

POTTER'S FIELD

JANET BIERY

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CHAPTER ONE

MISS POTTER'S NEW FIELD

Edna Potter tugged at the top half of her dress, impatient with the polyester ruffle that extended over the bright lavender skirt. She had debated wearing something less dressy, but then this was a special occasion. She ran a comb through her short brittle locks, fighting them into some semblance of shape. They seemed determined to stand up no matter what. Vexed, she gave up, left the bathroom, and worked her way among the ambling herd of teachers back toward the cafeteria.

Despite her vow never to attend again, here she was at yet another inservice training, as she had been at the start of the new school year at Winslow High every August, every year for most of her adult life. But if her announcement went over as well as she expected, it would be worth it to hear Superintendent Dolen's boring welcome back address. At least this year, she wouldn't have to stand in crowded school corridors to grouse about the ignorance of her students or sympathize with some young teacher's pathetic frustration with how out of control young people were today. Maybe they were out of control in their classrooms, but never in hers. It wasn't the student's fault in her opinion. They just weren't putting enough starch in today's teachers.

Edna glanced around, nodding hello to those who made eye-contact or called out to her. She spied Dolen and headed straight for him. Hearing a titter behind her, she blushed. She had heard the same titter from students. Her rolling gait from her bad right hip made her waddle like some oversized goose. Forty years of sitting while parsing sentences or pointing out the underlying messages in the *Scarlet Letter* had left her with serious arthritis. When she could no longer stand the pain she would have the surgery her doctor had recommended and get the fossilized relic replaced, maybe in another year or two.

“Herbert Dolen, I need to talk to you,” Edna declared.

The young man speaking with him backed quickly out of her way. Edna took only a second to identify the new coach.

“Ms. Potter,” Herbert blurted, “what a surprise.”

She wasn't fooled by Dolen's warm smile. They'd had a run-in the year before about two seniors whom she'd failed and the principal had mistakenly promoted. Not completing a research paper on time had always been grounds for failure in her class. She had won the argument and both students went to summer school to finish their English requirements. Was he holding a grudge? Probably.

“Herbert, I wanted to find out your agenda for today.”

“Edna, you're looking good. I'm sure Miss Minnie still has some brochures left at the door.”

She snorted. “Looking well, you mean. I've seen it. That's what we need to talk about.”

He squinted at her. “You have some complaint about the schedule, or the program?”

She glared back. Herb began teaching four years after she had and, truth to tell, if he'd been any good at it, he would never have been promoted to principal and then elected to superintendent.

“A suggestion. I wondered if you would recognize the retirees with the new teachers instead of waiting until after lunch. I have a lot to get done today, and I planned to say a few words.”

“You're not the only one. Fred Keaton is retiring, too. He may not be here yet.”

Edna tucked her chin, then swiveled to glance around the noisy room. There were few things harder than getting a group of teachers to sit down and be quiet at a meeting. Most were milling around, loudly exchanging gossip about their families and summer vacations. She was about to accept defeat when she spied a black, bald head. “There he is by the water fountain.”

“Well, I guess,” said Dolen, then he smiled at her bright smile.

When terror didn't work, she could use charm with the best of them. “Thank you, Herbert. I appreciate it so much. My bad hip makes sitting through these things intolerable, you know.”

“Right.” He made a note on the pink flyer atop the podium.

Still smiling, Edna found an empty seat near the door. She waved to Fred and was glad when he came to join her. Even though he was several years older, his dark skin was barely creased around his eyes, his shaved head hiding the age his white hair would have revealed.

“Hey, old girl, didn’t expect to see you here today.” He put out a hand to touch her arm.

She laid her hand on his to return the warm gesture. “I didn’t plan to come, you know, but I changed my mind. Thought of something I wanted to tell them after all.”

“Good, good. I’ve got me a few words to say, too,” he laughed as he unrolled a sheet of paper.

Oh, Lord, she thought, but merely smiled in reassurance. Even if she went first, she would now have to wait to hear his speech. Years ago he had asked her to proofread the speeches his boys gave at the agricultural competitions. Unfortunately, it never occurred to the man to ask her to edit his own. At least his delivery would be good. Keaton knew the techniques of deep breathing and how to use the dramatic pause. Those boys of his had won awards in speech trials for years on the same tired old speeches.

Miss Minnie sailed past them, swishing her hips in her usual prissy walk, on the way to the microphone. Leave it to Dolen to make someone like Minnie call the unruly crew to order.

“How do you like this retirement business?” Edna asked.

“Retirement? You kidding? I still got all that bottomland to farm. I just had one of my biggest tobacco crops. Don’t reckon old war horses like us ever get to retire, do you?”

She smiled. “Well, at least from teaching. Did they call you and ask if you wanted to be on the substitute list?”

“Oh, yeah. Asked me like it was some kind of big favor, in case I get lonesome for my classroom and those boys and girls. Shoo-oot, you don’t want to know what I told them?”

“I can imagine. I told them forty years was enough. I had no intention of walking back into a classroom.”

“Forty? Is that all you taught? I thought you were teaching before Methuselah.”

She glared at him. “How old do you think I am?”

He laughed. "You don't want me to speculate about that, do you?"

"I'll be sixty-three in January," she declared.

"Just a baby. Ain't you quitting a little early?"

"I think I've put in enough time in the classroom."

"Shoo-oot, I taught forty-four years. Figured I'd never live to be sixty-five so I could get out of there."

It was her turn to laugh. Unfortunately, Herb Dolen had taken over the microphone and the room fell silent. Her horsey sound brought forth answering laughs, then nervous titters from the crowded room.

"Great," his voice boomed out. "I know you're glad summer break is over. Teachers, like students, are always glad to be back in school."

Fred leaned close to whisper, "Guess we better shut up, old girl, and listen to him spread that manure one more time."

Edna covered her mouth to stifle another laugh as the Superintendent proceeded to shovel it out. Her hip was a dull throb by the time Dolen finished his speech.

The business secretary explained changes in insurance coverage and payroll deductions, then Dolen was back, introducing new staff members, asking them to stand to be recognized. The scattered applause decreased with each new employee.

Edna rested her forehead on her raised hand and tugged at her hair impatiently as Dolen started on congratulations for those who had married or had children.

Fred leaned over and patted her back. "Patience, patience, Edna, he's winding down."

