

CHAPTER THREE

Nola looked at her watch. 8:55 P.M. Too late to call a locksmith, too early for bed. She wished Vale had come with her.

Perhaps she could find something to read. The wall under the stairs was lined with shelves of books, if she could make out their titles in the gloomy darkness. She looked over the balustrade, ordering herself to make another trip into that cavernous room.

At the top of the stairs she was stopped by a low gobbling sound. She stood, alert, for a moment, then recognized the phone ringing in her room. On the fourth ring she reached it and gingerly picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Nola, this is Dr. Broadcliff--Greg.”

“Oh. Hi.” His already-familiar voice was like a splash of sun-warmed water in her face.

“You okay there? I’m through here at the hospital and will be home in about twenty minutes. Would you like me to stop over and check out the house with you?”

Nola hung on the line, accepting his nurturing tone at face value, until an inner voice reminded her that isolation and fatigue were playing games with her emotions.

“Thanks, Greg,” she forced a normal manner. “It’s good of you to offer, but I’ve already checked everything, and I’m ready to turn in. It’s been an

exhausting day.”

“I’m glad you’re all right,” he said, disappointment edging into his voice. He hesitated. “Why not come over about eight tomorrow morning and have coffee with me? I’m stopping on my way home for a box of fresh Danish.”

“Can’t. I’m expecting Vale.” And she had a will to find. “Thanks, anyway.”

“All right, then. Take care.” There was an abrupt click when he left the line. Holding the phone, frustration at her situation began a slow burn under her ribs.

Her hands quivering, she replaced the phone and reached for a cigarette from her tote. It got as far as her lips before she stopped in disgust and broke it in two. Snatching the phone again, she dialed Vale’s number in Chicago.

On the third ring, Vale’s brassy-bright voice came over the line. “Hullo. Vale Ching speaking.”

“Vale? Nola. I wish you had come with me.”

“So do I. We could be practicing our new self-defense moves.”

“We’ll work out when you get here.”

“It won’t be long. I’ll see you in the morning, Nola. Weather Central says this storm is moving northeastward.”

“You’re not going to drive, are you?”

“Oh, no. As soon as the snowplows clear off the runways, airports here will be open. Chicago and Green Bay both told me flights will start coming in by 5:00 A.M. I’ll have breakfast with you, Nola. Hot tea and rice porridge, don’t forget.”

“I hope that works out, Vale. I’ve no idea how I’ll

get you from the airport out here to Bay Haven. The way this storm is hitting, I'll be stuck here till the snowplow goes through."

"Never fear. We'll play it by ear. Oops, didn't mean to rhyme."

Nola laughed. "Oh, Vale, I miss you. Every drawer and cabinet in the house is locked, and I'm supposed to be going through my aunt's possessions. Instead I'm looking for something to pass the time. I can't call a locksmith 'till morning."

"Just forget the locksmith. Those guys cost money. I'll open your locks the minute I get there. I promise."

"Without keys?"

"Certainly. My father is not only San Francisco's finest P.I., he's a great dad. Thanks to him, I've received training in lots of useful skills."

"You mean like picking locks? You can help me find that will?"

"I promise to do the job quickly, with no noticeable noise."

Nola laughed. "Noise won't matter here, Vale. There'll be no one but us here. The only sounds right now are creaking timbers and howling winds."

"Sounds spooky. I'm sorry I'm not there to keep you company. But I've got an idea. Remember the file I slipped into your tote because it had a Green Bay tag on it?"

"One of the open files that came with our buy-out of Fred Bailey?"

"Yes. I've been looking over the backup copy. Believe me, you'll forget everything, once you start this one."

“Oh, Vale, suggest something else, please. I need a good night’s sleep.”

“But this one has everything--millionaires, a beauty queen, rich people dropping dead.”

Nola couldn’t help laughing. “You sound hooked. I know you’re dying to get out there and start working, but--” She fell silent, then said soberly, “Vale, I’m uncomfortable about the suddenness of my aunt’s death. I want to find out what happened here.”

“Why? Do you suspect something?”

“Vale, the basement and stairwell are full of things that couldn’t have belonged to her, and every drawer and file is locked up tight, something totally out of character. She died unexpectedly, too, in her prime really. It doesn’t feel right.”

