

HEATHER DAY GILBERT

1



A MURDER IN THE MOUNTAINS

MIRANDA
WARNING

PRAISE FOR MIRANDA WARNING:

"Tess Spencer will make you fall in love with her, then push you away, then charm you back into love again. She's got a past she'd like to forget, a future she's still learning to embrace, and a few skeletons—er, ghosts—in her closet, but when those she loves are in jeopardy, watch out! This West Virginian, Glock-wielding mountain mama goes all Mama Bear! Deliciously creepy mystery, well-rounded cast, delightful small town setting. Can't wait for Book Two!" ~ **Becky Doughty**, author of *Waters Fall*

"The perfect blend of spine-chilling suspense and cozy mountain mystery, *Miranda Warning* is that rare novel that has it all: a unique setting, rich characters, and a plot so riveting you can't look away. Best of all, it has Tess Spencer, a tough young heroine with a tender heart for those she loves and sense enough to pack a Glock when she needs to." ~ **Karin Kaufman**, author of *The Witch Tree*, a 2011 Grace Award finalist

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NOVEL



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MIRANDA WARNING
BY HEATHER DAY GILBERT

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ISBN-13: 978-1499154870

ISBN-10: 1499154879

Cover Design by Jenny Zemanek at
Seedlings Design Studio

Published by WoodHaven Press

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*Dedicated to the grandmas whose prayers hold up
the mountains on their backs—
I hope to join your ranks someday.*

*And to my sister-in-law, Kathleen Taylor, for reading
this book and encouraging me to publish it.*

*To my mom and mother-in-law, Betty and Jane, for
being there for me, just like Nikki Jo is for Tess.*

*And to my husband David, for being honest on early
drafts of this story and pushing me to dig deeper into
Rose's personality.*

*And to my children, my parents, my siblings, my
friends, and my readers. I hope you enjoy this story,
because it would never exist without your support.*

1



I chose the day I would die.

My husband's deep brown eyes glowed as he handed me the cocoa. "Maybe you'll sleep better tonight, Rosey."

I was tired of the charade between us. I never wanted to smile at his dinner parties again. Never wanted to beg him for the children he wouldn't give me. I'd never again clean up his clothes, covered in moonshine vomit.

I gulped the foaming, lukewarm liquid, a smile on my face. And that was the last time Paul Campbell would ever see me smile.



"Checkmate, girlie! Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

The steely-haired matriarch sitting across from me clicks her heavy rings together, eyes sparkling over her glasses.

Miranda Michaels has a heftier dose of spunk than your average assisted living home resident.

“Are you sure you didn’t cheat? Seems like that rook was over one...”

She smiles broadly, rolling her wheelchair back from the marble-topped table. “Listen, young’un, not to be mean, but you haven’t played for a while. Maybe you just need to practice some?”

I can’t resist it when she kicks in the Southern charm.

“I know you didn’t cheat. I just can’t concentrate today—sorry.” I reposition the ivory pieces on the board.

Miranda rolls around to my side. “Can we talk in my room? I’ve had something on my mind, too.”

The comforting smell of her favorite Black Cashmere lotion surrounds me. She doesn’t douse herself in Youth-Dew perfume, like most of the older ladies here.

I pat my hair, trying to smooth down a particularly willful cow-lick. She picks up on my insecurity before I say a word.

“That bob is quite becoming on you, what with your sleek dark hair. Reminds me of a flapper.”

“Thanks, but I think she cut it a little lopsided.” I roll her chair toward the long hallway. The usual suspects populate the Recreation room. Blue-haired women gossip as the assistants give them eye drops. Grizzled men watch TV, snatching peeks at the prettier assistants.

Miranda cranes her neck at me. “Tess Spencer, when are you going to learn to take a compliment?”

Even though Miranda has had a heart attack and a stroke, her keen insight still amazes me. At home, I secretly call her the *Grande Dame* to Thomas. For a sixty-nine year old near-

cripple, she's *tres formidable*.

In her suite, which is more like a small apartment, I roll her over to her blue satin couch and help her sit. I set the kettle brewing on her small stove for her afternoon cup of Earl Grey—a ritual she's maintained since I met her four years ago.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Miranda leans forward so precariously, I'm afraid her skinny legs will buckle and she'll slide right off the couch.

“Hm. I've heard plenty of ghost stories, what with all the hundred-year-old houses around Buckneck. But I haven't really decided. Why?” I glance around for some sort of food to go with her tea. Nothing but a package of peanut butter crackers that's been open for about three weeks.

