunt Edna. We really should try to find out if the old girl is still alive. Oh, Lou,” Naomi sounded distressed, “I just had a horrible thought. If there was money involved, could it have been,” Naomi’s voice dropped to a whisper, “murder? Is that why Mum was so distressed?”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Naomi finally said, “Lou?”

“I’m trying to think here, sis, just give me a minute.” Louise sounded somber. “I am curious about the money, but you’re reading something into Gran’s death that wasn’t there. She was dying, Naomi, don’t forget that.”

“But you heard what mum said in the letter, she appeared to be getting better. I’m sure the word that’s half missing is “suspicious.” Think about it, Lou.”

“I am thinking, but you know what, my brain’s not working with this flu. E-mail me the letter and let me get back to you. Okay?”

Naomi agreed, hung up the phone and put the letter in the scanner. Her stomach felt queasy. She couldn’t get the word murder off her mind. Could this be why something kept gnawing away at her? Why she couldn’t put to rest the death of a grandmother she’d known so briefly?

Chapter 3

Naomi was surprised her sister hadn't called back yet. The package arrived two weeks ago. She was tempted to call Louise, but remembered how perturbed her sister had seemed. She decided to give her a little more time. Naomi was mystified by her sister's reaction. Why wasn't she curious to learn the truth about their gran's death, about a possible inheritance? What harm would it do? She would wait a little longer, but Naomi knew, with or without Louise, she would have to find the answer to this family mystery. The writer in her just wouldn't leave it alone.

The writing part of her life was going well right now. She had completed the chapters her editor was waiting for and was about to mail them. As she packaged them up, she thought about Diana telling her to throw herself into writing. It was certainly paying off.

Diana had called once since rescuing her at the library. They'd had a good chat, and Naomi got off the phone feeling she'd made a friend. Friends were something she lacked right now. It hadn't occurred to her before, but just about everyone she knew in this town was either part of Kevin's family or one of Kevin's friends. He had grown up here in Walkersville, so it was logical to move here after they married. Since the divorce, the only time she saw any of his family was at the grocery store. They were pleasant enough, but she knew they blamed her for the breakup. If the truth be told, so did she.

She'd thought more than once about selling up and moving over to Central Oregon to be near Louise. Naomi knew leaving her little frame house with its picket fence and flower garden

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would be hard. It was a bit out of the way—four miles into Walkersville—but she loved being surrounded by fields and trees. They had chosen the house thinking it a good spot to raise children. Somehow, that seemed an eternity ago, and driving into Walkersville leant credence to that thought. The town was growing by leaps and bounds: inevitable with the interstate so close. Naomi knew she'd be trading a lot of conveniences by moving to the high desert. For the time being she'd stay put, friends or no friends. When the book was finished, she'd take another look at the situation.

Naomi called Spike in from the garden. He was an outdoor cat in the good weather, but she liked him in when she wasn't home. It was late spring now, and rain was never out of the question in Oregon. She settled Spike in her bay window seat, and told him, "Mummy will be back soon."

It was a little cooler out than she expected. She was vacillating on whether to go back inside for a warmer jacket, when someone hailed her from the road. A cyclist pulled up and leaned his bicycle against her fence. He waved a package at her and fumbled with the gate.

"It looks like I just caught you. Just wanted to drop this off," he held out the package while struggling to remove his helmet.

Naomi hadn't a clue who he was, but he obviously thought he knew her. She studied him, trying to place him. He was a good-looking man, with a wonderful smile, warm hazel eyes and a shock of white hair. Naomi guessed he'd be in his forties. He was tall and lean, and had an air of relaxed confidence that always attracted her. She reached out to accept the package, her expression giving her away.

He laughed heartily. "You have no idea who I am, do you?"

"I'm sorry, I'm trying to place you. Is it the library or the post office?"

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“Well, the library is close.” He was teasing her. “Would it help if I told you Diana sent the package? It’s her famous banana bread.”

Naomi’s cheeks flushed. She couldn’t hide her embarrassment, “Oh, you’re Diana’s brother; my knight in shining armor. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you. I couldn’t see you very well with all the rain. It’s Ben, isn’t it?” Naomi stuck out her hand, “I’m Naomi, thanks so much for helping me.”

