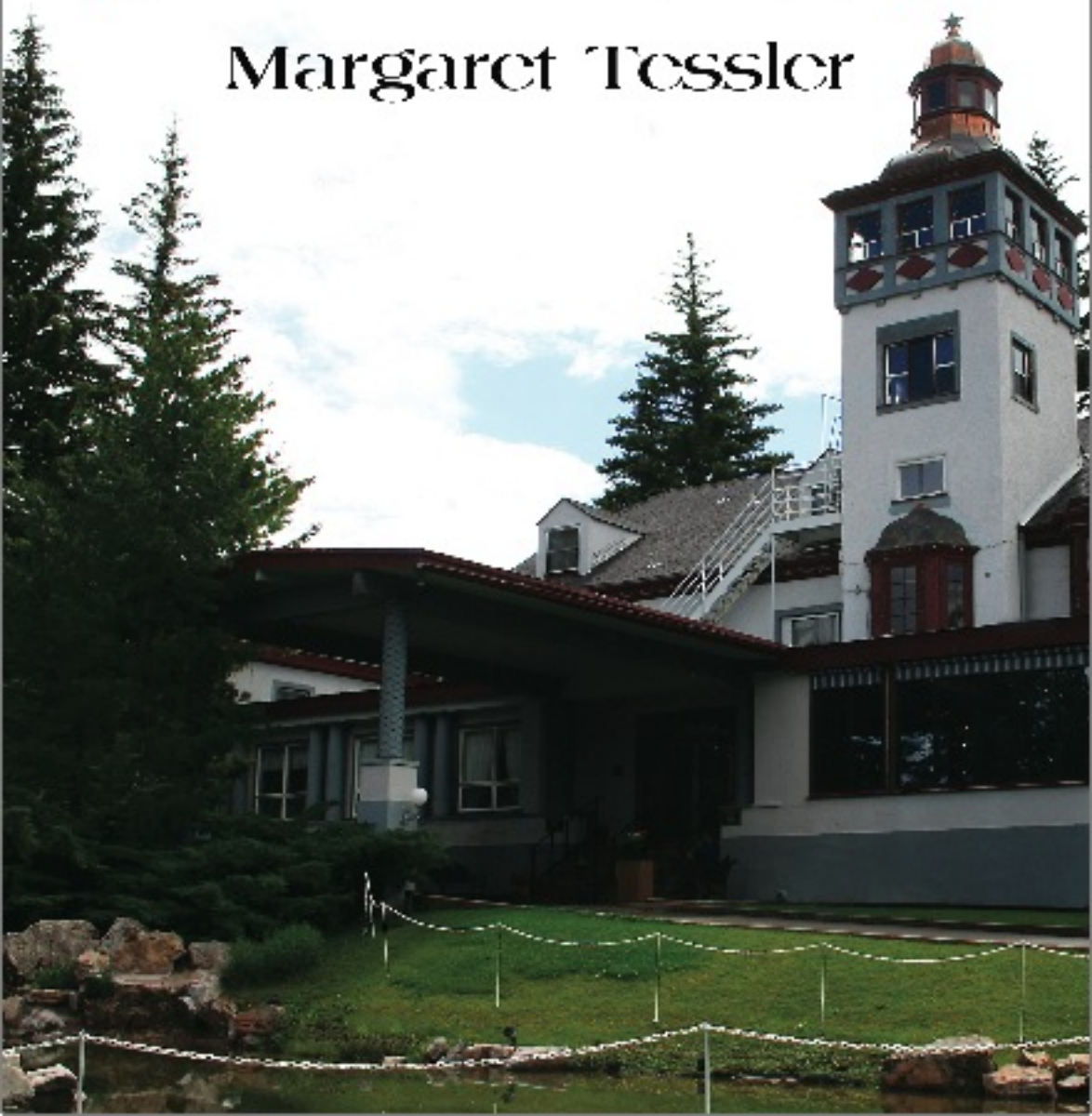


CASTING SHADOWS

Margaret Tessler



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by
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CHAPTER 1

You've heard of people—maybe even known a few—who don't have a mean bone in their bodies. Well, evidently all the leftover mean bones found their way into Alvina Piffle's body. And Alvina Piffle found her way into my life with a little help from my friend Cat Córdova.

"She's my aunt, my mother's youngest sister, and she signed up for the same Mystery Theater shindig we're going to," Cat had told me over the phone, her voice flat. "She's very independent, so she won't be hanging out with us, but my mom would feel better if we, uh, kind of kept an eye on her."

Since Cat was kind and generous by nature, I wondered why she sounded so unenthusiastic about honoring such a simple request. Maybe she felt it would interfere with our plans.

"It won't be any trouble at all," I reassured her. "In fact, she'd be welcome to join us anytime."

"Can you see me rolling my eyes through the telephone lines?"