She looked at Fred from under her hand. This was one of the things she would miss, the camaraderie between teachers. They had talked no more than a few dozen times in the years they had taught at opposite ends of the same high school, yet they knew how each other felt at this moment. She had outlasted most of the others she started with. They had married, surrendered, or moved on to jobs that paid more and demanded less. Those who stayed, old or young, knew they all stood together on the front lines of a war that mattered.

"Now, I would like to recognize two special individuals. This year we have two teachers retiring from the Tacheka County School District, Mr. Keaton and Miss Potter. Together they have taught over eighty

years at Winslow High.” When the ahhs stopped, he continued. “First, Fred. Would you stand and say a few words?”

There was loud, thunderous applause. Edna straightened, shifting on the hard chair and leaning back so she could watch him stand and bask in the well-earned attention. His speech was grand, floating out in rich, dulcet tones without the aid of a microphone. If there were lapses in grammar, they slipped by unnoticed.

Fred brought a lump to her throat as he finished with the words, “It’s an important thing you people do, teaching. Don’t ever forget that you are all that keeps the world from slipping back into the darkness of the Middle Ages. Ignorance is out there, waiting to win young minds. You have to make them learn, you have to make them want to know something.”

“Thanks, Fred. Now, Miss Potter?” Dolen looked in her direction.

Edna waited until the last applause died away and Fred sat down. She rose slowly, pushing against the edge of the table for support, praying it had been wiped clean of spills. It was sticky to the touch, and as she lifted a hand to brush her hair back from her eyes, she thought she sniffed sour milk and that indefinable smell that was cafeteria food. She cleared her throat, leaned her weight away from her bad hip as Dolen finished introducing her.

She coughed as he finished up and someone handed her a Styrofoam cup of water. She took a few swallows, struggling to push down all the maudlin thoughts and words that sprang to mind. It was one thing to feel them, another to let them spill out.

“Thank you, Mr. Dolen.” Edna tilted her chin and smiled at Fred. “Thanks for being such a hard act to follow.”

There was soft laughter, full of hesitation.

“There are many in this room, I dare say, who sat in my classroom not so many years ago. You know all my speeches.” She knew for a fact that there were twenty-seven teachers in Tacheka County that she had taught, nineteen of whom were here today.

“I don’t want to speak of regrets. I don’t have any. Well, maybe not marrying that skinny boy who turned out to be governor.”

This time they all laughed. She’d told the story so often when asked why she never married, she almost believed it was true herself.

“Truth be told, I’ve taught long enough. I leave my room to Mrs. Little; I leave the task to all of you. I’m ready to move on to other things. As you know, our Mr. Keaton is a farmer. He’s always been a farmer and he always will be a farmer. Isn’t that right, Fred?”

“I reckon so. At least until the day I die.”

Edna waited until they were silent again, scanning the room and studying faces, wondering how they would take her announcement.

“Well, I was always a teacher,” she continued. “For the last forty years I’ve taught English and drama. Now that I’m retired, I need a new profession. Not being as old as my friend here, I’m not ready for Social Security. That being true, I’ve been planning for a second career.”

The room was totally silent. Were they wondering what a waddling ex-teacher might do? It was now or never.

“I’ve taken correspondence courses over the years. This summer I left town for four weeks. It wasn’t my usual trip to Cousin Sarah’s in Atlanta. Instead, I attended a private-eye institute, where I earned A’s in all areas, including marksmanship. I’ve applied for and received my license from the state.” Edna knew her voice was rising, but she couldn’t keep her pride and excitement from showing.

She heard whispers and, with a stern glance at the guilty, brought herself and the room back to attention. “I would like to announce today that I will be opening the Potter Detective Agency. I will be Winslow’s first, and only, private investigator.” At the shocked faces, she smiled. “I’ll leave a stack of my business cards with Miss Minnie if any of you would like to pick one up during break. Thank you.”

The room went silent and Edna saw gaping mouths. She slapped the table with her right hand, her signal to students that it was time to get ready for the bell, and everyone snapped out of it. They were no longer stunned, but all were still watching her in wonder as she walked slowly over to the registration table and set her purse on it. Carefully, she extracted the seventy-five pale ivory cards she had counted out that morning, each card boldly printed with black embossed ink proclaiming her new career.

Miss Minnie lifted one of the cards and read it out loud in a tinny little voice that carried perfectly. “Potter Detective Agency — no problem too large or too small.”

Below was Edna's address and the phone number she had managed to keep unlisted for forty years. Well, she hoped if students or parents called her now, they would be paying customers.

"Way to go, girl," called Fred.

Edna tried to smile at him, but she suddenly felt all shaky inside. She glanced over to the table where the women who had taught at her end of the hall were whispering furiously to each other. She certainly would hear what they thought of it all, but she'd hear it later. She tugged at the blouse's ruffle, turned, and strolled as calmly as her rolling gait would allow out to the crowded parking lot and her little Honda.

CHAPTER TWO

EDNA'S FIRST CASE

Edna was still in bed when the phone rang. She muted the *Today Show* and slid her feet out to find her slippers. Muttering under her breath, she picked up on the fourth ring. "Hello," she barked.

"Oh, excuse me, Miss Potter, if I'm waking you. I tried to wait until after eight so I'd be sure you were up."

Edna grunted. "What do you want, Lola?"

She was awake, of course, had been since five when nature called her from her warm bed. She seldom went back to sleep, just carried a tall glass of juice and the evening paper back to bed. She enjoyed snuggling back in like a groundhog hiding from spring, comparing the details of the day before filtered through the conservative regional newspaper she read while listening to the same events analyzed by the liberal New York television newscasters. She then stayed in bed to finish her crossword puzzle while listening to their banter about fashions and books on the morning talk shows.

She had nurtured her new habits in the first weeks of retirement, a reward for not having to wake up to an alarm, spring out of bed to bathe, and hurry to work. Her mornings were delicious. It would be a damn shame if this detective business spoiled them.

"What do you want, Lola?" Edna repeated.

"How did you know it was me? Everyone always says I sound so different over the phone. I can't believe you knew it was me."

"Yes, well, you don't. I did. Now what do you want?"

"I can tell I woke you up on the wrong side of the bed. It can wait, I'll just call back later."

For the last week her phone had done nothing but ring off the hook. Unfortunately, all the calls were from people asking her if the

rumors were true. She had rehearsed her answers carefully, "Yes, I've retired. Yes, I've opened an investigative agency. How can I help you?" But her prepared replies vanished and she began to snap at the callers when they wanted to take up her time with their foolish opinions of her sanity.