“Uh oh. I’ve learned to trust your instincts in these cases, Nola. Do you know the cause of death?”

“No, not yet.”

“We’ll have to get to the bottom of it.”

They said their goodbyes, and Nola turned to face the big soft bed. Henry Moffat expected the will in the morning. She must stop thinking about that and try to get some sleep.

Next morning the scrape of blade on roadbed brought Nola awake with a start. The snowplow. She sat up in the double bed and pulled the comforter around her shoulders, reluctant to leave its cocoon of warmth in her nylon slip.

The radio alarm, a spot of light on the table beside her, showed 7:00. Vale’s flight would arrive any moment. Nola threw off the covers and dashed

for the warmth of the bathroom. If and when Vale arrived and opened all the locked drawers in the house, would one of them contain the will?

Nola turned the hot water faucet in the shower and swished her hand through the stream of icy water that became cool, tepid, warm, then deliciously hot. She added more cool until the temperature was tolerable and stepped behind the plastic curtain, poured a dollop of shampoo into her cupped palm and worked it through her hair. It was hard to believe she was there, having a shower in Bay Haven, when Aunt Haley and Uncle George were gone, never to return. The place was theirs, forever all theirs, in her mind.

A slow chill at the base of her spine, where it had no business spreading under the stream of hot water, warned Nola that, where Aunt Haley was concerned, she needed to do some investigating.

She dried off vigorously in a voluminous pink towel from the wooden rack, dressed and slipped into an old coat she found hanging in the closet. Anxious to see if she'd be able to drive into town, she ran down the stairs and through the house, noticing that the early-morning gloom had lifted, giving way to a bright new day. Passing through the doorway she and Greg had entered during the storm, she remembered how he had intercepted her skid down the slope, stirring her emotions with his concern. Recalling her confusion at his touch, she felt her face flush.

Outside she inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with sweet cold air. Fresh snow draping the trees and bushes presented a living Christmas scene of the woods, and a light wind spattered the air with bursts of glittering crystals. The departing storm had left

behind a radiant calm that made the alarms of the night seem like a bad dream.

Though the snowdrift under the carport hadn't reached her car, Nola winced when she caught her first glimpse of the driveway. The storm had deposited snow, several inches deep, the entire length of the drive. If no one rescued her, she might not even be able to attend Aunt Haley's funeral on Tuesday.

The monster snowplow clearing the county road, its grinding blade and roaring engine within earshot on the main road, yet out of sight, drove home the completeness of her isolation. A cry of frustration constricted her throat. She longed for a cigarette and began ambling back toward the house, when the mechanical dinosaur bellowed. She turned to see it lurch into view around the bend in the long driveway and advance toward Bay Haven, a fountain of snow spewing from its chute and a gigantic bushy tail of black diesel smoke billowing up behind it. Astounded, Nola stood on tiptoe, to see if it would plow all the way to the house and save the day for her.

At the next bend in the drive, where there were fewer trees, a yellow cab popped into view, pursuing the big yellow machine like an infant animal bonded to its mother. Nola squinted through the mist of blowing snow and recognized its passenger. Vale, in a furry parka, waved at her.

"Vale." Nola waved vigorously.

When the plow shuddered to a stop near the house, Vale jumped from the taxi, looking pretty as an Eskimo maiden in her fur-trimmed white parka.

Running to greet her, Nola heard her say, "Thanks, Ray," smiling at the driver when he lowered his window. "Why don't you ditch this rig, come in and have coffee with us?"

With a wide red hand, the driver took off his fleece-lined cap, smoothed the earflaps and set it back on his head. "Jeez, I'd like to, Vale. But that'd be stretchin' it."

"I appreciate the special delivery, Ray."

He touched his cap. "Courtesy o' Brown County."

Nola grasped her associate's hand. "Vale, you can't imagine how glad I am you got here. Tell me how you managed to hijack that snowplow."

"Don't give me credit, Nola," Vale said. They entered the house, hanging their coats on the clothes tree with the suede jacket. "It was the cab driver's idea to follow the plow."

"But you got him to clean off the driveway."