She grasps one of the overstuffed peach pillows close, sinking back into the couch. She takes a deep breath.

“I think one is trying to contact me.”

Most people might coddle an older person and tell them they're imagining things. Quite possibly, Miranda's own daughter would do that, if she ever came to visit.

But I'm not her daughter—I'm her best friend. And I know Miranda's the last person on earth given to flights of fancy. I pour the tea into her gold-trimmed Lenox teacups and sit in the rocking chair opposite her. “What's going on?”

She fingers the lacy white sweater draped over her shoulders. “I got a letter the other day. The letter itself was odd, but I recognized the handwriting.”

She pulls the letter out of a drawer in her French provincial coffee table. I take it, reading quickly. It's handwritten on plain copy paper.

Dear Miranda,

I know you have been seeing Mr. Paul Campbell. For your own sake, I hope you stop doing so.

I'm watching you.

“You’re right. It is weird. Is it a threat or a warning? And more importantly, you didn’t tell me you were dating someone!” I fold it up into the envelope, noticing its postmark from Sedona, Arizona.

As I hand it back, Miranda’s fingers tremble. “Yes, Paul Campbell has come to call on me a few times. I didn’t think anyone knew yet.”

Something tells me the older women at The Haven assisted living facility have indeed noticed a man coming to call on the Grande Dame.

“But what about the handwriting? You said you recognized it?”

She nods. “That’s where it really gets strange. It’s my old friend Rose’s writing.”

“Does Rose live in Arizona?”

Miranda’s milky-pale skin blanches even further. “No. Rose Campbell’s ashes sit in an urn on Paul’s mantelpiece. She’s been dead for forty years now.”

Understanding hits me. “So you’re dating Rose’s husband. And you got a note that looks like it’s from his dead wife.”

She nods, lips tight. A fresh cup of tea would do us both some good, so I head for the kitchenette. I pour liberal cream and sugar in both cups before returning.

Miranda takes the cup, which clatters on its matching dish. Time to change the subject.

“Well, I have some news.” My announcement sounds forced, even to my ears.

“Ooh, do tell.” Her dark blue eyes widen and one expertly-penciled eyebrow shoots up.

“We’re expecting.” After a mere two years of marriage. Before I could even land a job. While Thomas has no health insurance. Whoopdie-do.

Miranda’s eyes fill. “God bless you...you weren’t ready, were you?”

As usual, the Grande Dame cuts straight to the heart of the matter. I take a deep breath. “No, I wasn’t. But we’ll get through.”

“You’re right. God knows just when those babies need to come, whether we’ve planned them or not. He’ll provide, just you wait and see.”

Miranda has a biblical application for everything. And it’s more comforting when she says it, no matter how self-evident it may seem.

She looks out her large bay window at the mountains, covered with a soft red and gold blanket of leaves. The rich colors shimmer and shake loose, making way for the monochromatic lines of winter. She takes a moment to speak. “You know, my friend Rose always wanted a baby.”

I grip my still-flat stomach. Why does God drop babies on those who aren’t ready for them and withhold them from those who want them most?

Miranda interrupts my thoughts. “I’d love to have you over for dinner Thursday night. Paul will be here, and we can talk about the letter. I haven’t showed it to him yet.”

“Sure.” After all, Thomas works late at his low-paying law

office every night. I'll use my free time to figure out why some ghost is bugging my sweet elderly friend.

2



At first, Paul's close attention didn't bother me. When we were newly married, I thought it was sweet how he hated for other men to look at me. And they always looked. "Beauty is your curse," my mother always said. "Find a strong man who can protect you."

Protecting was all Paul did. I'd be black and blue from his harsh grip as he steered me back to our car, every time we went to town. Then it happened every time we went to church. It got to where he didn't let me go out. We'd have dinner parties at home, to entertain his boss and friends.

One night, Paul's friend Russell brought his wife, Miranda. She walked into my dining room, cracked a joke with a wide-open smile, and wrapped me in a hug like we'd known each other forever. I admired her from that day on—she was someone who didn't measure every word before she spoke it. When Paul would make his blanket statements, she'd challenge him and shoot me conspiratorial looks.

I loved my auburn-haired friend. We planted flowerbeds together and sewed quilts for other women's babies. We shared gossip and recipes. But there were two things I never mentioned to Miranda: Paul's possessiveness meant my slavery, and now his attentions were shifting to her.