"Lola Owens, tell me why you called." Edna knew she had snapped that out a little harshly. It would be hard to build a business if she terrified her customers. She could hear a snuffle and let out her breath when the woman began to talk again.

"Mrs. Little was in to get her hair permed for school, and well, everyone was talking about the speech you gave at the teacher's meeting. She showed me your card, and . . . I've got this problem. I just never would call one of those numbers in the phone book, but I know you, and I trust you, and I was just hoping you could help me."

"I charge \$40 an hour."

"What?"

"I have a professional agency license and I charge \$40 an hour, \$250 for a full day. If you want me to help, I can make an appointment for you to come by."

Lola sputtered.

Edna stood up with an effort, resigned that she was going to miss the identity of and interview with the "hot" young actor who would be appearing in the next "blockbuster" movie, and clicked off the television. She held the phone in the crook of her neck as she pulled the covers straight. She had moved to the back side of the bed and had fished out the unfinished mystery novel that she'd been reading the night before by the time Lola stopped sputtering.

"No one said anything about your fees."

Edna plumped the pillow and smoothed the comforter. She decided to try common sense. "Do you style hair for free?"

"No, but I'm an experienced hairdresser. You're just starting out with this thing and—"

"How many sets and perms did you do for free before you charged?"

"It's not the same thing. Besides, that's a lot of money."

"Fine. I've got work to do." She pushed the red off button and clicked the portable phone into its stand.

Edna was dressed and had just started the coffee when the phone rang again. She pulled a cinnamon roll from the package in her freezer, put it in the microwave to heat, and set out a mug before picking up the telephone.

“All right,” said Lola, “but I have a ten o’clock shampoo and set coming in. I wanted to talk to you and get this out of the way first.”

“Come to the back door.” This time Lola hung up first.

Edna grinned and rubbed her hands together. Lifting the new brown book from the counter, she carried it to the kitchen table. She had chosen it because the synthetic leather and spiral binding was so similar to the grade books she had always kept. It took a moment to search her purse for the special pen that she had bought for the occasion.

Carefully, she entered the year and agency name, centered on the first page. Below, in the bottom third of the sheet, she filled in address and phone number. Since it was in her home, there was no need. But someday, when business expanded, she planned to rent a little office space over the bank. She turned the sheet, smoothing the vellum down so the lines and debit/credit boxes were even with the facing page. With quiet precision she entered the time and name of her first appointment, then clicked the pen into the spiral for safekeeping.

Gleefully, she patted the closed book and checked her new tape recorder to make sure it was operational. Certain it would work, she nearly danced over to get her coffee and roll. She had eaten only two bites when a car pulled up outside in a flurry of gravel.

Edna checked the window and smiled broadly as Lola Owens climbed out of her car. A blue chiffon scarf covered Lola’s distinctive red hair and she wore dark, wraparound sunglasses. Edna chuckled as she hurried to open the back door.

Graciously, Edna stepped back, holding the door as Lola dashed inside, looking over her shoulder as though she were being pursued. Edna looked around carefully outside before closing the door. “Are you worried that someone is following you?”

“No. I just don’t want your nosy neighbors seeing me here.”

Edna nodded and calmly walked back to the kitchen table. It was a reasonable concern since Winslow was such a small town. There wasn't a lot of news except what people invented.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” Edna asked.

Lola shook her head as she peeked through the lace curtains covering the window in the back door. Edna knew what there was to see beyond the screen of lilacs and shade of the two sugar maples. The mechanic next door had left for work at six-thirty, his wife Doreen for the factory at seven, and their two children had been dropped at school by whoever's week it was. Probably Doreen's.

Across the road, Dr. Chastain would have already driven to the Big-O donut shop in town to buy breakfast and flirt with the waitresses. Many openly called it a disgrace, but Edna thought it made perfect sense. His wife Helen did not eat breakfast, liked to sleep late, and she was beautiful. Homely was too kind of a description for Dr. Chastain.

Of course, there was the widow Howe on the other side. She wouldn't have seen who pulled in on this side of the house, but she might have caught the make and model of the car. She was eighty and had cataracts, but one could not rule out the possibility.

Edna washed down the last bite of roll with strong black coffee and slapped the table. “Let's get started.” She moved the tape-recorder with its built-in microphone to the middle of the table and made a show of switching it on.

Lola settled on the thick-cushioned chair, nervously folding her hands so that all ten of her perfect red nails were displayed. Edna noted that for someone in disguise, she should have thought to wear something less conspicuous than a pink uniform top with her sequined name tag in the shape of scissors.

Leaning forward, Edna spoke slowly into the microphone. “Lola, if you choose to hire my services as a private investigator, anything and everything you tell me will be confidential information. I will not reveal it to an outside source without your explicit permission to do so. Do you understand that?”

It worked like the course instructor had suggested. Lola's narrow face pinched in concentration. She nodded and Edna pointed to the microphone. Lola leaned forward and whispered, “Yes, I understand.”

“Good. In order to do the best job possible, I'd like to tape our conversation and listen to it after you've gone to make sure I haven't missed a crucial detail. Do you agree to have our conversation recorded?”

Lola looked uncertain. "I don't see why you have to do that, really, or if I should allow it. Are you sure you need to?"

Edna scowled at her and Lola leaned forward. "I agree."

"It is now 9:00 a.m. on the twenty-third of August. I am talking to Lola Owens. I've explained the charges for my services are \$40 an hour or \$250 per day. Do you agree to pay those charges and any expenses incurred on your behalf?"

"I still think it's too high, but I agree to pay for one day's work if that would mean eight hours of investigation."

Edna nodded impatiently.

"Okay. But I'm not sure what you mean about expenses. I would have to approve each of those beforehand."

"Agreed. Now, what do you need me to do?"

Lola leaned back in the chair, wrapping one long arm around the chairback, the fingernails of her other hand clicking against the polished wood of the table. She looked surprised by the question.

Edna tried not to growl, just tucked her chin and ran a hand through her stiff hair. She waited. After all, she had been warned that most of what a detective did was sit around and wait. It had not sounded hard until now.

She distracted herself by trying to guess what it was that Lola Owens could possibly need a detective for before Lola could tell her. The redhead had attended Winslow high, eleven years behind Edna's graduating class. She'd been beautiful, was still pretty for her age, which quick calculation made to be around fifty-one. Edna didn't think she had graduated, something about getting in trouble and having to marry a football player, if she remembered right.