He shook her hand. “To be truthful, all I could see of you was the color of your hair. I knew I had the right house because of the fence. Diana would have dropped this off herself but she’s waiting for the vet. Her horse tangled with some barbed wire.”

“Do thank her for me. No, I’ll call her later.” Naomi felt flustered. Why did she always get this way around an attractive man? “Your sister’s a lovely woman,” she assured him.

“Yes, she is. I don’t know what I would have done without her.”

“She seems so capable. Has she always been that way?”

“Always. If she’d been with Napoleon, history would have been rewritten.”

They both laughed and she noticed how his eyes sparkled with humor. There was an awkward pause, before she asked, “Would you like to come in for coffee? It’s the least I can do.”

“No, but thanks. I really do want to talk to you more. Diana tells me you’re a writer.”

Naomi nodded.

“A friend and I are working on a piece of fiction. We could use some input, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I’d be glad to help,” Naomi assured him.

“Good. Then we’ll have to talk shop some time soon.” He gestured to his bike. “Believe it or not, this is part of my exercise program. It looks as though you’re headed for the post

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office. Tell you what, next time you're in town in the morning, stop by the coffee shop across from the post office. I'm there most mornings. The owner's a friend and he let's me hole up there and write. Would that work out with you?"

"Sure, and this time I will recognize you."

He laughed and held out his hand. "I'm unforgettable." His eyes held hers briefly. Then he hopped on his bicycle and was gone.

Naomi felt a flush of pleasure as she walked the banana bread through to the kitchen. Wow, she didn't realize Diana's brother was so attractive. Did she detect some interest when he looked at her? Had he liked what he saw too? She paused in front of a mirror. And why not, she thought, I'm trim and Kevin always said I was pretty. At the thought of Kevin, Naomi came back to earth. What was she doing even thinking about another man? That's the last thing she needed right now. Still, she made a mental note to stop at the coffee shop one day soon.

Louise called the next day. "Sorry, sis, I've been up to my eyes in it. Just as I was feeling better, Sam came down with the flu. You know what that's like: my head hurts, I'm sore, I can't breathe. Will you rub my chest? And they call us the weaker sex."

Naomi laughed. "Poor Sam, I can see he doesn't get much sympathy from you."

"Oh, he does all right. How are you doing? Having much luck with the book?"

"As a matter of fact I mailed off some chapters yesterday. Now I have a little breathing space. How are my favorite nephews?"

"They're your only nephews and they're fine. School, sports and 4-H keeps them busy. They want to know when Aunt Naomi's coming to see them. What about it, sis, we're germ-

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free now, and it sounds as though you can spare the time. Why don't you come for the weekend?"

Naomi thought out loud, "I could use a break. If the neighbors can feed Spike for me, I don't see why not."

"Great. Can you drive out Friday? We've got a new place we go to eat. The food is fabulous."

"Sure. I'll try to get there about threeish. I think I'll drive the Santiam Pass, it should be pretty with all the spring growth."

"The boys will be excited. Oh, and sis, I haven't forgotten about Gran. I've been looking into it. I'll fill you in when you get here," Louise explained. "Don't forget to bring the photos with you."

They were sitting in Louise's kitchen—Naomi at the table and Louise, as usual, perched on the counter. Naomi marveled at what an agile woman her sister was. Louise didn't look anywhere near her age: 38 in a few weeks. She looked beautiful framed by the snow-capped peaks of the Cascade Range, visible through the kitchen window. Louise had her father's dark hair and blue eyes—not as blue as Naomi's, but still lovely. Her skin was tanned from long hours in the saddle. She looked every bit the horsewoman.

This was Sam and Louise's dream home, built on a ledge of lava overlooking the Deschutes River. It was quite a hike down to the river, but the view from the house was fantastic. Naomi had to admit she did love this country. The air was so fresh and pungent. Maybe moving to Redmond wouldn't be such a bad idea. It would put her close to those she loved.

Sam had taken the boys to baseball practice. Naomi and Louise had the place to themselves, and had just finished looking at the photos from New Zealand.

