

• THE CATE KINKAID FILES •

Lorena McCourtney

Author of the Ivy Malone Mystery series



Dying to Read A Novel

“With each new mystery series Lorena McCourtney skillfully creates a unique sleuth—and Cate Kinkaid is no exception in *Dying to Read*. I loved all the witty prose and the laugh-out-loud moments I’ve come to expect when reading McCourtney’s mysteries. Seasoned with romance and a fascinating collection of peculiar characters, this clever tale will keep you guessing about more than murder. Never a dull moment, *Dying to Read* is a winner!”

—Elizabeth Goddard, author of Carol Award–winning
The Camera Never Lies

“Lorena McCourtney has fashioned a fun and engaging mystery that begs to be solved. And just when I thought I had figured it out, I realized she had added another layer. Mystery lovers, kick off your shoes, curl up somewhere comfortable, and prepare to be entertained! *Dying to Read* will keep you fully engrossed and guessing.”

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“I adore Lorena McCourtney books. She’s one of my favorite authors. *Dying to Read* adds a delightful new tale to her stack of engrossing and entertaining mysteries seasoned with her signature wry humor. The fun and intriguing plot is populated by interesting characters with fascinating quirks, foibles, and challenges. McCourtney keeps the pages turning with fresh developments in a case that lures rookie PI Cate Kinkaid ever deeper into skin-tingling danger. I can hardly wait for the next book in this exciting new series!”

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“The beginning of a new mystery series featuring naive but loveable Cate Kinkaid and a hero definitely worthy of the title ‘Knight in Shining Armor,’ *Dying to Read* keeps one guessing until the very end.”

—Ruth Axtell, author of *The Moonlight Masquerade*
and *Hometown Cinderella*

“Cate Kinkaid is trying to get her life together. Until that happens, she takes on a part-time job as an assistant private investigator for her uncle and instantly finds herself caught up in a messy murder mystery. Crisp, witty writing spins this amateur sleuth tale into a late-night page-turner.”

—Suzanne Woods Fisher, bestselling author
of the Lancaster County Secrets series

“Lorena McCourtney’s lively cozy mysteries hit all the right notes for me and her newest, *Dying to Read*, doesn’t miss a chord. A quirky, likable heroine, a handsome guy and oh, a murder. Don’t miss Cate Kinkaid’s first case as a PI. It’s a killer.”

—Lyn Cote, author of *La Belle Christiane*

“In *Dying to Read*, Lorena McCourtney has again given us likable characters and aggravating characters, as well as eccentric and devious characters. This smorgasbord of intriguing people is served up with delicious romance and a tantalizing mystery. I’m dying to read it again, savoring all the spices of a seasoned author.”

—Donita K. Paul, bestselling author of the Dragon Keeper
Chronicles and the Chiril Chronicles

“*Dying to Read* lends an exciting definition to ‘cozy mystery.’ When Cate Kinkaid sets out to find a missing housekeeper, she plunges headlong into the murder of the hostess of a book club. Or is it murder? *Dying to Read* will keep you turning the pages to learn whodunit.”

—Eric Wiggin, author of *Skinny Dipping at Megunticook Lake*
and *Blood Moon Rising*

• THE CATE KINKAID FILES • BOOK 1 •

Dying to Read

A Novel



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◆ 1 ◆

Cate glanced at the identification card her Uncle Joe had printed out just before she left his office. Cate Kinkaid, Assistant Private Investigator. Complete with the photo he'd snapped, which showed a spike of red hair growing out of her left ear, and the address and phone number of Belmont Investigations.

An identification card that made her—what? An over-age Nancy Drew? An underage Jessica Fletcher? A clueless Stephanie Plum?

Whatever, she was getting desperate, and the job was only temporary, not a lifetime commitment. She was, as Uncle Joe had put it, just dipping her toe into the world of private investigation. Just until one of the many résumés she had floating around brought results. All she had to do today was check on a woman named Willow Bishop living at an address on Meisman Street here in Eugene, Oregon, and then write up a brief report for the files.

Although Cate hadn't expected the house to look as if it had jumped off the cover of some old Gothic novel. She parked at the bottom of the steep driveway and stared up at the unlikely old place sitting on an oversized parcel among

a subdivision of modest homes. Not dilapidated, but weathered and brooding, with oddly shaped windows tucked into unlikely nooks and several upper windows painted over. A witch, or maybe a vampire or vulture, wouldn't look out of place peeking over the peaked roof of a corner turret.

No witches, vampires, or vultures lurking today, Cate decided as she walked up the driveway. Not unless they'd taken to using Lincolns or Buicks as transportation. A handful of older women milled around the front porch. One woman was punching the doorbell with open-up-or-else ferocity. Another had her hands pressed to the sides of her face as she peered in a window.

A plump blonde woman in pink spotted Cate and immediately charged out to meet her. "Willow, thank goodness you're here! We've been waiting twenty minutes and—" She stopped and peered at Cate with disapproval. "Oh, you're not Willow, are you?"

"Actually, I'm looking for Willow myself. Willow Bishop?"

"I don't know that I've ever heard her last name. Are you her sister?"

"Does she have a sister?"

"I don't know. You look like a sister."