One thing about my mother-in-law: she's the best cook I've ever known. Tonight, she's dropped off a container of her famous sausage lentil stew, along with six cornbread muffins. Ever since Nikki Jo heard we're having a baby, she's committed herself to fattening me up. And since Thomas and I live in the cottage right behind her big house, that means I've been getting lots of free meals lately.

About the time I've snuggled in on the couch with my steaming bowl to watch a rerun of *MacGyver*, Nikki Jo calls. Her familiar chirpy voice is always a little too loud.

"How are you, honey? Did you see the soup? I left it right on the counter."

"Yes, Mom, I sure did. Thanks so much—it's delicious." I pull my favorite green afghan around my shoulders. Even though the days are chillier, I'm determined to save money by keeping our heat turned down.

"Now, I know Thomas won't be home till late. But you tell him not to forget his school reunion is tomorrow night at seven."

"Will do." The Buckneck High School is so small that all their graduates are invited to their yearly reunion. Thomas will

doubtless take me along as what he calls “arm candy.”

“Now, you just get some rest and don’t worry about looking for a job.” Uh-oh. Here it comes: the “I-was-a-stay-at-home-mom” speech. “You know that Thomas and his two brothers grew up fine with nothing but their daddy’s income from the railroad and the National Guard.”

“True, but it was also thanks to their momma’s good cooking.” I smile in spite of myself. I haven’t figured out how Nikki Jo kept it all together, with Roger traveling most of the time.

In the background, Dad shouts, “How about some more of that stew, Nikki Jo?”

She sighs into the phone. “How’s Miranda doing over at The Haven? I worry about her—stuck in that wheelchair.”

Nikki Jo lived near Miranda when she was a small girl, and the Grande Dame was somewhat of a legend in small-town Buckneck. She was the classy woman in the huge green house, who gave out *real chocolate bars* for Halloween.

“She’s doing well. Actually...she’s dating Paul Campbell. Do you know him?” Putting out some feelers can’t hurt.

“*Dating* Paul Campbell? Good lands! Now doesn’t that just take the cake?” She takes a deep breath. “Paul was an early widower. His wife, Rose, was well-nigh the prettiest girl ever born in these parts. Doc Cole—that’s her doctor—said she took a heart pill overdose. Suicide.”

Dad’s voice drifts into the silence. “Nikki Jo? What you doing, honey?”

She ignores him and continues. “Would you believe Rose dropped dead right there in her favorite chair? I can’t figure out how Paul’s lived in that same house all these years.”

Nikki Jo gets quiet, and I know she's processing the implications of Miranda dating Widower Campbell.

"I'd better eat some of this stew now, Mom. Thanks for calling."

"Sure, honey. You have a great night."

It's still a little strange for me to call Thomas' parents *Mom* and *Dad*, but *Nikki Jo* and *Roger* seem too fancy-schmantsy. Besides, they're the closest thing to real parents that I've got.

Hm. A heart pill overdose. Like Nitroglycerin? Miranda has to pop those little pills occasionally, since her heart attack.

I ponder this as I watch MacGyver disarm some lasers with a piece of glass. Man, that mullet still works on him somehow. He has warm brown eyes, just like Thomas.

The old brass knob moves on our front door, and Thomas walks in. We don't even have a lock. Thomas' parents live so far out in the woods, I'd be surprised if the UPS man ever finds us.

"Hey babe, you're home early." I jump up to greet him, but sober down my smile when I notice his face. "Rough day?"

"You said it, hotcakes. What's that smell? Is it stew?"

Food wins out over chitchat every time for my boy-man. "I'll get you a bowl," I say.

Rumples crease the back of his blue striped shirt. His hair looks like he's run his hand over it, back and forth, all day. He kicks his shoes off in the middle of the jute rug and heads up the rickety steps to our attic bedroom—one of the four rooms in this farmhouse-style cottage.

"What's up?" I shout up the steps to him.

"Job stinks. That's all."

It irks me when my brilliant husband gets no street-cred at

work. “You need to go rogue! Start your own business! After all, you did go to UVA!”

“Tess, no one around here cares where I went to school. They just want a lawyer to handle all the grunt work. I’m too young to start my own place.”

“Whatever, babe,” I mutter, scrounging under the piled dishes in the sink for my ladle.

“I heard that.” Thomas sneaks up behind me, grabbing me around the waist.