"Can you see me brushing away all our worries with a wave of my hand?"

We laughed and ended our call. Nothing could dim my excitement over our upcoming pre-Christmas holiday.

My name is Sharon Salazar. My husband, Ryan, and I live in San Antonio, Texas, where he's a high-school Spanish teacher and I'm a lawyer. Whenever we take a few days off from work, if we go with anyone else at all, it's usually with

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some of our relatives. I say "our" relatives, even though—strictly speaking—there are only three on "my side" and about 200 on Ryan's.

However, this time our friends the Córdovas, Cat and Steve, were joining us on a trip to Cloudcroft, New Mexico, to take part in an interactive mystery play.

Afterwards, the Córdovas would head back to San Antonio while Ryan and I would stay another week or two in Cloudcroft. Ryan had a long winter break, and I'd been asked to participate in a legal symposium—a way of combining business with pleasure.

The first few days of December zipped by, and I never gave Cat's Aunt Alvina another thought. I'd barely had time to finish writing cards and wrapping presents when it was time to leave.

The Córdovas met us at the airport, where we all boarded an early-morning flight to El Paso. Once we arrived, we rented a van large enough to accommodate suitcases stuffed with heavy winter gear, as well as the cross-country ski equipment we planned to rent.

It was 70 degrees all the way from El Paso to Alamogordo, but we soon left the warmth of the desert as we climbed toward the mountains surrounding Cloudcroft, about sixteen steep miles away. Ponderosa pines with a light dusting of snow greeted us along the winding highway into town.

We had reservations at The Lodge, an impressive Old-World-style building atop a hill. The inn's three stories were crowned with a lookout tower, rumored to be visited at times by mysterious apparitions—most often the ghost of the beautiful red-haired Rebecca.

As we drove onto the circular driveway in front, I noticed a figure huddled on a nearby wrought-iron bench and

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bundled in so many coats and blankets, he—or she—looked a little like the abominable snowman. The only sign of life was the glowing red tip of a cigarette that protruded from a slit in the wooly gray scarf covering its face.

We'd no sooner checked in than the snowman, sans scarf and cigarette, accosted Cat, whose ashen face revealed her dismay.

"Aunt Alvina, I didn't expect you till tomorrow."

CHAPTER 2

"I didn't expect you today either," Alvina said. The woman had white hair, blunt-cut just below her ears, icy blue eyes, and a fearsome scowl. "Almost didn't recognize you, Caterina. Looks like you've put on a few pounds."

"Only where it counts," Steve said. He set down their suitcases, put his arm around Cat, and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Who asked you?" Alvina retorted.

Ryan and I glanced at each other, not sure if we should edge away and leave the Córdovas to fend for themselves or stay and wait it out.

"All for one," Ryan whispered, setting down our own suitcases.

"God, it's hot in here." Alvina turned toward the back of the lobby, where a cheerful blaze was glowing in the fireplace. "Why do they have that stinky fire going?"

"I'm sure it'll be pleasant once we take off our coats," Cat said. "We're on our way to our rooms now."

"I'd go to mine too, but there's nowhere to smoke in this damn place. A person can't even be comfortable in their own room."

Cat smiled. "I'm sorry. I guess we'll have to make do. So...we'll be on our way now."

"Not so fast, missy." Alvina jerked her head toward us. "Who are these people?"

"I'm sorry," Cat said again, her voice contrite. "I didn't mean to be in such a hurry."

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Cat introduced us; Ryan and I murmured appropriate responses. I tried to smile, but must not have been too convincing.

Alvina glared at me in return. "What are you staring at?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize...."

It occurred to me that there were a lot of "I'm sorrys" going around to the person who least deserved them.

"I didn't realize," she mimicked. "You should pay attention."

Actually, I HAD been staring. Trying to see even one smidgen of resemblance between you and Cat.

"It's been a hectic morning, Aunt Alvina," Cat said. "I'm sure we're all a little bleary-eyed. We'll catch up with you later."

Then, before Alvina could waylay us further, the four of us excused ourselves, leaving her to direct her complaints to the management. In the background, we could hear her berating the desk clerk about the accommodations, the service, the heat inside, the cold outside, and numerous other infractions for which she held the inn responsible.

* * *

Our spirits picked up once we were out of earshot. We were delighted to find our rooms cozy and charming. Naturally, Cat and I had to check out each other's rooms, both of which shared a Victorian motif, with a patterned quilt on each bed, ruffled pillow shams, and brocade drapes and valences. Oak furniture and tiffany lamps added to the ambiance. Paisley teddy bears made themselves at home on plush armchairs. Yet each room had its own distinct flavor. The Córdovas' was decorated in shades of blue and peach, ours in various greens, with splashes of burgundy.