Cate had realized the description Uncle Joe had given her for Willow Bishop, age 26, 5'4", 120 pounds, red hair, blue eyes, came close to fitting Cate too, but apparently the similarity was even closer than the numbers suggested. Although she was nearer the dreaded 30 than 26.

"No, I'm no relation. It's a business matter." Uncle Joe had emphasized that the work Belmont Investigations did was strictly confidential. "And you are?"

"Fiona Maxwell."

Another woman, tall and gaunt and clothed in more purple

than Cate had ever seen on one person, said, “We’re the Whodunit Book Club. We read a mystery and meet every other week to discuss it. Today we’re meeting here at Amelia’s house.”

“She’s our club president this year,” a short woman with a squeaky voice added.

“Someone named Amelia, not Willow, lives here?” Cate asked.

“Willow lives here, but she works for Amelia,” Fiona said. “We’re supposed to have lunch here at 12:00, and it’s already—”

Purple Woman filled in a time. “Almost 12:15.” The broad brim of her purple hat flopped with indignation as she spoke.

“Amelia can be so *rude*. Making us wait out here like this.” This woman, in a long, suede skirt, cowboy boots, and spur earrings, waved the book in her hand. “And insisting we read *Wuthering Heights* was ridiculous. It’s no whodunit.”

“It wasn’t any worse than that awful spy thing you suggested last month, Texie,” Fiona snapped.

“At least I had lunch on time,” Texie snapped back.

Cate decided a prudent retreat was advisable before she found herself in the cross fire of a book war. Cowgirl-garbed Texie, more toned and tanned than the other women, looked as if she could be a tough adversary. Maybe she had a six-shooter tucked away in that outfit.

“Could Amelia be ill, and that’s why she isn’t answering the door?” Cate asked.

The women exchanged glances. What seemed a logical thought to Cate apparently hadn’t occurred to them.

“I suppose it’s possible,” the woman in purple said, although the agreement sounded reluctant. “She’s never sick, but she’s always complaining about her fluttering heartbeat.”

“It’s her eyelashes that flutter. Whenever any good-looking male comes within flutter distance. And it doesn’t matter who the male belongs to.” Texie planted her fists on her hips. The venom in her voice suggested personal experience.

What Cate couldn’t figure out was why this group bothered to meet, given the hostility billowing around them. Not her concern, however. She turned to go. She could come back tomorrow. It did seem odd, however, that neither Amelia nor Willow was around to feed what was apparently an expected horde of hungry mystery readers.

“Is there someone you could call who would have a key so you could go in and see if everything’s okay?” Cate asked.

“Actually,” Fiona said slowly, with a wary glance at the others, “I have a key. I didn’t want to mention it because when Amelia gave it to me she said not to let anyone else know I had it.”

“But she gave me one and said the same thing!” Purple Woman dug in an oversized purple purse and whipped out a key on a metal ring.

Almost instantly, five identical keys on five identical metal rings dangled from five not-so-identical fingers. Purple nails on the gaunt woman. Short, bitten-to-the-quick nails on Texie. Elegant, silvery-pink on another woman who now said, “Well, isn’t that just like Amelia?”

“Why is that like Amelia?” Cate asked.

Texie took a step forward to answer. “Because she’s underhanded and sneaky, that’s why.” Texie sounded triumphant, as if this were something she’d wanted to proclaim for a long time.

Purple Woman tilted her head thoughtfully. “It’s a psychological thing. A power play. She wants to make you feel special, so you’ll be indebted to her.”

“I was in a garden club that broke up because of one awful woman,” Texie said. “So then we got together and reorganized without her.” She glanced around as if looking for support for a reorganization.

“Amelia’d find out,” Fiona said, her uneasy tone suggesting the consequences could be dire.

In spite of the dangling keys, the women didn’t seem inclined to make use of them. When Cate suggested someone unlock the door, a discussion followed, the consensus being that Amelia would be outraged if she unexpectedly found them all inside her house.

Cate impatiently grabbed a key. “Tell her to blame me then.” She marched up the front steps and stuck the key in the lock.

With the door open, the Whodunit ladies swarmed inside. They headed for the dining room, apparently hoping lunch would materialize there, but Cate took a moment to glance around the living room.

Unlike the Gothic-gloom exterior of the old house, the interior held sleek, Danish modern furniture, an oversized flat-panel TV, and recessed lighting. Bookcases winged out on either side of a white marble fireplace. A curtain of wooden beads hung over the entrance to the turret room. A curved staircase, more Southern plantation than Gothic, swept to the second floor. A flamboyant painting of three green eyes immersed in what looked like a cauldron of boiling beans hung over the fireplace. Cate wasn’t knowledgeable enough about art to identify what style the painting represented, but this was definitely a house with a split personality.

“The table isn’t even set for lunch!” the squeaky-voiced person squeaked from the dining room.

Another voice suggested they move the meeting to a nice tearoom near the university.

“But it’s Amelia’s turn to provide lunch! She shouldn’t get to just wiggle out of it. Sometimes she can be so cheap,” Fiona said. “Remember that time she said she was serving lobster, but it turned out to be that imitation kind?”

“She’s not cheap when she’s buying shoes. Have you ever priced those Jimmy Choos she likes?”

“Hey, wait.” This voice came from farther back in the kitchen. “This is odd.”

