

MURDER IS NO ACCIDENT

CHAPTER 1

When Maggie Greene heard a noise in the big old house below her, she sucked in her breath to listen. It wouldn't do for her to get caught up in the tower room at Miss Fonda's house.

It didn't matter that Miss Fonda had told her it was okay. The old lady's face lit up when she remembered hiding out in the tower room when she was fifteen like Maggie. But Maggie's mother wouldn't think Maggie had any business inside the house unless they were cleaning it for Miss Fonda. So Maggie kept her visits to the tower room a secret.

After Miss Fonda had to go to the Gentle Care Home, Maggie's mother did say Maggie could come feed Miss Fonda's calico cat, Miss Marble, who lived out in the garden shed. But the cat excuse wouldn't help if Maggie got caught inside the house. She'd be in trouble.

The thing was not to get caught. So Maggie stayed very still and listened for what she'd heard. Or thought she heard. No sounds now. Old houses could creak and groan for no reason.

Maggie crept over to the window and felt better when the circular drive down below was empty. Maggie rubbed a spot clean on the glass with a corner of her sweater. No telling how long since these windows had been washed. The years of grime didn't let in much of the October sunshine.

Maggie shivered and pulled her sweater tighter around her. But it wasn't actually a feeling cold shiver. More the kind of shiver that sneaked up on you and made old timey people like Miss Fonda say somebody must have walked over their grave.

As she started to turn away from the window, a car did pull into the driveway. Maggie took a step back, but she could still see the red and white sign shaped like a house on the car's door. Maggie knew who drove that car. Geraldine Harper.

Everybody in Hidden Springs knew the Realtor. They said she could talk a bulldog into selling his doghouse. Maggie had heard her sales pitch back when her parents had hoped to move out of the trailer park and buy a house. That was before Maggie's father lost his job. Since then, there wasn't any talk about new houses, just worries about paying the lot rent in the trailer park.

That didn't keep Mrs. Harper from calling now and again about this or that perfect house. Calls that nearly always led to arguments between Maggie's parents. A couple of weeks ago she stopped by the trailer where Maggie's father told her in no uncertain terms to stop bothering them about houses. The woman gave him back as good as she got and then kicked their little dog when he sidled up to her, his tail wagging friendly as anything.

She'd probably kick Miss Marble too if she spotted the cat, but maybe the cat would stay hidden. Like Maggie. If Mrs. Harper caught Maggie in Miss Fonda's house, things were going to be bad. Really bad. Surely Mrs. Harper wouldn't climb up to the tower room. She had on a skirt and shoes with a little heel. A woman had to dress for success, she'd told Maggie's class last year on career day. But she definitely wasn't dressed for climbing the rickety ladder up to the tower room.

All Maggie had to do was stay quiet. Very quiet. And hope the woman left soon. She needed to be home before her mother came in from her job at the Fast Serve. The doing homework at the library excuse didn't work past closing time.

The woman pulled her briefcase and purse out of the car and headed toward the front steps. She must have a key. Maggie couldn't believe Miss Fonda wanted to sell her house. She

loved this house. She was always begging to go home whenever Maggie went to visit her.

Maggie couldn't see Mrs. Harper after she stepped up on the porch. She couldn't hear her either. The tower room was a long way from the front door.

But what about the back door? That was how Maggie had come in. If Mrs. Harper found it unlocked she might blame Maggie's mother. Say she was careless. They might fire her mother.

Maggie's heart was already beating too hard before she heard somebody coming up the steps to the third floor. Too soon for Mrs. Harper. She would just be coming in the front hall where the grand staircase rose up to the second floor. But somebody was in the hall just below. A board creaked. The one in front of the room that led up to the tower. Maggie always stepped over it, but whoever was there now didn't.

Mrs. Harper must have heard the board creak too. Her voice came up the stairway. "Hello?"

Nobody answered. Certainly not Maggie. And not whoever had just stepped on the squeaky floorboard. Maggie wasn't sure she could have answered if she'd wanted to. Her throat was too tight.

The door opened into the room below Maggie and something crashed to the floor. Probably the lamp on that table beside the door. It sounded like a bomb going off in the silent house.

"Who's there?" Mrs. Harper's feet pounded on the steps.

Maggie desperately hoped whoever it was wouldn't decide to hide in the tower room. Her heart banged against her ribs, and she put a hand over her mouth to keep her breathing from sounding so loud.

Relief rushed through her when the door creaked open and the floorboard squeaked again. Where before the steps had sounded furtive, now they were hurried. Mrs. Harper's heels clattered on the wooden stairs up to the third floor. Those steps were narrow and steep, nothing like the sweeping broad staircase from the first to the second floor.

Maggie slipped over to the trapdoor into the tower and eased it up a few inches. She couldn't see anything but maybe she could hear what was happening.

"What are you doing here?" Mrs. Harper's voice was strident.