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After our inspection, Steve and Ryan reminded us that we hadn't eaten anything but peanuts since breakfast. We planned to have dinner at the Lodge, so thought it would be fun to have lunch someplace in town. We headed toward the lobby to ask about good places to try.

"Wait," Cat said as we reached the intersection where our hallway joined the main hallway. "Let's make sure the coast is clear." We sneaked down the hall, pressed close to the walls, listening for sounds of Alvina's sniping.

Hearing nothing but the happy chattering of other guests, we stepped up to the desk with our questions.

The clerk, whose nametag read "Laura," was polite but cool. She suggested a few places to eat, then cleared her throat and asked, "Aren't you here with Ms. Piffle?"

Cat's cheeks turned red. "No. We're all here for the Mystery Weekend. Beyond that, we're each going our own way."

Laura's demeanor softened. "Pardon me for asking, but we were hoping, since you seem to know each other, that you could, ah...."

"Believe me, I would if I could."

"I shouldn't have said anything," Laura apologized. "It's not your problem. Just enjoy your lunch!"

* * *

We checked for Alvina outside the lodge, before picking up our pace.

"I can't believe we let that little old woman intimidate us," Steve grumbled as we hurried down the steps toward the parking lot. "Here we are—every darn one of us nearly forty years old—skulking through the hotel like schoolkids playing hooky."

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We burst out laughing, imagining big burly Steve shaking in his boots. Ryan didn't fit the picture either. Not as tall or husky as Steve, he was still well built—certainly looked like someone who could hold his own against the likes of Alvina Piffle. Cat suggested I use my Karate skills to take Alvina down, creating a mental image that seemed even more comical.

Of course it would be a lot easier if physical prowess was all it took to stop Alvina's nastiness. But, besides not being inclined to fisticuffs, Cat and I weren't even scary looking. I was a hazel-eyed blonde with short curly hair. Cat always described herself as medium: Medium height, medium brown hair and eyes. In reality, she was quite pretty.

On the short ride into town, we mulled over Laura's suggestions and decided to have lunch at Ernie's Hot Dogs and Burgers. We placed our order at the counter, then moved into the dining area, which was large enough for only four tables and a booth. We chose the booth, situated against one wall.

Only two other tables were occupied. Seated at the table against the opposite wall was a tall, lanky, cowboy-type guy wearing a Western shirt, Levis, boots, and a Stetson. A rather nondescript man sat at the table between us, facing the cowboy but with his back to us.

Our burgers arrived, and we found ourselves too involved with our own meal and conversation to pay much attention to the other diners. Then, during a lull when we were doing more eating than talking, the cowboy turned to the other customer and said in a conversational tone:

"My wife got online last night and looked up registered sex offenders in our area. She showed me a picture of someone looked exactly like you."

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If there had been a lull before, it was dead quiet now. I remembered to close my mouth before glancing over at the two men.

"Well, that certainly is a coincidence," Mr. Nondescript said in a monotone.

"Yessir, just like you," Mr. Stetson continued. "From somewhere up in Idaho. Where you from?"

"California."

"What brings you here?"

"Just passing through...on my way to Dallas."

"Big city like that. Easy to get lost."

I figured Mr. Nondescript would get up any minute now and walk away; then I could get a look at his face. But he just sat there as if he and Mr. Stetson were talking about the weather.

And the four of us just sat there like pillars of salt. I'd lost my appetite, but that didn't have anything to do with my hamburger turning cold.

Ryan cleared his throat. "Ready to go?"

We came out of our trance, but before we could even put on our coats, we were jarred by the sound of someone stomping into the café.

"Mind if I join you?" Alvina rasped, sliding into the booth beside Cat.

"How did you find us?" Cat blurted out. "I mean, sure, but we were just leaving."

So was Mr. Stetson. Ryan read my mind (a sometimes wonderful habit of his), and we rose to pay our bill while the Córdovas dealt with Alvina. This wasn't one of those fancy places where the waitress refills your coffee—or pays any attention to you at all. So Ryan and I met up with Mr. Stetson at the cash register.

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On the way to the counter, I couldn't help but take a surreptitious look at Mr. Nondescript, who looked a little queasy. No wonder. He seemed rooted to his chair. I guess he wanted to make sure the cowboy had left before encountering him at the register.

By now, the Córdovas had disentangled themselves from Alvina and joined us in line. While taking care of our bills, we heard some kind of commotion coming from the dining area.

"Alvina!" Cat said. "I bet she stood in the doorway and overheard that bizarre conversation before she barged in on us. And now—"

And now there was silence. Cat peeked into the dining room, but no one was there. Instead, Alvina was waiting for us outside.

"He just ignored me and walked away," she growled. "Thinks he can get away with being a menace to society."

And apparently—in his haste to escape the wrath of Alvina—thinks he can leave without paying for his lunch either.