I turn, taking in the spiky blond hair, the faded red tee, and the boot-cut jeans. Too much. I kiss him, full on the lips.

He grins. “Woman, can’t you see I’m famished?” He grabs the ladle, deftly washes it and helps himself to a bowlful of stew.

We both settle into the couch before I drop my news on him. “Thomas, the Grande Dame has a stalker.”

“What?” He eats his stew like some high-class laird, placing the entire spoon in his mouth. Not a drop of it hits his shirt.

I explain about the note and tell him Rose’s story. Thomas assumes his lawyerly, pensive look until I’m finished, then starts his questioning.

“Let me get this straight. Rose took an overdose? In her twenties? What would make a woman do that?”

I’ve been wondering the same thing. “Maybe because she couldn’t have kids? Miranda said she wanted them so badly.”

Thomas peels his muffin from the wrapper, meticulously dropping each tiny yellow crumb into his napkin.

“Thomas, you make me feel like a peasant when I watch you eat. I have to stain spray my clothes every day from spilling stuff on them!”

“You’re just pregnant, little missy.” He lightly pats my stomach. “It’s common knowledge that pregnant women can be klutzy.”

“Thanks a lot. I—”

The door flies open and Thomas’ youngest brother runs in, skidding to a stop on our rubber doormat. The twelve-year-old reminds me of a self-contained tornado.

“Petey, what on earth? Have you no manners, boy?” Thomas stands to greet him, not a crumb escaping the napkin gripped in his hand.

Petey’s red curls have grown over his ears, so he looks like a cross between a street urchin and a skater dude.

“Sorry, bro. Hey, Tess. You look nice.”

Thomas shoots me a sideways grin. Petey has a little crush on me, and everyone in the family knows it.

“Thanks, Petey. What’s your hurry?” I fold the afghan over the back of the couch.

“Just wanted to tell you I followed Thor out into the woods. He was hot on the scent of something, barking his head off. Turns out, someone took off—they were right near your house!”

Thomas’ family must’ve been feeling ironic when they named their miniature Doberman *Thor*. I keep telling Thomas they should get a full-sized Doberman, and name it *Thor Senõr*.

Thomas runs upstairs, no doubt retrieving his twelve-gauge—typical protocol in our deep-woods locale. Petey and I head outside.

“Right over there, behind that bush.” Petey points, and we close the distance quickly, a yelping Thor on our heels.

The leaves are smashed in a circular pattern, but nothing

else looks strange. Thor noses into the flattened leaves, destroying any kind of evidence. Why am I thinking I need evidence, anyway? This whole thing with Miranda is freaking me out.

Thomas bolts out the door, shotgun aimed toward the sky. “Get back, you two!”

He’s nothing if not heroic. And quite angry with Petey and me, to boot.

“What are you *doing*? What if someone were out here with a gun? You could’ve both been killed!”

Petey and I edge back toward the house. Thor pulls his nose from the debris, takes one haughty sniff, then pees all over the leaf evidence. Charming dog.

Thomas looks around the perimeter, lowering the gun slightly. He glares at Thor. “Maybe we need a bigger dog.”

“Or a lock on the door,” I suggest.

“This isn’t funny, Tess. We’re out in the middle of nowhere with no protection.”

Petey gets serious, too. “Don’t worry, bro. I’m around after school. I’ll watch out for Tess. And Dad’s around too. You know he’s got a whole arsenal up at the big house.”

I chime in. “I’d prefer a throwing star, so I could practice my rare ninja skills.”

Petey laughs, and even Thomas cracks a grin.

“We’ll figure out what’s going on.” When Thomas says this, it sounds like a declaration of war. He won’t stop until he finds the person who’s been watching us. He trudges off into the woods, gun at the ready.

A nice sentiment, but what if I run into that person first?

3



One man who came to our dinner parties always tried to catch my eye. Every time Paul was out of the room, he'd scoot his chair closer, asking questions about my flowerbeds. Once, he grabbed my hand, turning it over so it exposed the bruise on my wrist.

"Rose, do I need to get you out of here? I'll do it in a heartbeat." From his concerned look, I could tell this idea had simmered for a while.

There was no time to answer as Paul pushed open the dining room door, cigar in hand. "Ready for some poker, boys?"

It was my cue to make myself scarce. I piled up the dishes in my first of several trips to the kitchen, but almost stopped when my would-be protector spoke up.