Edna leaned forward; it was coming back quickly. She had taught that daughter, Priscilla maybe, and then Lola's two younger boys, Steve and Cody. Dumb as rocks, those boys, but at least they had graduated.

"Can I smoke?" asked Lola.

She considered saying hell no, not in my house. But Lola was a client, her first client, she reminded herself.

Edna smiled and said, "Of course." Then she stood up to search for an ashtray. She knew she had one from Hawaii. It was shaped like a volcano.

There was something about that daughter. Back when Edna had taught six classes a day and was the entire English department. Right, she was a dull girl but pretty. Hot-to-trot, if Edna remembered right. Let's see, she'd had her for freshman and sophomore English. There had been a problem with the Hillard boy. Edna remembered; he refused to marry the girl and it had been a big disgrace then. The girl was expelled so she wouldn't be a bad influence on the others.

Times had certainly changed. Now the girls drug their little bastards around school like special dolls. Everyone was supposed to ooh and coo over them. No dropping out or being expelled for this generation.

"It's about my granddaughter."

Edna sat down with the ashtray just in time to catch a long ash and a whiff of the acrid smoke. She smothered a cough and it came out like a bark. "Right. I was just recalling your daughter. Priscilla, isn't it?"

Lola smiled and pulled her billfold from her purse. "Right. I forgot you had her in class. It's her daughter that I'm worried about."

Edna looked at the separate photographs of the two women, trying to decide which one looked older than the other. "Right, I remember when she was born. I've not had her in class yet, have I?"

Lola shook her head. "Carrie was just a sophomore last year. You would have had her in class this year, but you both quit school." Lola gave a little laugh.

Edna nodded and smiled encouragingly. Come on, tell me. You're not going to shock me, she wanted to yell. Instead, she sat there, trying to look stoic and sympathetic.

Lola extinguished her cigarette and chewed her lower lip. She rubbed her eyes, then lit another. "I'm real worried about my Carrie." Her voice broke.

Edna leaned forward and impulsively touched her hand. The fingers felt limp and cool. "What do you mean, your Carrie?"

"I raised her. After Priscilla got in trouble and dropped out, she had the baby and then took off for New York. I'm the only mother Carrie's ever known."

Edna nodded. She had heard Lola talking about this particular grandchild when she visited the beauty shop. Lola never had much to say about how her children were doing, avoiding those questions with a

noncommittal "fine." She never even mentioned her other grandchildren, those from Steve and Cody. Easy to understand why, since they were idiot children of idiot parents. Not the sort one wanted to remember, let alone, brag about.

But she had seen photos of Carrie over the years. The last one in her cheerleading uniform had been clipped to the mirror over the shampoo basin. Another beautiful redhead, only she knew from conversations in the teacher's lounge that this girl was really smart. A first for the Owens.

"What about Carrie? Is she in some kind of trouble?"

It came out in a rush. The confessions of past sins, sins visited on the daughter and now the granddaughter. Edna wasn't surprised to learn the girl was pregnant. Maybe a frenzied sex drive was genetic; everything else seemed to be. But the rest of Lola's confession shocked her.

"I told her she'd have to have an abortion." Lola covered her mouth, barely able to get the words out.

"Good for you."

Lola stared at Edna in shock.

"You did the right thing. No sense letting one mistake ruin her life like it did her mother's."

"That's what I told her. It did ruin Priscilla's life. It did. When Joe Hillard denied it was his baby and refused to marry her, it was such a scandal. She couldn't wait to leave town and that baby and all her shame. She's been miserable ever since. Took up with the wrong kind of people. Had a real drinking problem for years. Maybe drugs, too?"

Lola whispered the last.

Edna nodded and continued to hold her hand. "It's her generation. Drugs have destroyed too many."

Lola nodded and drew in a deep breath.

"Would you like something to drink?" Edna offered.

Lola looked around. "Not coffee, but cola if you have it."

Edna rose and brought a glass of ice and a can of soda to set beside Lola, then looked up at the kitchen clock. Nine-twenty-five. She needed to practice her technique and get people to open up sooner.

Lola followed her gaze and drank some soda in a deep gulp. "All right, I'll hurry. She had the abortion. I paid for it. Made her so mad, or at least that's the way she acted. But I think she was really relieved. She

didn't even know which boy it might be, you see. She was a cheerleader, and I don't want to shift the blame, but those children were never supervised properly."

Edna nodded. She had often speculated about that. "So what is the problem?"

Lola puckered up and began to cry for real and Edna almost missed it. "She's run away."

"Hush. Stop that sniveling. If I'm to help find Carrie, I need you to tell me all you can."

Edna opened the notebook and wrote on the first blank sheet in the back section.

"When did she leave? Do you have any idea which way she went? Do you have family that she might have turned to for help? What about Steve or Cody? Did you talk to the police? Have you heard from her mother? What was Priscilla's last address? Phone number? Social Security Number? Birthdate? The last time you talked to her, what was she doing? Carrie's full name? Height? Weight? What was she last wearing? Describe some of her other clothes to me? Who are her friends? Can you name some of these boys she saw? What else? Think! Think!"

Lola looked at her in total panic, then took another gulp of soda.

"I'm sorry," said Edna. "I'll slow down. We'll take them one at a time."

She recorded each response as quickly as Lola answered and then thought of another. In twenty minutes she'd collected every fact that either one could think of and handed Lola one of her business cards.

"If you think of anything else, call me."

Lola straightened and stood, smiling bravely. "Thank you. I called the police, but they told me it's not been long enough. That tall deputy—what's his name?"

"Cletus Barrow?"

"Yeah, that's the one. He actually said to me, 'Well, Lola, you know how hot little redheads are.' Wasn't that mean?"

Edna nodded. Mean, but true, at least for the Owens.

"Besides, I couldn't tell him all this. You don't know what it means to finally tell someone all the truth and just to know someone is going to find her."

Edna walked her to the door. "Cover your hair and don't forget your glasses."

"I didn't pay you," said Lola.

"You can write a check to the Potter Detective Agency."

Lola quickly opened her purse and filled out a check and signed it. She hesitated before handing it over. "Maybe I should bring cash. Someone might see the check."

Edna snagged the check and held open the door. "It's been my experience, everyone else already knows more than you think they do about your private business."

Lola stared at her. "I'm surprised to hear you, of all people, say that. No one had a clue about your being a detective? That's one reason I came. I told Steve, 'if anyone can keep a secret, it's Edna Potter'."