"Oh, he was being friendly. When he stopped to adjust his blade, I got out and told him I wished my parents could meet him and his family. I invited him for a tour and a real Chinese dinner anytime he makes it to San Francisco."

"Okay." Nola shook her head, smiling at this typical display of Vale's social skills. "And then--?"

"I told him about the funeral on Tuesday." While she talked, Vale removed two packets from her purse and laid them on the kitchen counter. She plucked a kettle from the circular rack above the kitchen island, filled it partway with water and set it on a front burner of the range. "Ray said he'd better give the driveway a once-over right now so we'd be able to get in and

out. He told me the county plows all long driveways, but only after clearing the roads. But he figured this was an emergency." While she talked, Vale opened the packets and poured their whitish contents into the kettle.

Nola laughed out loud. "Vale, you are something else. Tell me, what are you cooking?"

Vale's eyes danced. "Something mysterious. Rice porridge with bits of dried pork, ginger and onion."

Nola laughed.

"Now," Vale said, "while everything's heating, I'll open your locks."

"Great. Henry Moffat will be waiting." Nola measured coffee into a new filter and slid it into place, while Vale set the burner gauge to simmer and turned up the fire under the tea kettle.

The slender California girl followed Nola through the great room, looking about in amazement. "Your uncle must've been some kind of politician."

Nola laughed. "He liked to entertain." They mounted the steps to the gallery and stopped outside Aunt Haley's bedroom. "I have a hunch we'll find what we're looking for in here," Nola said. "In the vanity. Or in Uncle George's chest of drawers."

"Let's see." Vale removed a set of lock picks from her purse, biting her lower lip in concentration. She ran her fingers over the locks on the vanity. Like a watchmaker bent over a painstaking task, she probed the first lock with a pick in each hand. When they didn't work, she discarded the picks with a sigh and selected two others.

With twists, prods, and an upward flip, she

popped the lock on the top right drawer. "Ah, one down." Nola pulled it open, and Vale moved to the left drawer and worked that one open with a few delicate movements.

Nola grinned. "You're better than your ad."

"Uh huh." Vale retreated to the chest of drawers while Nola searched the vanity, her pulse quickening at the sight of a large accordian-pleated envelope. She unwound the cord around the fastening and nervously pulled out the contents--an insurance policy on the cabin cruiser. Nola found other items in the drawer--a jewelry box, a picture album and a cloth case of fine handkerchiefs. No will.

She moved to the left side of the vanity. When she pulled at the drawer, it stuck on something lodged in the track. Giving a yank, she heard ripping paper and jiggled the drawer enough to see a stick-up note, half-clinging to the cover of a small crossword magazine jammed in the mechanism. Nola pulled out the magazine and its note, dropping them on the vanity.

She rummaged among compacts, hair curlers, address books and greeting cards tied with ribbon. Under everything, at the bottom, her fingers closed over a fat sealed envelope encircled by a rubber band. On its white front someone had typed, "Last Will and Testament: Haley Crocker." Two separate pieces of folded paper had been slipped under the band, keeping them with the envelope.

Nola exclaimed, "Vale, I found it." She felt giddy with relief. Wondering what to expect, Nola pulled the extra papers from the rubber band, shook out the first long sheet and read, Note of Tenants' Meeting:

Ownership Change, Crocker Building. What was that? With a dry mouth, she labored to read notes taken in a kind of rough short-hand without vowels that recorded a meeting at which Uncle George informed his tenants that he was no longer the sole owner of the building. Feeling her world shift under her, Nola made out the name, "Gregory Broadcliff."

Impatient for more information, she opened up the other legal-sized sheet and read the title, Partnership Agreement: George M. Crocker and Gregory Broadcliff, M.D. The words leaped off the paper like miniature firecrackers, exploding her framework of reality.

She learned that Uncle George had sold Greg a thirty percent interest in the Crocker Building and the parcel of land it stood on, the agreement initialled where it had been amended, to replace Uncle George's name with Aunt Haley's after his death. So first Uncle George, then Aunt Haley, had been Greg's partners.

While the implications sank in, she realized that the agreement might be amended again, with her name replacing that of Haley Crocker. No wonder Greg had been attentive to her. The thought that this had been the motivation behind his concern made her lean against the edge of Aunt Haley's bed.