Everything about the split-personality house, the missing Amelia and Willow, and the squabbling Whodunit ladies struck Cate as odd. But she was curious about what one of them might consider odd. She cut through the dark cave of the dining room, where heavy drapes closed off view of the backyard. The woman in purple stood at an open door on the far side of the kitchen. Cate stepped up beside her to peer inside.

The room was scantily furnished with a single bed, a nightstand with a lamp lying on its side, a mirrored dresser, and a swivel rocker. An open door led to an adjoining bathroom. Candy wrappers, dust balls, lint, and paper clips trailed across the floor. One white sock lay in the doorway. All suggested the room had just been hastily vacated.

“Willow’s room?” Cate guessed.

From behind her, Texie said, “She must have had enough of Amelia.”

“Not the first employee to walk out on her,” Fiona said. “But Amelia might have fired her. You know how worked up she can get over some little thing.”

“I don’t suppose anyone would know where Willow may have gone?” Cate asked.

Negative murmurs from the group now clustered behind Cate in the doorway.

“How about where she came from, or where she has family?”
More negative murmurs.

A real private investigator would no doubt know what further questions to ask or what to do next to obtain information for the great-uncle client in Texas, but Cate didn't. She'd have to ask Uncle Joe if he had more ideas.

But at the door between kitchen and dining room, she reluctantly paused. She tried to reject the unwanted feeling that had suddenly kicked in, but it wouldn't retreat. Something did not feel right here. Something felt, in fact, very *wrong*. Then she scoffed at herself. When had her intuition ever been of any great value? Not in the job market. Not in her relationships with men. Not even when she'd chosen Hair Delights for a haircut last week. She fingered that odd spike sticking out behind her ear.

Had something changed now that she was a fledgling private investigator? She'd heard about people connecting with their “inner child.” Had she connected with her inner PI? Because something definitely felt off. And a spider of apprehension skittered up her spine.

“Maybe we should look around upstairs,” she suggested reluctantly. “Make sure everything's okay.”

Fiona shook her head. “Amelia wouldn't like it.”

Behind her, one of the women opened the refrigerator door. “Hey, there's food in here. Look at this! Salad and sandwiches . . . and cream puffs!”

Like a flock of hungry birds, all but the tall woman in purple descended on the refrigerator. She stepped toward Cate. “I'll go with you.” She stuck out a hand, as bony as the rest of her. “I'm Doris McClelland.”

Cate shook the gaunt hand. “Cate Kinkaid.”

They crossed the living room and climbed the stairs. A fat

white cat sitting on the top step regarded them with regal blue eyes.

“That’s Octavia. I think the name’s from *Antony and Cleopatra*.” Doris waved a hand back toward the bookshelves. “Amelia has all these literary pretensions.”

The cat jumped up and scampered down the hallway with surprising agility, considering her weight, and disappeared through an open door.

“Would that be Amelia’s room?” Cate asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been up here.” The woman tapped the carpet with a long, narrow purple pump, and Cate suspected she had come upstairs more out of curiosity than helpfulness. “I could buy a new car with what Amelia spent carpeting this house.”

They walked down the hallway and peered into the bedroom together. A pale peach chiffon canopy draped the king-sized bed, beside it an identical canopy in miniature over a cat bed. An array of bottles with prescription labels surrounded a crystal lamp on a nightstand. A mirrored dressing table held an assortment of cosmetics and lotions. Octavia jumped on the unmade bed and kneaded a satin pillow. She stared at Cate and Doris as if challenging them to object. An oil portrait hung on one wall, a regal-looking woman with jet black hair and a red ballroom gown.

“Amelia?”

“They must have used a stand-in for the body. Amelia’s never had that kind of figure. At least not since I’ve known her.” Doris patted her own chest. “Oh my. I’m cattier than Octavia today, aren’t I?”

A walk-in closet had been built into a corner so that it extended out into the room. Cate opened the door. Amelia’s taste ranged from furs and glitter to designer jeans and

cashmere sweaters. And if an army ever needed to march on high heels, there were enough here to outfit them. Amelia apparently liked scarves too, because designs from geometric to flowery, wool to silk, handkerchief-sized squares to toe length, draped a dozen hangers. A scent of some perfume that Cate suspected was too pricey for her to recognize hung in the air.

Doris circled the bed and studied the labels on the prescription bottles.

“What are they for?” Cate asked, curious in spite of a feeling this was getting a bit too nosy.

“Blood pressure. Heart. Cholesterol. Insomnia. I think she takes a sleeping pill almost every night. There’s no point even trying to talk to her before she has her morning caffeine to unfuzz her head.” She opened the drawer of the nightstand. “Of course it’s no wonder she can’t sleep. I wouldn’t be able to either, if I were her.”

“Why is that?”

Doris had already moved on to the bathroom and didn’t answer. Cate followed and peered into the room with her. Double sinks, fancy gold faucets, garden-style tub with Jacuzzi jets, separate shower large enough to shower the Whodunit ladies en masse.

What neither bedroom, closet, nor bathroom contained was Amelia herself.

Back in the hallway, they cautiously opened other doors. Two were guest rooms, a bit musty smelling. The third held a four-drawer, wooden file cabinet, an old electric typewriter, and an expensive copy machine. At the end of the hall another narrower stairway led upward.