CHAPTER THREE

HOW LITTLE WE KNOW

Strange, thought Edna, how many people a person could know without really knowing them—your hairdresser, doctor, and mechanic, even the people you worked with. You knew what they told you and the rumors that other people spread, but it was just a tiny fraction of the truth. Living all her life in one place, working with people who were friends since childhood, Edna often thought she knew everything about everybody. When their children and grandchildren sat in her classroom, she could predict their grades, their actions, and explain both based on their inner character and raising, or lack of it.

She suddenly realized how much fun she was going to have being a detective. She wouldn't have just the open-ended puzzles to solve, she would learn hundreds of new secrets. Filling in the blanks in people's lives would be even more fun than filling in the last word in the Sunday New York Times' crossword puzzle.

Edna chuckled. If she'd had different hair, she might already know more about the Carrie Owens' case. Her thick hair had so much body and such a mind of its own that she seldom went to the beauty shop. When she did go, every six weeks, always a Monday, she just had it clipped short in the back and long on top. Then she could wash it out in the shower, towel it dry, brush it hard, and be on her way. No one cared what old buffaloes looked like anyway. As long as she was clean and neat, she felt presentable.

Edna opened her log and entered a single line under the Owens' Case. Initial interview, one hour, retainer accepted. At the end of the line, she marked her first credit for \$250 and snapped the book shut.

After clearing the table, she pulled a roll of butcher paper from her bottom counter drawer and carefully draped it across the table. She left

the paper long enough to add future leads as the case developed, then tore it off the roll. Settling back down with a cup of coffee, she uncapped a black magic marker. Edna carefully divided the first-half of the sheet into four-inch columns and headed each with a name. The first two were easy. The last six were not.

Under Priscilla, she wrote: Identity—Priscilla Owens, birth mother. Description—5'5", weight unknown, 32 years old, long red hair, blue eyes. Last location—New York. Occupation—waitress? White Poodle Club. Problems—alcohol and/or drug addiction. Known skills—none. Education—tenth grade. Interests—? Last contact—a recent birthday card from Priscilla to Carrie that Lola had hid from her granddaughter.

Under Carrie: Identity—Carrie Owens, missing daughter of Priscilla, granddaughter of Lola. Description—5'6", approximately 135 pounds, age 15, short red hair, blue eyes. Last location—Winslow, student and cheerleader. Problems—upset about pregnancy and abortion—rebellious against grandparents, boy-crazy. Skills—typing. Interests—cheering (maybe upset when she didn't make the squad again this year), music—Smashing Pumpkins? Clothes—Grunge? Last seen—Sunday morning.

Edna added: Questions—family doctor? gynecologist?

Under Lola: Lola Owens, client/grandmother, 5'4", around 130 pounds, 51, medium-length red hair, blue eyes. Last location—Winslow. Occupation—hairstylist. Problems—dumb husband, scandalous past, runaway daughter, and now a runaway granddaughter. Interests—movies and church. Last contact with missing girl—Sunday morning before church. Question—why had both girls runaway instead of turning to Lola for help?

To be fair, she added Lola's husband, Steve Owens, Sr. to the list. Steve Owens: 6'1", about 200 pounds, 58, hair—brown. Winslow. Gunsmith, retired military (Air Force? Navy?), also a pig farmer. Reclusive—the only time Edna had ever seen him was when she had to sell tickets to a Panther ballgame. Problem—seemed to recall he had a heart condition. Last contact—Friday night, argued with Carrie. Lola had heard them yelling, but Steve sent Carrie to her room. Lola didn't know what the fight was about—probably boys as usual.

Edna stood up and stretched. This was a lot of work; maybe she should just keep things aligned in her head. The worst was knowing

there were many more names to add. Lola had given her names for only three boys. Of course, Carrie was still young.

Lola knew nothing about any of the boys but what they drove. No wonder the poor girl was in trouble. No wonder nearly half the babies born in America today were illegitimate. Nobody acted responsibly. Not the parents and definitely not the kids. In her own day, parents wouldn't let you go out alone with a boy before you were sixteen. Even then, it was to a chaperoned dance or on a double date, and they had to meet and cross-examine the boy to make sure he was from a good family.

Determined, Edna sat back down and gave each boy who Carrie dated a column of his own, then wrote down what she could remember about each from school. Rusty Williams: 5'11", 160-170 pounds, 17, red-blond hair, freckles, green eyes, quarterback for Panthers, mows yards on weekends, good family (father was a deputy), conceited, steady girlfriend (Susan Hillard, prom queen), average student, vehicle—white pickup truck, the probable father of Carrie's baby (at least Lola thought he had been, now it didn't matter). Last contact—dated all last spring, broke-up because of Susan?

Alex Smith: 6', 200 pounds, 19, brown hair, football lineman, lazy, poor student (ugly and a nose-picker as she recalled). Carrie's first boyfriend—she had dated him her freshman year. His father was a preacher (Pentecostal?). Vehicle—used Chevy. Last contact—unknown.

Dione White: 5'10", 160 pounds, 16, black, handsome, running back, thrown off team last season for two games (no one had told her the reason he was benched), didn't make the team this year. Excellent student, product of biracial marriage, parents divorced, no car. Last contact—Lola had made Carrie promise not to see him after she'd brought him home last summer (they were caught together at the house).

She wondered if she should add the more interesting facts to Dione's column. Gossip credited him with being the father of two babies born last year to two different white girls. It did not surprise Edna, very little did any more, since the boy was absolutely beautiful. He had skin like a milk chocolate candy bar and eyes with lashes longer than any girl she had ever had in class.

Plus, the boy had charm. In English class, Dione had memorized every poem Edna suggested, recitation being something she allowed

students to do for extra credit. Yes, his memory was flawless and his voice was like velvet. She had seen the effect he had on girls in her classes. Charmed them like a snake would a bird.

Wouldn't it be interesting if Dione had been the one to impregnate Carrie? It might explain why Lola was relieved after the abortion. Although most of the young people had little trouble with black and white mixing, the adults of Winslow were ultraconservative. Edna had heard a few even kept extra white sheets in their closets. She added one word below Dione's name. Stud.

Lola's comment about Carrie not being sure who the father of the baby was meant there might be more boys. She would have to talk with Trish or Doris at school to see if they knew any names she should add to her list of people to question.

At the top of the last column, she added a name that Lola had mentioned with disgust. Carrie was young but intelligent. What if Carrie had seen the birthday card from her mother in New York and asked questions about her parents? Would Lola have told her why Priscilla left? Would she have told her that Joe Hillard was her father? Was that the reason for such a drastic reaction in the Owens home? What had Steve Owens, the grandfather, said to Carrie?