Louise shook her head. “I know the photos are all black and white, but it’s like you’re looking through a gray veil. It must be the poverty. Oh, Naomi, it makes you realize how lucky we are. Thank goodness Mum and Dad had the good sense to move here.” She took a sip of coffee. “I found the letter fascinating. It sounded as though Mum thought for a long while that Mamie had given her false information. Something changed her mind, I wish we knew what. I wish the darned letter hadn’t been torn. I have to admit the money intrigues me. But murder, come on, sis, people do that for scads of money. We’ve never seen evidence of that.”

Naomi wrinkled her brow. “What if it was Aunt Edna? She just disappeared; maybe she took the money with her. Oh, I don’t know, Lou. Maybe murder is too strong a word, but something’s fishy. I’m itching to find out what it is.”

“I’m with you there, and I’ve already started the ball rolling. Curiosity got the better of me. I don’t expect to find a fortune hidden away somewhere. But there’s no smoke without fire. There must be some money involved. What intrigues me is that Mum and Aunt Kath never mentioned it. Funny, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, not so funny with Mum,” Naomi agreed. “She always did treat us like kids. Maybe mothers always do. You’d think Aunt Kath would have said something though. She was more of a friend to us—maybe because she didn’t have children. I’m inclined to think Mum and Aunt Kath didn’t know about it. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if Gran didn’t know either. It’s like a jigsaw with pieces missing. How are we going to put it all together?”

“Well, I’ve made a start. It might not pay off, but we’ll see.” Louise jumped down from the counter and leaned her elbows on the table. “You know Sam’s sister has been doing a lot of genealogy on the web?”

Naomi nodded.

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“She’s given me a bunch of leads.” Louise continued. “It seems she has a few contacts in England. We’ve e-mailed one, a lawyer, to see how to look up any paperwork there might be. We’re also researching the Cavenish name. Maybe something will turn up there. One of her English contacts is a real whiz at this kind of thing. It’s actually loads of fun.”

“I’ll bet it is. The ultimate mystery—one that involves you personally.”

“Just call me Magnum PI,” Louise spoofed.

They both laughed at the thought, then Louise turned serious.

“Sis, promise me you’ll stop thinking about Gran’s death. I find it so macabre. Let her rest in peace. No matter how it happened, it was long overdue. I remember Aunt Kath saying Aunt Gwen, who was a nurse, couldn’t believe anyone would last that long in Gran’s condition. It was a blessing she died, and we should just accept it as that.”

Before Naomi had time to respond, Louise had another thought.

“Speaking of Aunt Gwen, what about trying to contact her children? We haven’t seen them since Uncle Bill’s funeral. I used to send Christmas cards, but they stopped years ago. You never know, they might have heard something about the money.” Louise grimaced. “I never much liked Michael, but Susan was all right.”

“It’s funny you should say that, I thought about them the other day. My book’s at a point where I need to do research on Vancouver. I’ve got one chapter set at the Capilano Suspension Bridge. Do you remember it?”

“Yes, that thing scared me to death.”

“Me too. Anyway, I need to refresh my memory about the area. I thought of going up to Vancouver and getting in touch

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with Michael and Susan. That's if I can find them. Michael was in Vancouver, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure about Susan. She married a doctor and they did talk about doing mission work somewhere. Still, Michael would be a start. I think it's an excellent idea. When would you go?"

"That depends on how quickly my editor gets back to me, but probably in a couple of weeks. If I find Michael, how will I find out what he knows without letting on, Lou? His mother was one of the three Mum suspected, after all."

"He doesn't know that. I would just get the conversation around to the Cavenish family," Louise suggested. "Ask him what he knows about family history. Say we're working on it, which is the truth. He was old enough when Gran died to know what was going on." Louise looked pensive. "Only thing is: he was never too friendly. I'm rather hoping you can find Susan."

"Me too," Naomi agreed.

"Come and look at my latest painting," Louise said, changing the subject. "Sam thinks it's pretty good."

They walked to the studio, attached to the garage. Louise was trying to establish herself as an artist. Naomi agreed with Sam, the new piece showed promise.

"It's good, Lou, you're definitely getting better. You should show it to that woman from the gallery in Bend."

"I did. She said if I do a series, they'd give me a show. They seem to like the way I use color."

Naomi was happy her sister was achieving success.