Cate and Doris exchanged glances, and then, in a conspiratorial tone, Doris said, “Why not? I’ve always wondered what’s up there.”

Cate paused midway up the stairs. “We probably should have checked the garage first to see if her car is here.”

“Amelia hates to drive. She uses a taxi a lot of the time. So the Mercedes might be here, and she could still have gone somewhere.”

“But surely she wouldn’t leave knowing the Whodunit ladies would be here at noon. Unless she forgot, I suppose.”

“Or got a better invitation from Radford.” Doris gave the name an inflection that was not complimentary. “She’d dump us in a minute for Radford.”

“Radford?”

“The current man in Amelia’s life.”

Cate had to admit she was surprised Amelia had a “current man,” but then she chided herself for being ageist.

The third floor hadn’t benefited from the remodeling and updating that had taken place on the floors below. Faded wallpaper in an old-fashioned cabbage-rose pattern covered the walls of small rooms stuffed with furniture and racks of old clothes. The last room held a jumble of golf clubs, fishing rods, a stuffed owl, and an accordion. Octavia raised a cloud of dust when she jumped up beside the owl.

“A memento room for old husbands,” Doris observed. “Amelia had four of them, and the last one played the accordion, as I recall.”

“You’ve all been friends for a long time?”

“Define friends.”

“You’ve all been in the Whodunit Club together for a long time?”

“That’s how we met. It used to be a larger group, but some people find Amelia’s personality a bit . . . overpowering.” Doris’s smile unexpectedly changed her bony face. “And the rest of us have our peculiarities too.”

The third-floor hallway ended in a door to the outside. Cate was surprised to see that it stood partway open. “Maybe she leaves this open for the cat to go in and out?”

“Not Octavia. That cat may have been a stray at one time, but she thinks she’s queen of the universe now. She’s also deaf, so Amelia keeps her inside.”

Cate felt an unexpected flicker of kindness toward Amelia. She hadn’t heard much good about the woman so far, but anyone who’d take in a deaf stray must have some redeeming qualities.

Cate stepped onto a small square of weathered boards outside the open door, Doris right behind her. The steep stairway below them looked dangerously flimsy, the old boards dark and cracked. And at the bottom . . .

Cate’s breath snagged in her throat. Uncle Joe had assured her this assignment was strictly routine. No murder, mayhem, or mystery, not like what those detectives on TV always encountered. No dead bodies.

Wrong.

◆ 2 ◆

“Oh no,” Doris breathed. “Amelia.”

Cate grabbed the rough handrail, rammed a splinter in her palm, but ignored it as she dashed down the stairs. Even with the handicap of high heels, Doris was only a few steps behind. At the concrete landing at the bottom, they both knelt by the crumpled figure. Cate awkwardly fumbled with the wrist for a pulse. Doris touched the woman’s throat.

“I don’t feel anything,” Doris whispered.

Amelia’s eyes were neither open nor closed. Slitted, as if she looked into some eternity beyond this world. Blood matted the dark mass of her hair and oozed onto the concrete. Her skin felt cold beneath Cate’s hand.

Still on her knees, Cate dug the phone out of her purse and punched in 911 with fingers that felt peculiarly numb. A brisk lady took the information and said help would arrive within a few minutes. After Cate put the phone away, she and Doris just looked at Amelia. Cate felt as if she should *do* something, but she had no idea what.

“She likes black,” Doris said. “Liked,” she added with a catch in her voice. “She said it made a woman look sophisticated.”

Amelia was in black now, but she didn't look sophisticated. The slacks were ordinary, a bit snug, and a swirl of Octavia's white hair decorated the front of the sweatshirt. Amelia was a large woman, her body matronly, her personality apparently formidable, but she also seemed so vulnerable, so exposed and defenseless lying there. One fuzzy pink slipper lay near her foot, the other upside down in the grass. The little-old-lady slippers seemed at odds with all those spike heels in her closet.

Which meant . . . what? That, at the time of her fall, the arrival of the book club was not imminent, so she hadn't yet dressed for the lunch? Uneasily, Cate looked up the stairs again. A dangerous stairway, obviously. But falls weren't always accidental, and the Whodunit ladies, including Doris here, were so hostile toward Amelia.

No. Ridiculous. The women obviously had their squabbles and hard feelings, but surely that wasn't enough to motivate a fatal shove. None of them could have done it anyway. They were all clustered on the front porch when Cate arrived, all puzzled about Amelia's absence.

But one or two or more of them could have come earlier, done the deed and departed, then returned at the lunch hour to play innocent. And they each had a key . . .

Get off it. This was just an accidental fall, not a conspiracy of little old ladies.

But what about the missing Willow Bishop, who had apparently disappeared in haste?

Doris's gaze followed Cate's up the stairs. "I can't imagine what Amelia was doing out here. I didn't think she ever used these old stairs." After a moment, she added, "I guess I'd better go tell the others."

Cate wanted to jump up and follow Doris, but leaving Amelia lying there alone didn't seem right. "I'll wait here."