"What's going on, Nola?" Vale hurried over. "What have you been reading?"

"An agreement between my Uncle George and Dr. Gregory Broadcliff giving Greg an interest in the Crocker Building and the land around it. That means he also has a share in the spring."

"Who's Gregory Broadcliff? What spring?"

"He's our next door neighbor." Nola gestured toward Greg's house. "An artesian spring gushes pure water in a corner behind the building. People come there every day to fill their containers."

"So, if you inherit the building that belonged to your Uncle, Dr. Broadcliff will be your partner?"

"Right. But that's a big 'if', Vale. Aunt Haley may not have made me her heir."

"Nola, you have the will in your hand. Why don't we read it?"

Nola shook her head. "I wouldn't want to do that." Her hands trembled. "It's sealed. Anyway, this is Aunt Haley's copy. Henry Moffat has another. The two might not agree." She breathed a deep sigh. If she were Aunt Haley's heir, she'd have to deal with Gregory Broadcliff whether or not she felt comfortable around him.

"After breakfast, we'll get this will to Henry Moffat," Nola said. "Then we'll arrange the funeral luncheon."

Vale picked up the crossword magazine. "Look at this." She handed it to Nola, half the torn note sticking to its cover, the other half lying on the vanity. The words, "Barry's Seated," stood out. Nola smoothed the crumpled portion and fitted the halves together. Aunt Haley had written a note to herself.

"Barry's Seated Liberty in my dryer--why? Ask 'T.'"

Nola re-read the note. The "T" had to mean Terri. "Vale, read this. Barry was Terri's husband. Terri was my Uncle George's step-daughter. What do you think Aunt Haley means--his Seated Liberty?"

"Gee, I don't know. Some kind of fancy quilt?"

"I wonder when she wrote this--"

Vale handed back the note. "Why didn't she ask Barry?"

"Barry died five months ago. But the note was stuck to this crossword magazine." Nola quickly verified the date on its cover. "This is the current issue."

"Nola, if your aunt just wrote this--"

"We can't be sure of that." Nola thought a moment. "Yes, we can be sure. Aunt Haley wouldn't have kept an old note lying around. She'd have trashed it."

Vale's voice quavered, "Terri's last name doesn't happen to be Henrun, does it?"

"Yes, it does. She was married to Barry Henrun. Why?" Nola stared at Vale, wondering why she had suddenly paled.

"Nola, she's the one I was reading about in that Green Bay file last night. She's the beauty queen."

Nola felt needles prickling the base of her spine at Vale's tone and manner. "Yes, Terri won our biggest beauty contest. She became the Snow Rose, the way her Aunt Mirabel had before her. Beauty runs in their family. So--?"

"So, Terri's last two husbands died unexpectedly less than a year after marrying her, each of them leaving her a million dollars in insurance, and now she's engaged again, to a man called Kendall Granger."

"Kendall Granger? No. Oh, dear Lord, no!"

Vale grasped her hand. "Nola, what's the matter?"

"Vale, that's my cousin, Kenny. His parents lived

next door, and I often walked him to school. I was sort of a big sister to Kenny.”

“Are you related to Terri, too?”

“Only through marriage. My father’s twin brother, George Crocker, was Terri’s stepfather. Terri was a pre-schooler when my Uncle George married her mother, Moira.”

Vale paused as if considering her next words before saying quietly, “Bummer deal for you. Your cousin is next in line to take out life insurance, and then--”

“Don’t say that.” Nola hastily pulled the file, with its Green Bay tag, from her tote and skimmed through the pages. “Vale, this is terrible. And now little Kenny is involved with Terri.” Nola’s voice broke.

“He’s not little anymore,” Vale said. “Didn’t you see his picture?”

“No. Where?”

Vale found the place. “Look at him, Nola. He’s some handsome hunk for sure.”

Nola searched his face for a family resemblance. “I wouldn’t have recognized him. Last time I saw Kenny, he was a lanky teenager.”

“Well, he looks like a cool hunk, now. But how come he has gray hair?”

Nola examined the picture again. Kenny’s hair did appear surprisingly gray. The gunmetal curls matched his gray eyes and the silvery ski jacket he was wearing. With his shoulders filled out and his face matured, he could have been a model for a winter resort.