The other person must not have found a place to hide. Whoever it was mumbled something, but Maggie couldn't make out any words.

"Stealing is more like it." Mrs. Harper sounded angry. "I'll not let you get away with it."

Maggie did hear the other person then. Panicked sounding. Maybe a woman's voice. Maybe not. "I can explain."

"You can explain it to the sheriff."

"Wait!"

Mrs. Harper didn't wait. Her heels clicked purposely on the floorboards as she moved away. The other person rushed after her.

A shriek. Thumps. The whole upstairs seemed to shake as the bumps kept on. Then it was quiet. Too quiet.

Maggie lowered the trapdoor and scooted away from it. She waited. Down below, a door opened and shut. Not on the third floor. On the first floor. Somebody leaving the house. Maggie counted to one hundred slowly. Once. Twice. Everything was quiet. Maggie peeked out the window. Mrs. Harper's car sat in the same place in the driveway.

What if the woman was hurt? She might have fallen. Something had made all that noise. Maggie couldn't just stay hidden and not help her. It didn't matter whether she liked Mrs. Harper

or not.

She took a deep breath and squeezed her hands into fists to keep her fingers from trembling.

You're fifteen, Maggie. Stop acting like a scared three-year-old.

The trapdoor creaked when she lifted it. Maggie froze for a few seconds, but nobody shouted. She put her foot on the first rung of the ladder, but then climbed back into the tower room to hide her notebook. She'd never worried about that before, but nobody had ever come into the house while she was there until today.

She spotted a crack between the wallboards and stuck the notebook in it. When she turned loose, it sank out of sight. Well hidden. With a big breath for courage, she climbed down into the room. She stood still. All she could hear was her own breathing.

With her foot, she scooted aside the broken lamp and went out into the hallway. She made sure to step over the squeaky board.

The silence pounded against her ears. She'd never been afraid in the house even though people said it was haunted. People had died there. Miss Fonda told her that, but that didn't mean they were hanging around now. Maggie didn't believe in ghosts. She really didn't, but right that moment, she was having trouble being absolutely sure.

"Mrs. Harper, are you all right?" Her voice, not much more than a whisper, sounded loud in Maggie's ears. She shouldn't have said anything. If Mrs. Harper had followed the other person outside, Maggie might slip away without anybody knowing she was there.

A little hope took wing inside her as she reached the top of the stairs. Hope that sank as fast as it rose.

Mrs. Harper was on her back at the bottom of the steps. She wasn't moving. At all. Maggie grabbed the railing and half stumbled, half slid down to stoop by the woman.

"Mrs. Harper?" Again her voice was barely audible, but that didn't matter. The woman stared up at Maggie with fixed eyes.

Maggie had never seen a dead person out of a casket. She wanted to scream but that wouldn't help. Nothing was going to help.

She should tell somebody, but how? She didn't have a cell phone. Not with her family struggling to buy groceries. Maybe the other person did. The one who had chased after Mrs. Harper to keep her from calling the sheriff.

But that person must have walked past Mrs. Harper and on out the door without doing anything. Maybe worried like Maggie about getting in trouble. Afraid like Maggie.

Maggie stood up. It wasn't like she could do anything for Mrs. Harper. The woman was dead. A shiver shook through Maggie, and she rubbed her hands up and down her arms. She could leave and nobody would be the wiser.

A chill followed her down the stairs. Her feet got heavier with every step. Whether she got in trouble or not, she couldn't leave without telling somebody. When Maggie spotted the white cell phone in an outside pocket of Mrs. Harper's handbag at the bottom of the stairs, it seemed the perfect answer. She didn't even have to unzip anything. She gingerly picked it up and punched in 911. The beeps sounded deafening in the silent house.

"What's your emergency?"

The woman's voice made Maggie jump. She must have hit the speaker button. She didn't want to say anything. She thought they just came when you dialed 911.

The woman on the other end of the line repeated her question. "Respond if you can."
Maggie held the phone close to her mouth. "She can't. She's dead."

“Who’s speaking? What’s your location?” The woman sounded matter-of-fact as though she heard about people being dead every day.

Maggie didn’t answer. Instead she clicked the phone off so she couldn’t hear the questions. She started to put it down, but then she remembered those police shows on television. She pulled her sweater sleeve down to hold the phone while she wiped it off on her shirt. Her fingerprints were all over the house but nobody would be suspicious of that since she helped her mother clean there. The 911 voice didn’t have to know who Maggie was.

Maggie propped the phone against Mrs. Harper’s purse. The police had ways of locating cell phones, so they would find Mrs. Harper easy enough. But Maggie didn’t want them to find her.

She slipped through the house and outside. Her hands shook so much that she had to try three times to get the key in the slot to lock the backdoor.

When she turned away from the house and looked around, she didn’t see anybody. Not even Miss Marble. She ran across the yard and ducked through the opening in the shrubs.

She didn’t think about whether anybody saw her.