The weekend passed too quickly. Her nephews, Craig and Brian, monopolized most of her time. Naomi didn't mind. She'd hiked down to the river with them that morning. They'd hunted for frogs and she'd been privileged to see the boys' secret tree fort. Now on the drive home, her calf muscles were letting her know they didn't appreciate the sudden burst of activity.

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She hadn't mentioned Ben Ferguson until she was ready to leave.

"By the way, sis, I met a really nice guy the other day."

Louise feigned horror, "And you waited 'til now to tell me!"

Naomi turned to Sam. "See why I didn't tell her before, Sam?"

"Yep, she'd have dragged you out shopping for a wedding dress yesterday," Sam said with a smile.

"Okay, okay, you guys," Louise said chastened, "but I have to know more. Come on, Naomi, out with it. Who is he, and on a scale of one to ten just how hunky is he?"

Naomi laughed, and then told them about meeting Ben. By the time she was finished, Louise was practically jumping up and down.

"You are going to have coffee with him, aren't you?" It was more a command than a question.

"Maybe," Naomi didn't sound fully convinced.

Louise grabbed Sam by the arm and marched him off to the house, "Go away, Sam," she said playfully, "My sis needs some girl talk."

"Why wouldn't you go, Naomi, he's a writer. You'll have a lot in common. You don't have to jump in bed with the guy...yet," she gave an impish grin.

"That's precisely why," Naomi shook her head, "I don't want to start anything. Besides, he may not be interested. Anyway, I don't need complications in my life right now. I'm putting all my energy into the book. Distractions are the last thing I need."

"Which means you are *really* attracted to him. Oh, come on, sis, you've got to be horny. How long's it been?" She saw the look of irritation on Naomi's face. "Okay, but just meet the guy for coffee, please. What harm would it do? You could use a friend."

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Naomi thought that was the end of it, but as she drove off Louise called out, “And don’t forget to fill me in on all the sordid details.”

That Louise, Naomi thought, as she drove alongside the Santiam River, she should have been the writer, not me. But she knew that wasn’t true. Louise did have a vivid imagination, but she was far more comfortable on the back of a horse than hunched over a computer. Still, she did make you laugh. On a scale of one to ten, indeed!

How would she rate Ben? Well, based on looks—that’s all she had to go on right now—he’d be about an eight, Naomi thought. She’d give it ‘til Tuesday before going to the coffee shop. She didn’t want to look too obvious.

Tuesday morning Naomi got cold feet. She tried to tell herself to just think of Ben as another writer, but it didn’t work. She was attracted to him, and that was that. If she just happened to run into him in town, it would be another matter. She vacillated back and forth all morning. When her cuckoo clock announced the noon hour, she was still no closer to solving her dilemma.

“Oh, Spike,” she said to her cat in frustration, “just look at me, I’m acting like a silly teenager.”

Spike wasn’t sure how to respond, but was saved by the telephone. It was Diana. She passed a few pleasantries before turning the conversation around to her brother. Ben had enjoyed meeting Naomi, she said, and was looking forward to talking about writing. Diana thought the idea of meeting at the coffee shop was great. Ben didn’t know any other local authors. It would be good for him and his writing partner to talk fiction with Naomi. They had a good start on their book, Diana said, but fiction was new to both of them. She believed Naomi would

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enjoy the camaraderie, and asked if she planned to meet them soon.

Naomi acknowledged that she did enjoy meeting Ben, and intended to meet with them sometime.

“Can you make it soon?” Diana responded. “I know they’re anxious to get your opinion on a couple of points.”

Naomi felt trapped. “Maybe I’ll stop in the coffee shop tomorrow,” she said weakly.

“Great, I’ll tell him to look for you.”

Well, that took care of the jitters, Naomi thought, hanging up the phone. Now I’ll have to go. Ben apparently wasn’t attracted to her, or he would have said so to his sister. Diana would have told her if he was. Wouldn’t she? You’d better cut out this silly schoolgirl stuff, Naomi, she admonished herself. The man just wants to talk books.

As Naomi pulled up to the coffee shop, it occurred to her the last time she was here was with Kevin. They’d taken Spike to have his nails trimmed at the vet’s, two doors down. Sipping coffee while they waited, Naomi was acutely aware of the wall they were building between them. Conversation was stilted. Not like the old days, when they were brimming over with plans and ideas. Would things have been different if she’d said something then? Or had they already lost the spark that ignited their love in the first place. Water under the bridge, she thought, but maybe I learned something from it.

