

# Murder Comes by Mail

by A. H. Gabhart

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How did he get into these things? Michael Keane wrestled with the steering wheel of the old bus to keep it rolling on a fairly straight course down the road. The bus could have gotten an antique vehicle tag when the First Baptist Church of Hidden Springs had acquired it for church outings ten years ago. Since then the only thing that held it together was Pastor Bob Simpson's constant entreaties to the Lord.

Michael told Pastor Bob he needed to pray for donations for a new one, but the preacher smiled and said God had supplied this old bus. It would surely make one more trip. So far it always had. Of course that was with the pastor behind the wheel tuned into his direct line to the Man upstairs. As Michael fought the old bus around the curves down toward the river, he was pretty sure the words stringing silently through his head might not be the exact same ones the reverend used to keep the wheels rolling.

Behind him, nineteen members of the Senior Adult Ladies Sunday School Class chattered and fanned themselves furiously with folded church bulletins they must have stuffed into their purses for just this occasion. Nobody suggested putting the bus windows down. They were going to a play in Eagleton, and a few beads of sweat were a small price to pay to keep their beauty shop curls intact. Aunt Lindy was the one exception. She had sensibly lowered her window as soon as she boarded the bus and thus turned her seat into an island of wind all the other women avoided.

Michael met her steady blue eyes in the mirror. She was the reason he had given up his day off to ferry the women to Eagleton for the matinee performance in place of Pastor Bob, who had been called to do a funeral this afternoon.

"You'll enjoy it." Aunt Lindy all but commanded him that morning when she called.

"Can't you find another driver?" Michael had looked out the window of his log house at the perfect blue of the lake where he planned to spend the day out in his rowboat drowning worms. "How about Hal Blevins?"

"You know Hal hasn't been the same since his by-pass surgery last year. What if our bus breaks down?" Aunt Lindy paused to give Michael time to imagine Hal having heart failure by the side of the road while a busload of little blue-haired ladies watched. "Besides, Clara's first husband's niece is in the play. You remember Julie Lynne. The two of you dated when you were in high school, didn't you?"

"One date." In those days Julie Lynne Hoskins had been too tall, with a frizzy brown mop of hair that she continually hacked at with a brush to fight it back from her face.

Aunt Lindy had pushed him to ask Julie Lynne to the homecoming dance. She said Julie Lynne needed a date and they'd have fun together. They didn't. At the dance, the two of them sat in a pool of awkward silence amid the thumping music. He tried to get her to dance a couple of

times, but she just shook her head without raising her eyes from her clenched hands in her lap. That was the last time he'd listened to his Aunt Lindy's advice about girls.

Shortly after that, Julie Lynne's family had moved away from Hidden Springs, and he'd lost track of her until their tenth high school reunion. She hadn't come, but one of the girls reported spotting her in a store catalog, modeling underwear.

That was amazing enough, but now here she was onstage in a play that some of the ladies on the bus behind him weren't too sure was proper. He was kind of looking forward to seeing how Julie Lynne had changed.

He wasn't so sure he was as interested in her seeing how he had changed, or maybe how he hadn't changed. After all, here he was still in Hidden Springs, not having done much of anything yet, just passing the days being a deputy sheriff in a place that hardly ever needed a deputy for anything but directing traffic and collecting property taxes.

But that was fine with Michael. Arresting people wasn't on his list of favorite things to do anyway. He liked having plenty of time to fish and read about the War Between the States and keep Aunt Lindy happy. She wasn't looking very happy at the moment as she glared at Edith Crossfield across the aisle from her.

Edith had been talking nonstop since they'd met at the church thirty minutes ago. Michael tuned her out after the first mile, but now he tuned in again to see what had Aunt Lindy riled.

"There are simply some things you shouldn't do as a church," Edith was saying. "I mean, we have to have standards."

A couple of seats back, Clara James flushed red and muttered something to her seatmate, but Clara wasn't about to take on Edith head to head.

Aunt Lindy had no such reservations. "If you're that worried about your sensibilities being insulted, Edith, you could always get off the bus and go back home."

Michael slowed the bus a little to add emphasis to Aunt Lindy's words.

"Get off the bus?!" Edith swung around to face her attacker. "And what would I do out here two miles from town, Malinda?"

"Michael can call Lester to come pick you up and take you home."

"In his patrol car?!" Edith sputtered. "And lose my ticket money? I think not."

"Then hush and enjoy the trip." Aunt Lindy turned her face back to the front as if the exchange were over.

"Well, I never, Malinda." Edith flapped her makeshift fan double quick. "I'm not one of your high school students. I've got a right to say what I think, and I think we should have been more selective about which play we're seeing. Even if Julie Lynne is Clara's niece and all, that doesn't mean we have to support something indecent with our attendance. But seeing as how the Sunday school class was going, I thought it my bounden duty to come along. I always support the doings of the church. You know I do, Malinda. Better than you most of the time, I might add. Not that I'm keeping count or anything, but . . ."

She was still droning on as Michael wrestled the bus around the final curve to the bridge spanning Eagle River. On the other side of the river the road straightened out a bit, and if the bus could make it up the hill, they might actually get the rest of the way to Eagleton without incident. That is, unless Aunt Lindy tired of Edith's harping. Who knew what might happen then?

He glanced at her in the mirror, but she wouldn't meet his eyes now. She was staring studiously out the window, her short steel-gray hair lifting off her forehead in the breeze from her open window. Her lips were set in a thin line that made Michael cringe, but Edith Crossfield prattled on, multiplying her words, letting the sheer volume of them steamroller her opponent.

Michael was so busy waiting for the explosion from Aunty Lindy that he didn't notice the man perched precariously on the wrong side of the bridge railing, leaning toward the river below, until one of the ladies behind him gasped and pointed. After a shriek, even Edith fell silent.

The man had picked the middle of the bridge for his jump. People always picked the middle of the bridge. While he was working in Columbus, Michael and his partner, Pete Ballard, had talked down a few jumpers, but they'd lost a couple too. One a doped up sixteen-year-old boy, and another, a middle-aged woman. Michael's stomach lurched at the memory.

Michael braked to a stop about fifty feet away from the man who kept his eyes on the water and didn't seem to note their presence.

On the bus, the ladies found their voices, with Edith speaking up first. "What's he trying to do?"

"I think he means to jump," another lady chimed in.

"Who is he?" Two women spoke that question in concert.

"What does that matter right now?" Aunt Lindy frowned at the other women and then looked toward Michael. "Do something, Michael."