“I have no idea why his hair is gray. Kenny can’t be more than twenty-five. I’ve heard sometimes early

graying is hereditary.”

“Or, he might have colored it.”

“Oh, Vale.” Nola smiled, accustomed to Vale’s occasional off-the-wall remarks.

“And how about that Terri?” Vale asked. “She must be one of the most beautiful women in the country.”

“Well, she was crowned the Snow Rose.”

“What’s a Snow Rose?”

“The queen of our winter festival. She heads a parade through town in a horse-drawn carriage covered with white roses. It’s so beautiful and romantic, every man in town wants to marry her.”

“That figures. Two men, Oscar Willsey and Barry Henrun, married Terri, then died untimely deaths. Now she has your cousin, Kenny, to console her. Apparently he hasn’t insured himself yet, anyway,” Vale said thoughtfully. “But I suppose he will, now that they’ve set the date.”

“Where did you see that?” Nola cried, frantically searching through the file again.

“Near the middle of the file. The clipping from the social page.”

“Yes, I see. I see.” Nola read aloud, “‘The wedding will be held in St. Stephen’s chapel on April 2nd.’ Vale, that’s--”

“I know. Two weeks from now.”

“Check out the last page,” Vale said, “the one with the red highlighting.”

Nola found the place and read Fred Bailey’s note, “Terri Henrun has been flagged by computers of two insurance companies, advising that no more policies be issued having her as beneficiary, pending further

investigation.”

“But he doesn’t say she’s being investigated.”

“No, not yet. When her name turns up as the beneficiary on another policy, the issuing company will decide whether or not to take a chance with her.”

“Meanwhile--”

“Meanwhile, I assume you’d like to protect your cousin, Kenny.”

“Of course. Of course I would, though I’m not sure I’m capable of protecting anybody.”

“Don’t forget I’m here. Nola,” Vale said cheerily. “We can team up and investigate this Snow Rose ourselves.”

The doorbell rang sharply.

Her head spinning, Nola thrust the file into her tote and hurried through the house into the back hall. Who could be at the door? Vale, behind her, stopped to check the simmering gruel.

When Nola opened the door, the leap of her heart at the sight of Greg Broadcliff warned her she’d been ambushed. He looked younger, almost boyish, in a down jacket and dress slacks, his tan cheeks tinged pink from the cold. She hadn’t expected a man she’d met only yesterday to look so familiar, yet make her so uncomfortable.

“Hi, Greg,” she tried to sound matter-of-fact. “Come on in.”

“I decided to come over and share my breakfast.”

The kind expression in his eyes lent a look of vulnerability to his face when he handed her a square white pastry box and removed his down jacket, hanging it on the coat tree.

“Vale, this is our next-door neighbor, Gregory

Broadcliff," Nola said. "Vale Ching."

Greg smiled. "Hi. Something smells wonderful." He helped himself to a dinner plate from the cupboard. "What're you cooking, Vale?"

"Rice porridge with ginger and pork. My parents send me the ready-mix packets."

"Mmmm." Greg began arranging pastries on the plate from the box Nola held.

His nearness and the already-familiar scent of his aftershave made Nola squirm. She moved away when he lifted out the last sweet roll. She hurried to the coffee maker. "This has brewed enough."

"I hope you like rice porridge," Vale's eyes twinkled. "It's ready to serve."

Settled at the table, sipping their hot drinks and tasting the savory porridge, Greg unexpectedly reached over and squeezed Nola's hand. "I'm glad Vale came," he said. "This is a big house for you to be rattling around in all alone." His nurturing expression seemed to show genuine concern for her.

Nola's heart gave a fearsome lurch, then her better judgment reminded her to be wary. He was probably ingratiating himself with his possible new partner.

Releasing his grip, he added, "I thought you might need a ride to town in my four-wheel drive. But I heard the plow and see your driveway's already cleared."

Nola hoped her eyes weren't giving away secrets. "Courtesy of Brown County," she said lightly.

"Hmmm. The county's never so courteous to me this soon after a storm."

Remembering Vale's role in the matter made

Nola smile, when they were interrupted by the sound of a key grating in the lock on the back door.