Cate, stiffening in her uncomfortable kneeling posture on the concrete, scooted over to the bottom step. Someone had made a rock garden beneath the stairway at one time, but now it was a neglected jumble of weeds and rocks and a broken metal statue of an antlered deer. Maybe the rickety stairs and weeds were the reason Amelia kept those dining room drapes closed.

Cate didn't want to stare at the body, but she couldn't not look, either. The almost-black hair had to be a dye job. It did not go well with Amelia's aged skin. Overly taut skin. One too many face-lifts? Trying so hard to hang on to a long-lost youth . . .

Then Cate felt guilty for such unkind thoughts. She jumped back to speculation about time of death.

No makeup, which further suggested the fall may have happened several hours ago, before time to get ready for the lunch group. She remembered hearing somewhere that rigor mortis set in at some predictable number of hours after death, but she had no idea how many hours that was. Hey, she could ask Uncle Joe. He'd know. Or he had all those reference books in his office—

She dumped the thought. Rigor mortis had nothing to do with anything beyond this awful moment in her life. No need to learn anything about it. Her toe, much less any larger part of her anatomy, did not belong in the PI business.

Cate was digging at the sliver in her palm when the Whodunit ladies swarmed out the back door and surrounded Amelia's crumpled figure. One woman knelt and touched Amelia's throat with an authoritative gesture.

"Krystal works with a volunteer group at the hospital," pink-clad Fiona said, the information apparently aimed at Cate since everyone else undoubtedly knew it.

The elegantly white-haired Krystal, with fashionable wedge shoes, shook her head and confirmed what already seemed inescapable fact. “Dead.” She looked up the stairs. “And no wonder, if she fell all that way and hit her head on this concrete.”

“How horrible,” Fiona said. “How truly, terribly, incredibly horrible. Dying out here all alone.” She lifted her glasses and swabbed her right eye with a tissue. “I feel so awful. Saying what I did about her being . . .”

Fiona didn’t repeat the word, but Cate remembered. Cheap. And someone else had called Amelia rude.

“And I didn’t really mean it when I suggested we disband the club and cut her out.” Texie swallowed hard and added virtuously, “We’d never have done it, of course. She had a wonderful lunch waiting in the refrigerator for us.”

Krystal stood up. “She really held our group together all this time.”

“Deep down, she was a wonderful person.” Fiona hesitated, as if trying to think of examples of that, but apparently came up blank and instead murmured, “One we all cared deeply about.”

More murmurs echoed that thought. Death had apparently upgraded Amelia’s character considerably.

Cate looked at the stairs again. Octavia stood at the edge of the landing now, tail twitching. Amelia might have stumbled over the cat. Yes, that was probably it. A tragic stumble.

Octavia cautiously descended the stairs, as if she suspected they might be booby-trapped. At the concrete landing, she eyed the group of women warily, then headed straight for Amelia’s body. Cate could almost see the cat’s confusion as she prodded the hand with her nose and got no reaction. She circled the body twice, then curled up in the bent crook of Amelia’s arm.

“What will happen to the cat now?” Cate asked.

“There’s a niece,” Doris said. “Maybe she’ll take it.”

“Shouldn’t somebody call the niece?” Cate asked. When no one offered to do so, she added, “Does anyone know the niece?”

“Her name’s Cheryl Calhoun,” Fiona said. “She and Amelia never seemed very close. Although Amelia thought Cheryl’s husband was a financial genius.”

Exchanged glances in the group seemed to give that statement some special meaning that Cate couldn’t interpret.

“They live over in Springfield,” Doris added. “Cheryl has an interior decorating business, but I don’t remember the name. The number might be in Amelia’s little red book, on the stand there by the phone.”

“Then maybe—” Cate didn’t get to finish the suggestion about calling the niece before a siren screamed to a stop on the far side of the house.

“I’ll go tell them Amelia is out here,” Doris said.

She disappeared through the open back door. Everyone else, by some unspoken agreement, backed away from the body. Another siren screamed up, then went silent at the same time as two white-clad EMTs ran out the back door. Octavia skittered to hide among the rocks under the stairs. Cate expected the EMTs to load Amelia up and instantly take her away, or maybe try to revive her with shock equipment. But, after a quick check, the men in white also stepped back. A moment later two police officers burst through the door.

“Don’t anyone leave,” one of them barked. “We’ll need to talk to all of you.”

The Whodunit ladies gravitated into a silent huddle. Cate stood off to one side.

The officers also checked the body briefly. They asked if

anyone knew her identity, and Doris volunteered the information. Amelia Robinson, age seventy-four. Widowed, no children. The only relative known to those present was the niece in Springfield. While the older officer was writing down the information, the other officer got on his cell phone.

“Was anyone here when this happened?” the stocky older officer asked.

Doris explained about the Whodunit Book Club and the lunch, and then how she and Cate had discovered the body. “Could she have had a heart attack?” Doris asked. “She had heart trouble and high blood pressure.”

“That will be for the medical examiner to determine. Officer Detrick is on the phone with the ME’s office now.”

“But isn’t the medical examiner the one who looks at a body when there’s a crime?” Fiona’s voice rose in alarm.

“The medical examiner is called in any situation such as this. Someone from that office will be here shortly.”

Any situation such as this. Did they have a lot of elderly ladies tumbling down stairs?