Edna added Carrie's probable father's name. Joe Hillard: tall, bald, rather ordinary looking, one of Winslow's most prominent citizens, Occupation—bank president, member—city council. Married Becky Hillard (her father was a state senator, her mother was one of the Howes, last year she ran away with another man). Father of three—Susan (now dating Rusty Williams), and the two boys—?, ? (both played football). Joe was rumored to be carrying on with his Mexican housekeeper. No known contact with Carrie.

Edna sat back and smiled. The case looked pretty good already, even if the columns were mostly blank. Lots to investigate.

She stood up and swayed from side to side, trying to ease the stiffness in her hip. Opening her log book, she added a line—one hour, identifying leads.

The sun streamed in through the kitchen window and she quickly rolled up the sheet of paper. She had promised herself to do less sitting

after her doctor told her walking would ease the arthritis. It had made it so much worse when she began that she thought she might die. But after two months of retirement and daily exercise, she was seeing improvement.

Eleven o'clock was late; she needed to go before it became any warmer. As soon as she was outside, she began to sweat. Damn August humidity. At least she wasn't trapped inside a classroom with thirty-five miserable teenagers. Grinning about her good fortune in that, she did what passed for stretching, then looked in both directions. Maybe she should start walking before going back to bed each morning. But just the idea of tying her oxfords that early made her groan.

Catherine Howe, the widow next door, started down her walk to get the mail so Edna turned in her direction. Catherine smiled at Edna, revealing she had left out her partial plate.

Edna slowed so that they reached the end of the walkway at the same time. "Good-morning, Catherine."

"Why, hello, it's Edna, isn't it."

"Of course."

She knew the woman had trouble seeing clearly, but obviously the old biddy knew good and well who she was talking to. She had hurried outside as soon as she heard Edna's back door snap closed. Edna had no sympathy for people who always wanted pity and attention for their infirmities. Normally, she would have walked off, but today she was working.

"How are you doing, dear?" Catherine began. "I thought I heard some—"

"Fine." Edna answered, cutting off the question. Patiently, she began walking in place and smiled.

"Had company, did you?" Catherine tried again.

"Yes. How's the rest of your family doing?" Edna continued the walking, making an effort to listen to this answer.

"Now, you know I live alone, Edna."

Edna nodded, "Thought you still had kinsfolk in Winslow."

"Very few. My sister died two years ago, remember?"

"Right, emphysema, wasn't it?"

“Sad, really sad. She had to suffer so much.”

“A smoker wasn’t she?” Edna had seen the woman chain smoking on the porch behind them many times. Toward the end she’d gasped all the time and her hands shook so badly she could barely light the next cigarette off the last.

Catherine nodded.

“Too bad,” Edna said. “Left several children behind, didn’t she?”

“Just one, Becky Hillard. Blessedly, the senator was already dead before his daughter made that scandal. My sister’s death may have been as much from shame and grief as from disease, you know. She left three grandchildren though. Now they’re the same as my own.”

“Poor little things.”

“Poor nothing. They’re rich, spoiled little devils,” Catherine laughed as she patted her dress pocket for her snuff. Edna watched in disgust and fascination as the widow Howe twisted the lid off the little silver can and then used one long brown-stained finger to deliver a pinch to the upper corner of her lip.

Edna wiped the sweat from her red face as she continued to walk and puff in place.

Catherine continued, her voice a little sharper with the load of snuff. “I mean, they’re all nearly grown and Becky didn’t do much for them anyway. She was always too busy or too dressed up to be bothered by little ones. It was my sister who did most of their raising. They’ve missed their grandmother. But no, they hardly seemed to notice when their mother ran off with that preacher.”

She took a step so she was behind a bush. Edna heard her spit.

“Naw, they’re all real fine. Two youngest, her twins, John and Cliff, their only trouble is getting to practice on time. They’re always complaining about those coaches making them run laps. But the oldest, Susan, couldn’t be happier. She’s a senior this year, has a nice boyfriend. She’ll probably still cheer; she makes good grades and is so popular. You remember she was prom queen last year, and her only a junior.”

“I remember. That was real unusual, but she is a beautiful girl.”

“Looks like her mother. Takes after the Howe’s side, you know.”

Edna stared at the skinny woman with her dark, clouded eyes and uncombed gray hair. Perhaps with all Catherine’s teeth in and the brown

stain gone, the Howe beauty would have been visible, but it strained Edna's imagination too much.

"Their father misses Becky the most, since he's useless around the house. I had to help him find a maid. He stays busy you know, running the Union Bank."

"Yes. I remember now. Joe isn't it?"

"That's right. Joe did real well for Becky. We never did understand why she left him for that skinny Bible-thumper. She never wanted for anything, them kids neither."

"That was disappointing, I'm sure. Have any of you heard from her since she left?" Edna wiped sweat from her face with the back of her hand and gasped for breath. She knew her face was glowing redder than the little flowers in her blouse.

"No, I guess she's too ashamed to call us now. Don't believe any of us would want to hear a word she has to say." She added a little humph.

Edna shook her head; damn strange people if they weren't curious. She couldn't believe they weren't all still dying to hear Becky's explanations. She was considering retreating back into her air-conditioned kitchen when she saw a figure run out the front gate across the road.

"You never did say who your company was, did you?"

Edna ignored the question and waved as Helen Chastain called out her name. "Well, I've got to get moving, Catherine. Nice seeing you."

She left the older woman behind as she strode out with Helen fast behind her. At least where they were walking, there was a little breeze.

Edna slowed her pace and waited until the younger woman was beside her before speaking. "Hello, neighbor."

Helen laughed. "None of that, Miss Potter. I want all the details."

"Details? Details about what?" Edna asked innocently, but she knew the pretty blonde beside her wouldn't give up. It had been nearly fifteen years, but she remembered how bright and persistent this valedictorian had been.

"You know. This detective stuff. I heard people talking about you at the supermarket. It's all over town and people are just amazed. Is it true? Are you really a private-eye?"

They were at the end of the lane and Edna had to decide whether to walk up to the bank and back as usual or surrender to the heat and head

back home. A white patrol car slowed beside them and she watched the dark window roll down on her side. Gratefully, she felt the cold air slide out over her.

Cletus Barrow leaned across the seat and looked up at the two women. "Miss Potter, Mrs. Chastain. You ladies need a lift?"