"I've got no money for betting tonight, Paul. You boys go on without me. I'm heading into the parlor to sit by your fire, till you shoo me out in that snow."

I knew he'd be waiting to talk with me. It didn't matter that the whole town knew him. It didn't matter that I was already married. I fell in love for the first and last time that night.



As I sit next to the disturbingly inebriated town dentist at the Buckneck school reunion, two thoughts keep running through my head. First, a drunk dentist must be some kind of oxymoron or a contradiction in terms...Thomas would know the right word. Second, my flip-out knife is burning a hole in my pants pocket, and if this dorky dentist hits on me *one* more time, I'll pull it on him.

Thomas, deep in conversation with one of his elderly teachers, has yet to notice that his bride is garnering all the wrong kind of attention. It's time for the eye candy to take a little trip to the water fountain.

"You going somewhere, gorgeous?" As I stand, the dentist puts his hand up to stop me. Thomas looks over at the word *gorgeous*. Maybe he's wondering who fits that description around here.

I motion to the door. Thomas nods before resuming his conversation with the white-haired woman. Dropping my hand into my pocket, I finger my knife's familiar grooves. After the watcher in the woods incident, I've practiced pulling my knife every day.

In the wide hallway, predictably lined with trophy cases, bulletin boards, and beat-up lockers, I nearly run into a silver-haired man who's hurrying into the cafeteria. He's dressed

immaculately—far dressier than most of the men inside—with a fitted, camel-colored suit jacket and striped tie that makes him look like a J.Crew model. Who on earth?

“Oh, sorry.” He gives me a distracted look, then focuses more closely. He holds out his hand. “Bartholomew Cole. Sorry, just got off hospital duty.”

He must be a doctor. Only a doctor or a lawyer could afford that getup. Wait—Thomas *is* a lawyer and we have a half-lifetime of debt. I shake off my judgmental thoughts as something niggles at my memory.

“Tess Spencer. Don’t worry, I was in a hurry to get out of—to get some fresh air.”

He gives me a sympathetic smile. “I know these reunions can be a trial. I do like seeing old classmates, though. No promise of the morrow and all that.” He studies my face. “Sorry, morbid thought. That was the doctor in me talking.”

Doctor Bartholomew Cole. As in *Doc Cole*, Rose’s doctor? Curiosity overtakes me. “So, did you grow up here?”

“No, no. We moved here the year I graduated from high school—1965.” He glances toward the cafeteria.

No time to waste, so I plunge in. “By any chance, did you know a woman named Rose Campbell?”

I’ve never seen someone’s jaw drop, but the Doctor’s does. His eyes widen and he slides both hands into his jacket pockets.

“Yes—how do you know Rose?” He leans toward me. He must be six foot three, making me feel like a tiny speck at five foot six.

“My friend Miranda—”

“Miranda...Miranda *Michaels*? Oh—sorry to interrupt.” He takes a small step back. “I saw Miranda today on my rounds.

She's always been a dear friend."

I don't try to get a word in edgewise. The Good Doctor seems determined to fill me in on things.

He looks at the ceiling, as if peeling off the mint green plaster layers and seeing deep into the past.

"Yes, Rose. She graduated the year before I did. Beautiful woman; the whole town said so. Married Paul Campbell—bit of a blighter, as my British grandma would say. Paul was always having poker parties, but he called them 'dinner parties' so the church-people wouldn't gossip."

"So you knew Rose well?" I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about the way he says *Rose*.

He looks directly at me. His eyes are what can only be described as battleship gray. Enchanting, really. Maybe Rose was enchanted by the Good Doctor?

"Her husband was quite overprotective. No one really got to know Rose well—in fact, she never left her house and her flowerbeds. As far as I recall, Miranda and I were the only ones she talked to. I was Rose's doctor."

With that, the conversation snaps shut like my laptop computer. The Good Doctor stretches his arm, checking his pewter-color watch.

"I've got to run." He nods and heads toward the heavy smell of overcooked chicken and instant mashed potatoes.

I'm left examining my black dress pants and my scuffed slingbacks from Payless. Next to the Doctor, I feel shabby. He seems high-class. Like Thomas, only older and more settled. Why do I always have to feel so—

"Tess!" Thomas jogs out of the cafeteria. "You hardly touched your food! Are you feeling sick?" I barely have time to

shake my head. “They already gave out the Outstanding Teacher Award. Mr. Irwin got it, the old coot. I always got in trouble in his lab class...Tess?”