Ben wasn’t surprised to see her; Diana had told him she was coming. He was encamped at a table in the back, his laptop surrounded by reference materials. A table for four had essentially become his office. He saw the bewilderment on her face.

“Wondering how I get away with this,” he said playfully. “Gus, the owner, has become a good friend. He’s the one who

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talked me into the fiction. He used to teach, and saw a need for what we're working on. My condo is so small; I was hanging out here a lot. Odd for a writer, but I actually prefer having people around me. It's probably a throwback to my academic days. Anyway, we have this deal: he's running the place on a shoestring, so he hires help sparingly. He's here alone most of the time. If he has an errand to do, I take over."

"You know how to do all that espresso stuff?"

"Sure, Diana's not the only capable one in this family. Gus is busy in the back, so I'll show you what I can do. What'll you have?"

"I hate to burst your bubble, but I've switched to tea lately. It sits better on my stomach."

"Well, I'm not nearly as impressive with the tea," he joked, "but I'll get it to you good and hot."

"That's just the way I like it. I'll have Darjeeling, just black, thank you."

He disappeared behind the counter and she realized with relief that she felt very comfortable talking to him. How odd that he chose to write in such a public setting. What kind of writer would do that? She answered her own question—a lonely one.

They talked about writing for the best part of an hour. Ben's friend, Gus, joined them as business allowed.

Their project, Naomi learned, was a book on the environment, aimed at seventh-graders. She was able to help them somewhat, and promised to return. They never did get around to talking about their private lives. Naomi guessed Diana had told Ben some of what she told her. Perhaps he steered clear of personal matters not wanting to upset her, Naomi thought. Talking about writing was inspiring to her, and she looked forward to their next meeting.

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Naomi's trip to Vancouver was put on hold at her editor's request. They needed her available to answer questions for a few weeks. This meant she was able to meet with the two men a few more times. She was still very attracted to Ben, in fact, even more so. It was hard trying to hide it. She found it very hard to read him. Their conversation was almost entirely about writing. But on occasion, she'd swear she saw something more in his eyes. She knew he watched her as she talked to Gus. Maybe he was shy and needed more time.

The Vancouver trip was finally arranged, and she was able to stop by the coffee shop the day before she left. Gus was dealing with malfunctioning equipment, and left Naomi and Ben alone most of the time. She felt a certain tension in the air and it made her nervous. To cover it, she asked Ben how he went about research in the field.

He was able to give her a few timesaving hints she could use in her research. She hadn't planned on discussing her new novel, but he seemed genuinely interested. They talked plot and background, and he confided in her that one day he wanted to try his hand at adult fiction. And then he surprised her.

"I have your novel at home. I checked it out at the library," he laughed when he saw the astonishment on her face. "Relax, I haven't read it yet. Maybe I'll get to it this weekend."

Naomi was uncomfortable with the thought. "It appeals to women more. I don't know how you'll like it."

Ben wasn't to be put off. "I'll give it a try, and don't worry, I won't critique it. It'll probably give me an insight into who you are though. Does that scare you?"

"Yes, you bet it does. You might not like what you see."

"Aha, so there's a skeleton in your closet, is there?"

"Don't we all have one?"

Ben was serious for the moment. "Indeed we do." Then he gave her a long, penetrating gaze. His eyes, she noticed, were a

very greenish hazel. When they weren't smiling, they looked sad.

"So you're off to Vancouver. When?" he asked.

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Driving up?"

"Yes."

"Naomi, I've really enjoyed this." His words were businesslike, but his eyes told her he felt something else. She felt it too.

She stood to leave. "I enjoyed it, too," she said, somewhat shaken. "Next Wednesday then. I'll be back before then."

She held out her hand and he took it in both of his, holding it tightly.

"Drive carefully," he said earnestly.

Naomi hadn't heard someone enter the coffee shop. As she turned to leave, a man was nearing their table. She noticed a dog collar and gray hair, but very little else about him. He appeared to be heading straight for Ben. Naomi had her hand on the door handle when the clergyman spoke, rather loudly.

"Ben, how's your wife coming along.

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