Helen shook her head and Edna wondered if she should jump in and flee. But there was that old saw, out of the frying pan and into the fire. She brushed her hair back and uttered a terse, "No, thank you," and turned around. Grimly, she put a hand on the ache in her hip and walked determinedly back toward her house. She could hear the furious whispers behind her.

Now why ever did she think this detective business would be fun? She felt like everyone in Winslow was investigating her. Why, she was positively notorious. Laughing at the idea, Edna walked back inside.

CHAPTER FOUR

DIGGING UP DIRT

Inside her house, Edna closed and locked the door. She imagined she heard running feet behind her. Or maybe that was just the town crier calling out her name and her cause for fame.

Peeking through the curtains, she was relieved that no one was in sight. Still, she could just imagine her two closest neighbors huddled outside on the concrete patio, arguing about whether to knock or not. She gripped the edge of her kitchen table and grimaced as she eased into the padded seat of her chair, putting most of her weight on her good side.

Five minutes later, her heart rate was back to normal and her face felt cool to the touch. It might only be walking, but no one could convince her it wasn't aerobic exercise.

The chart lay rolled up on the table, evidence that times had already changed. She filled in details under each name, including Susan Hillard's brother's names—the twins, John and Cliff. Edna seldom forgot, but she had noticed it took longer to bring names to the forefront of her mind. At times she could conjure up a face, hear a voice, or remember some antic from the past but fail to put a name to the person. When such occasions arose, she worried until the name came, and then promised herself she would write important details down. That had been one of the things they emphasized the most in her private investigation training classes. Pay attention to details and take notes.

Task completed, she carried the paper to her bedroom, which smelled of lilacs and dusty corners. She kept intending to give it a thorough cleaning, but there always seemed to be something more interesting to do than move furniture. She settled for keeping it picked up and giving it a superficial once over, while maintaining an operating room standard for clean in the kitchen and bath.

Edna stopped in front of her new computer in the corner and grinned. If Helen Chastain thought she was just another PI-novel gumshoe, she was dead wrong. This PI was wired and technologically current. She flipped the surge protector's switch, then reached above the monitor to thumbtack the sheet of paper in plain view.

Her instructor had recommended they use a freestanding chalkboard to keep facts organized, one that would flip to a blank side if need be, but she'd had enough of chalk dust for one lifetime. Of course she knew the principle was correct. There was something about seeing facts listed side-by-side that led the mind to make its own connections. If she had enough cases, maybe the pieces of paper would hide the dreadful rose covered wallpaper.

The little LED lights glowed greenly on the various components of her system. With the latest processor, CD-ROM drive, massive hard drive, and revved up modem, her computer met the specs recommended in her course. She had even followed their advice and ordered it from a catalogue that offered the best package price that included a laser printer and full-page scanner.

For someone who had always been technologically illiterate, this glowing monster in the corner of her bedroom was the biggest dragon she'd had to slay in order to get her license. Now, she connected to the Internet almost daily and corresponded with two of her fellow training classmates by email. Perhaps someday she'd use the spreadsheets and database to keep her client log and evidence links on, but not yet. There was something intrinsically satisfying about pen on paper that she wasn't ready to give up.

After checking her email, she opened a blank screen in her word processor and began to type, creating a client interview form. When she'd discovered how much easier it was to prepare a paper on the computer, she'd been sold. There was no sense interrogating potential clients or suspects if most of the time was spent hemming and hawing. She had never believed in wasting time. The next customer would have to complete her questionnaire, then they'd talk. She could have just left the questions in the computer and answered them there, but she preferred a hard copy. At her age, it was too late to begin inviting strangers into her bedroom.

An hour later, Edna finished working. She was tired, not just in her back and hip, but all over. She also felt weak with hunger. She turned off the printer and computer and took the interview sheet out to the kitchen table. She made vegetable soup and a pimento cheese sandwich, then ate greedily while editing the form, adding and changing questions as well as proofing for typos. Satisfied and full, she decided to grant herself a nap. After all, she was retired.

It was two-thirty when Edna woke up. The house was quiet except for the chug and hum of the air conditioner. She got up and switched it off so it could thaw, then went to the kitchen and fixed herself a glass of iced tea which she brought back to the bedroom, unwilling to give up the feeling of peace just yet. Her bed was an antique cherry four-poster and all the furniture in the room was from a matching time period, if not a matching set. All had been her aunts before her, all of it full of memories. Fluffing both pillows, Edna swung her bare feet up and sank back into the soft mattress.

Heavenly. She stared at the wall above the computer and reread the notations under each name.

Poor Lola Owens. She almost felt guilty taking her money. But this first case would require extra work as she figured out what she was doing, and damn if she intended to work for free.

Edna studied the chart and began making mental connections. The parallels between the three women listed were clear. Warmblooded, with low self-esteem, they had fallen prey to the same weakness, sex. It was interesting how the same sin led to such different punishments.

Shame had led Priscilla to abandon her baby and run away to live on the streets of New York. To Edna, that seemed worse than Carrie's fate of being forced to have an abortion, but one might argue that Lola's marriage to a pig farmer and gun nut was an even worse fate than her daughter's or granddaughter's. Edna tried to conjure up an image of Steve Owens but failed to come up with anything more than overalls and the smell of pig manure.

Had Carrie found the birthday card from Priscilla and then decided to search for the mother she had never known? If not, what had prodded the changes in Carrie from carefree child to wanton, then pregnant

teenager? Had Lola and Steve been too restrictive, or was there another reason Carrie had left home? Had she been abducted or was she the victim of foul play?

Whatever the reason, Edna needed to check the various missing person services online. A description of the girl might bring a call. It was one thing if the child ran away, another if she had been kidnapped or worse. In today's climate, anything could happen to anyone.

Edna sipped her tea and made another connection. Susan Hillard, the prom queen, was Carrie's rival for quarterback Rusty Williams. The choice between cute-but-hot and pretty-with-money had been easy for him to make. It paralleled the rivalry that had left Priscilla unwed and embarrassed. That competition then had been between Priscilla and Becky Howe for another quarterback, Joe Hillard.

There was no doubt who had won that contest. Joe was the father of Carrie's rival. Sisters, at least half sisters, after the same boy? Did the girls know they were blood relations, not just blood rivals?

But why had Susan's mother run off with another man if Joe Hillard was so wonderful? Edna had known the man for years, first as a fair student, but one who had tried to cheat during tests, then as her banker, where she suspected he tried the same tricks. She couldn't see where the attraction lay.