The EMTs left, but the younger officer repeated the earlier instructions to the women that they were not to leave. Cate doubted anyone planned to leave. They were obviously horrified by what had happened here but also morbidly mesmerized by it.

One officer went back to the police car and returned with both digital and video cameras to photograph the body and stairs from all angles. Both officers climbed the stairs and took more photos. Octavia dashed out from under the stairs and disappeared around the corner of the house. The officers closed the upstairs door. They came back to the body and made sketches and took measurements.

“There’s someone else you might want to talk to,” Doris

suggested. “An employee who also lived here, Willow Bishop. But her room is empty. She seems to have moved out.”

“Quite suddenly,” Fiona added.

Mention of Willow immediately brought questions from the officers about the departed employee. Cate expected answers from the club women, but, except for Doris’s comment that Willow drove a red Toyota and Fiona’s statement that she looked a lot like Cate, no one seemed to know anything.

“Anyone know the year of her vehicle?” an officer asked. “Or the license number?”

Cate hesitated. Along with Willow’s physical description, Uncle Joe had given her information he’d obtained from DMV records about Willow’s car. Confidential client data. Yet she surely couldn’t withhold from the officers what might be important information. She told them the car was a 2009 Toyota Corolla and gave the older officer the scrap of paper on which she’d scribbled the license number.

“You have this information because . . . ?”

“I’m working with a private detective agency.” Cate handed the officer the ID card Uncle Joe had made for her. She heard a whispery hum of excitement among the ladies at the announcement about her employment. “A client has a family message for her. That’s why I’m here. Because I’m looking for her.”

The officer inspected the card. “I know Joe Belmont, but . . . ?” He looked at her again.

“I’m his new assistant.”

Cate halfway expected some expression of doubt, but the officer merely nodded and handed the card back. “Good man.”

The officer wrote something more in his little notebook, but if he thought Willow’s hasty departure had any connection to Amelia’s fall, he wasn’t saying so. But now there

were more questions about Willow. The only information anyone had to add was Texie's statement that Willow was a real fanatic about trees.

"Amelia said a couple of times that Willow asked for a day off so she could go join some protest about logging. She was a, you know, one of those tree-hugger people."

After that, they were each interviewed individually. Someone from the medical examiner's office was just arriving as they were finally allowed to leave.

"All this questioning for an accidental fall?" Cate whispered to Doris as they all trooped around the house. They'd been told not to enter the house again.

"You're suggesting . . . ?"

"Nothing!" Cate said hastily. She lined up mental support for that statement. Amelia wasn't young. Heart attack. Stroke. All those pills in the bedroom. Maybe a momentary attack of dizziness there at the top of the stairs. A stumble over the cat. Lots of innocent explanations for the fall.

"There are peculiarities, though, aren't there?" Doris added thoughtfully. She itemized the oddities that also clung like white cat hair on black velvet in Cate's mind. "What she was doing out there on the stairs. Willow disappearing so suddenly."

The entire Whodunit bunch, with more hostilities than the Mafia toward an informer.

"I didn't notice, but now I wonder, was Amelia wearing any jewelry?" Doris asked.

Cate tried to remember. The slacks and sweatshirt weren't the kind of outfit you'd worry about accessorizing. "I don't know. I don't remember seeing any." But she hadn't been thinking about jewelry then. "Why?"

"Amelia has a lot of jewelry, expensive stuff. You know,

push someone down the stairs. Grab the jewelry off the body. Run.” Doris smiled ruefully and waved a hand in front of her face as if to dispel such thoughts. “I’ve been reading too many mysteries.”

Out in the driveway, Cate exchanged good-byes with the Whodunit ladies. She handed out business cards and asked them to call if they heard anything more about Willow. Doris headed for an older-model compact Ford parked farther down the street, well away from the more expensive vehicles in the driveway.

Cate headed home to where she’d been living with Uncle Joe and Rebecca since just before Christmas. The sunny spring day had turned to a gloomy drizzle, and Cate found doom-and-gloom settling around her like a soggy blanket. The terrible image of Amelia’s body lying on the cold concrete. Suspicions tumbling around inside her head that someone may have deliberately done this to her. A disappointing sense of failure about today for herself. Her report to Uncle Joe would be short and uninformative.

Went to address on Meisman Street.

Subject no longer living there.

Don’t know where she went.

End of report.

By the time Cate turned onto the street where Uncle Joe and Rebecca had lived for the past fifteen years, the sense of gloom had advanced into an all-too-familiar feeling that she was drifting in life. Or, to put it more accurately, floundering. Floundering from failure to failure. Here she was, twenty-nine years old, and what did she have to show for it? She’d graduated from college with a degree in education and failed as a teacher. Two years as marketing manager with a bath and spa products company, until the company merged with a

larger company and she wasn't one of the employees retained after the merger. A collapsed engagement. Two years in the office of a construction company that was downsized when the California housing market crumbled. Nine months of looking for a job and finding nothing.

Oh, there'd been a few jobs since she'd come to Eugene. She'd grabbed anything that offered a paycheck. Christmas elf at the mall. Stuffing flyers under windshield wipers. Wearing a bunny costume and waving a sign directing people to Top-Time Tax Service. But she hadn't been noticeably successful even at those endeavors. At the mall, she'd tripped over her pointy elf slippers and fallen into a buxom woman who whopped her with a purse. The flyers job ended when she accidentally dropped her entire stack of flyers in a Noah-sized puddle in the mall parking lot. The tax people had let her go because her sign waving lacked "exuberance."