The choices and actions of the three women seemed so similar, it made her wonder if Lola ever had a rival for Steve Owens. Edna laughed, then sat up. No, as she remembered it, Lola had been trying to live down her wild youth and met Steve at church. His proposal must have seemed like a godsend, but had it been? A long marriage did not necessarily mean a happy one.

But enough speculation. Edna logged onto the web and checked the WhoWhere.com website. Although she had CD ROM disks with telephone directories, the Internet white pages were more current. She found twelve numbers listed as Priscilla Owens. That was too many long distance calls to New York for her to make, especially since each might require two or three tries to connect with someone who might be Lola's daughter. She printed the list off, then checked the atlas site and printed off a map of New York City so she could circle each address.

After she checked out the FBI site for missing persons and descriptions for unidentified bodies, she logged off. As the files she'd collected printed, she opened the yellow pages disc and looked up the White Poodle Club, where Lola said Priscilla worked. Luckily, there was only one listed in the city. Priscilla might not be one of the women listed in the online phone book, but there was a high probability that if she were still working at the club they could help find her. Of course, there was the question of whether they would.

Edna checked the time and shut the computer down. If she hurried, she still had time to run by the bank and complete her list of errands, which included getting an answering machine. She had balked at the idea before, but she could now see where one might be useful. Even though her phone hadn't rung since this morning, unless it rang while she was out walking. It would take more than one client to make this endeavor a success, and she couldn't wait around for the next call.

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in a dark skirt and a sensible, polyester blouse, the same kind of clothes she had always worn like a uniform for work, Edna joined the stream of traffic into town. Factory workers were hurrying home and trying to stop for last minute items.

There was actually a line at the bank. She patiently deposited her first check, then looked at the end office where the bank president sometimes sat. Luckily, she avoided two former students who said "hello," and "is it true" almost in unison before they fell to talking excitedly to each other. She merely nodded and held her checkbook up to signal she was on an urgent errand.

Joe Hillard looked up curiously and Edna remembered the younger Joe who was already the quarterback by his sophomore year. When she'd wondered earlier what Priscilla Owens and Becky Howe had ever seen to fight over, she had forgotten that Joe had been tall and muscular as a young man. He'd had a rather low forehead and a mop of dark brown hair that fell into his eyes and over his collar in back. Quite the catch then, even though now the bald head and rounded belly were anything but appealing and the only long hair on his head was his winglike eyebrows.

Edna smiled as Joe rose to greet her, his forehead wrinkling back a good four inches to give him a basset hound look.

"Hello, Joe, can you spare a minute to help me?"

"Of course, of course, Miss Potter. Come in."

She began talking as she took a seat. "As you know, I've recently retired from teaching. I was thinking about investing some of the money I have in CD's in a mutual fund account. I remembered you mentioning something to me a couple of years ago about the bank offering those, but at the time I didn't want to take a risk with the money."

There, her prepared speech was out. It sounded kind of flimsy to her, but Joe leaned back in his chair with a finger rubbing the bridge of his nose as though it were the wisest thing anyone had said in days.

"Hear you've become quite the risk taker these days."

His response made her laugh. It was the opening she needed. "Well, some of us are conservative when we're young, more daring when we're older and there seems less to lose. Others are like you, taking all the risks when you're a young man."

"You mean, some of us never get around to taking risks."

"No, I remember when you were quiet the daring young man, the quarterback with all the women chasing after him."

Joe blushed and scratched the top of his bald head. "That was a long time ago."

"Not that long. Ever wonder if you made the right choice?"

"What?"

"Between that pretty little redhead and the blonde? I mean, since your marriage to Becky hasn't worked out?"

Joe looked annoyed. For a moment, Edna wondered if he would answer the too personal question.

She waited, letting silence help pull the answer out, then she softened the question with a smile and extended her bank book. The tellers always insisted she didn't need a passbook to keep up with her CD's since they were all on the computer, but she had always insisted she liked having everything carefully recorded in one place.

"Just \$5000, until I see how the earnings compare."

He nodded and pulled out a form for her to complete.

While she wrote quickly and carefully, he talked. "To be honest, I've often wondered. Not that Susan and the boys aren't wonderful, but Becky and I never got along that well. Her father and mother had spoiled her beyond belief and she expected everyone to keep it up. She was always demanding more money for something."

Edna's pen made a scratchy sound on the stiff paper. Noise from other people talking and lobby music mingled in the background.

Joe continued, "Priscilla was so much sweeter and less demanding."

Edna controlled the urge to look up from where she was writing and pretending to not be listening.

"It was my parents, you know. They convinced me that Priscilla was the wrong type of girl and that there was no way I could ever be sure the baby was mine." He paused, then almost to himself said, "I knew better, but I was afraid to disappoint them or anyone else."

Edna smiled and extended the completed application form. "I hear her daughter, what was her name? Carrie? I hear she's really smart."

Joe's hand shook as he took the paper. Edna saw tears in his eyes.

Instinctively, she leaned forward and whispered. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat, then looked away. "Of course. I'm fine. I'll be back in a minute."

She leaned back in her chair. People were such surprises. She had expected it to be difficult to get people to talk. Strange how a buttoned-down businessman could open up like that to anyone. Or was he merely telling her what she wanted to hear? And all the emotion—was he acting?

When Joe returned, he was brisk and business like. Other customers had left; a teller was waiting at the door with a key in the lock.

Edna rose and offered her hand to shake his firmly. "Thank you, Joe. Just in case you haven't heard, here is my card. All investigations are strictly confidential. If you ever feel the need to talk about things, just give me a call." She gave him a smile.

He took the card and shoved it in his pocket carelessly as though he had no interest at all. As she waited for the teller to release her, she noticed he had taken it from his pocket and was reading it carefully.

It wasn't impossible to expect Joe would call. After all, he still had a missing wife to locate. Surely he was concerned that she hadn't returned.

Before he could move forward with his relationship with the housekeeper, he would need to find Becky and get a divorce.

Unless the rumors about Joe and the maid that she had heard at church were merely rumors. If he didn't need a divorce, then he wouldn't be in a hurry to pursue Becky. It was also possible that he had hired a Nashville detective to investigate for him so no one in town would know his personal business. Just because she was now a private detective, it didn't mean people would all come flocking to her at the same time. They had a certain image in their minds of her as a teacher. It would take more than an announcement and a few cards to convince people to trust her as a detective.