If God had a plan for her life, it was as invisible to her as the calories in a plate of brownies.

By now the embedded sliver throbbing in her palm felt as if it went all the way to her elbow, but she forgot pain at the sight of an ambulance pulling out of Uncle Joe's driveway. Next-door neighbors and people across the street stood outside their homes watching.

Cate screeched her car to the curb and jumped out. "What's wrong?" she called frantically to the next-door couple leaning on their rail fence. "What happened?"

"It's Joe," the woman said. "They took him in the ambulance."

"Was he conscious?"

"We couldn't tell," the man said.

"Rebecca went with him?"

"She practically jumped in the ambulance."

“Where would they take him?”

“They took my sister to RiverBend when she had a heart attack.”

Heart attack. All too possible, given Uncle Joe’s cholesterol and blood-pressure numbers.

Cate was marginally familiar with Eugene area hospitals. She’d been turned down for an office job at the RiverBend hospital. She jumped back in the car. At the emergency room, she gave Uncle Joe’s name at the desk, and the woman told her to wait while she checked on whether he’d been brought there.

Cate perched on a sofa in the waiting room, but she couldn’t sit. She paced. She sniffed that faintly antiseptic/medicinal scent of all hospitals, a scent that seemed more a message of doom than vigilant cleanliness. She prayed. She drank coffee from a machine in the corner. Prayed and paced some more. Wondered if she should call the other hospital. Flipped through a magazine. Prayed again. *Take care of Uncle Joe. Please, please, please, Lord. And Rebecca too.*

She finally got the meager bit of information that yes, Joseph Belmont had been brought to the emergency room. Privacy regulations prevented them from giving out information about his condition, but the person who’d come with him would be notified that Cate was out here.

After an hour and a half Rebecca emerged through the swinging doors. Her usually crisp gray hair drooped into a wispy halo around her tired face. Her shoulders also sagged wearily. She and Cate met and silently wrapped their arms around each other.

Cate didn’t know what to ask because she feared the worst. “Is he . . . ?”

“They’re taking him into surgery.”

Not the worst—*Thank you, Lord!*—but . . . “Heart attack?”

“No. Can you believe it? He was cleaning gutters on the garage. I heard a thud—” Rebecca shook her head, her brow scrunched, and Cate suspected exasperation was how she was dealing with the fear. “Can you imagine? Up on a ladder. With that bad leg of his.”

“He fell?”

“And broke his hip. The surgery is to put it back together.”

“He’ll be okay?”

“He’s probably too stubborn not to be okay.” Rebecca pressed her lips together, then the fear burst through, and her face crumpled. “Oh, Cate, I’m so scared! I know of two people our age with broken hips. Neither of them lived more than a year.”

“We’ll pray.”

Which they did, arms around each other there in the waiting room, asking for skill and wisdom for the doctor and healing for Uncle Joe, and Cate added a prayer for strength for Rebecca. The hospital staff let Cate accompany Rebecca to a smaller, more intimate waiting area nearer the operating room.

“All this time I’ve been fussing and worrying about his cholesterol and his heart. All that tofu! Tofu burgers. Tofu turkey. Grabbing the salt shaker away from him. And what I should have been doing was following him around with a mattress so he wouldn’t get hurt if he fell. Serve him right if he limps on both legs now.” Then Rebecca broke into another torrent of tears that contradicted her grumpy words. “I feel so helpless. I know God is in control, and he listens to prayers, but sometimes . . .”

Cate patted her shoulder, feeling helpless too. Because bad things happened to good people. Rebecca and Uncle Joe had

been married some fifteen years now. Both had gone through several years of aloneness after their mates passed away, before square-dance lessons . . . and God . . . had brought them together. *Please, Lord, don't separate them now.*

It was evening by the time the doctor came out to talk to Rebecca. He explained how he'd inserted screws and a metal plate to hold the bone together, and Uncle Joe had come through the surgery satisfactorily. He also said, in a very offhand way that Cate suspected was designed to be honest but also to keep from alarming Rebecca, there could still be complications, and Uncle Joe would require physical therapy. Rebecca didn't want to leave the hospital, but Cate finally persuaded her.

The phone was ringing when they walked in the door at the house. And it kept ringing. Concerned neighbors and friends from church who had somehow already heard the news, wanting information or offering help. Rebecca gave out information while Cate opened a can of chili because they'd missed dinner. She tried to dig the sliver out of her hand, her ineffectual efforts reminding her that the world was probably fortunate she hadn't aimed for a medical career. She finally had to ask for help.

Rebecca swabbed the spot with alcohol. "How did you manage to do this anyway?" she scolded. "I thought you went to confirm some woman's address, not tear into the woodwork."

Cate decided not to tell her the full story. After the worries Rebecca already had about Uncle Joe, she didn't need to hear about someone else's fatal plunge. "Just an old stair railing I happened to grab at the house."



Next morning, the phone rang continuously with people calling to ask about Uncle Joe. Cate and Rebecca finally let the answering machine take care of the calls. At the hospital, a nurse let Rebecca in to see Uncle Joe for a few minutes, but he was nauseated, perhaps an aftereffect from the anesthetic, so no other visitors were allowed.

They had come in Cate's car. Rebecca didn't want to leave the hospital, even if all she could do was sit and wait. They agreed that she'd call Cate's cell phone if she needed Cate to come get her during the day, otherwise Cate would return that evening.

On the way back to the house, Cate made a determined decision. She was not going to have another failure on her record. Because, even if she didn't have to put it on a written résumé, it would be on a mental one. She *was* going to find Willow Bishop. Uncle Joe's accident, terrible as it was, gave her a little more time.

At the house, she ignored the ringing phone. She cautiously opened the door to Uncle Joe's office. Maybe she'd absorb something PI-ish in there.

Uncle Joe had kept an office in a professional building back when he was a full-time PI, but he'd worked out of a home office the last couple of years. Clients seldom came to the house, but there was a separate entrance to the office if they did. The no-nonsense room held a glass-topped oak desk, a computer and printer setup, filing cabinets, a copy machine, two hard-backed chairs for clients, and Uncle Joe's framed PI license on the wall. Under the glass covering the desk was an oversized map of Oregon.

Cate retrieved the key from where Uncle Joe kept it under a lamp and unlocked the desk drawer containing his files on current cases. He'd shown her all this before she'd gone to

locate Willow. But this time she saw something she hadn't earlier. A gun! Tucked in the back of the drawer, small, but sinister as a hooded figure in a dark alley. Which somehow suggested that not all Uncle Joe's work had been routine and unexciting. Cate pulled out the folder on Willow, shut the drawer on the gun, and studied the contents of the file.

Uncle Joe had skipped over some of the information. Willow's real name was Winona. She seldom used it, but she'd had to provide a birth certificate to get an Oregon driver's license. The great-uncle who was trying to locate Willow was Jeremiah Thompson, and he'd said his grand-niece might be using a different name than Willow, possibly something tree connected. Holly or Laurel or Aspen.

The phone on the desk rang. Belmont Investigations was on a different line than the home phone. She checked the caller ID. An out-of-area number. She intended to let the call go to the answering machine, but a raspy-sounding voice identified himself as Jeremiah Thompson. Willow's great-uncle! Cate grabbed the phone.

"Mr. Thompson? This is Cate Kinkaid, Mr. Belmont's assistant. I'm afraid he's incapacitated at the moment but—"

"Incapacitated?" In spite of the rasp in the older man's voice, the mispronounced word came out with a hint of Southern drawl.

"He's had a bad fall and broken a bone—"

"But I gotta find Willow! The family's chargin' around like a herd of hungry sharks, and I don't want 'em cheatin' Willow out of what she's got comin' from her grandma's estate."

"Actually . . ." Cate swallowed and tried to inject efficiency and competence into her voice, though that was a lot like trying to make a steel rod out of a noodle. "I'm working on your case myself. In fact, just yesterday I went to Willow's most

recent address. She's no longer there, but I'm, um, hopeful that I can locate her for you within a very short time."

"You sound awful young to be a private investergator, missy. Everywhere I go, some young whippersnapper's runnin' things now," he muttered darkly, the Southern accent even more noticeable, along with a hint of hillbilly twang.

"Yes, I know," Cate soothed. "But I have the file right here, and I'm wondering if there's anything more you could tell me about Willow that might be helpful."

"I ain't had no contact with Willow for nigh on to . . . well, I dunno. The years go by faster'n I can grab 'em with a pitchfork. But, lemme see. She's got that sweet smile, and all that red hair, purtier than a red heifer, as my mama, bless her heart, used to say. When she was little I used to tease her 'bout her hair lookin' like she fell into a bucket of barn paint."

Cate pulled a spike of her own hair forward and peered sideways at it. Red barn paint it was. "I was thinking more along the lines of occupational abilities. It appears she may have recently been employed as a helper for an older woman."

"Well, I remember she was a waitress, but she'd be right good at helpin' people, you betcha. A real carin' type gal she is, always one to bring home stray critters. Might be she'd go to work for a veterinary guy."

Jeremiah's ramblings weren't going anywhere, Cate realized with a certain frustration. "Well, if you think of anything more or if you hear from her, you let me know, okay? I'll call you as soon as I locate her."

"Call me how?"

"The number's here on the caller ID."

"Well, don't do that. I'd have about as much chance of gettin' the call here as I have of growing more hair on this bald head. They're always messin' up stuff like that here at

Millview Acres. Miserly Acres, we call it. Too cheap to hire enough help. But they always got somebody comin' in to tell me to take a pill or haul me off to some fool doctor," he added sourly. "I'm a-figurin' on moving to another place in the next few days. I'll have to call you agin."

"Fine, but give me a few days to get the case wrapped up, okay?"

"Okay, and you tell Mr. Belmont to get well quick, hear? Though I'm sure you're an A-OK investergater too," he added.

"I'll tell him you called. And he's supervising the case, of course."

"Okay. You take care. Don't take no wooden nickels."

Cate put the phone down, pleased with herself. At least Jeremiah Thompson hadn't fired her from the case. However, she wasn't any further along on how to proceed with finding Willow Bishop. Now what?