The idea of returning to the cafeteria for more tasteless chicken with a side of leering and innuendo revolts me.

“Can we just hit Wendy’s and go home?” I pull my leather blazer tighter, a hand-me-down from Nikki Jo. I feel exposed and raw.

Thomas’ eyes soften. He slips his arm around me. “Sure, babe. Let’s get outta here.”

4



The jealousy ate away at me, though I tried to stop it. Every time we talked, Miranda had to bring her husband into the conversation somehow. Their marriage was perfect—Russell was perfect.

But I found a way to escape. I carved my own alternate reality outside the influence of my husband. When Paul had to work overtime, I'd call my true love and we'd meet beneath my wisteria arbor, regardless of rain or snow. Paul never set foot in my gardens, claiming to be allergic. In reality, he didn't want to do any work around the house.

One bright winter day, Miranda's pale skin glowed beneath her crimson lipstick. She could hardly contain herself as we ate her chocolate-chip pumpkin muffins. I knew before she told me: she was expecting.

I was not. I never would be. Twenty-six years old and my husband deliberately treated me like a nun.

I knew why. But I had my own plans.



How the Grande Dame managed to get this gargantuan, antique white dining table into her sitting room, I'll never know. She sits at one end, wearing her diamond-blinged glasses and red satin dress. I anchor the opposite side, hopelessly underdressed for this apparently "cocktail-wear" meal.

Paul sits between us, his skinny frame angled toward Miranda. From the moment he shook my hand, I've been taking mental impressions like a sketch artist.

Soggy-biscuit handshake. Too much Old Spice, possibly to mask another smell...alcohol? Body odor?

I try to cut him a break on his appearance. He is a widower, after all—no one to cook and clean for him. But then again, if that's what he's searching for, why's he dating Miranda? She can't get in and out of the shower by herself, much less do someone's laundry.

Once Paul starts talking, I begin to see some of his charm. He asks lots of questions about Thomas' job, my parents-in-law, and my pregnancy—all the while watching me with sharp brown eyes. It should be encouraging to get such undivided attention, but it unnerves me.

A catering woman in a crisp white oxford shirt and black pants brings out our first course: rosemary corn soup. When I'd asked, Miranda had refused to let me bring anything, even dessert. "You just come and enjoy, Tess. I should be able to afford a meal for three people."

Where had Miranda's husband worked, anyway? I make a

mental note to ask Nikki Jo. He must've left her some money, since The Haven is practically a resort facility for the elderly. It's not every day you see assisted living homes with Keurig coffee makers for the residents, much less a lap pool and gym in the basement.

"...I never thought I could learn to live again," Paul says. I tune back in to the conversation.

Miranda reaches out and pats his bony hand, her sapphire ring catching the light from the chandelier and reflecting it on the walls. "It was so unexpected, for all of us. She was in the prime of life."

"Yes, a rose with no thorns." Paul looks at me sadly, waiting for his obviously well-recited phrase to have its effect. Now it's my turn to look into his eyes. He starts to tear up. I'm not buying it. He turns back to the Grande Dame.

"You knew her so well, Miranda. Sometimes I thought you knew her better than I did. And then, when Royston read the will—"

Miranda interrupts, which is completely out of character. "Don't let's talk about that now."

Paul glances at me and nods slightly. Our second course is brought out: some sort of crab cakes on a pile of salsa. I'm sure there's a French name for these.

"Mr. Campbell, if you don't mind my asking, how did Rose die?" I need to hear him explain what happened.

The answer comes quickly. His piercing gaze reminds me of those hawks I see staring at small birds from the fence-posts.

"Please, call me Paul...and my Rose gave up on her own life and took an overdose. I've never known why, Tess."

There's something wrong with his tone as he says my name.

Intimate? Chiding? I store it up for replay later.

Thomas thinks I have a photographic memory, but it really works more like a video camera. I can review scenes—entire conversations, really—in my head. I try to tell him it's *not* a blessing to stroll down my memory lane of bumbling boyfriends and high-school angst. Still, every time he asks me *What was Mrs. Martin wearing at that church meal?* or *What was that crazy phrase my dad used again?*, I obligingly pull up the info on my brain's hard drive. Thomas actually prays that our child-to-be will have this videographic ability, as well as my nose and his math smarts.

Conversation lulls as we dig into our thick pork chops, followed by a light raspberry chocolate mousse served in champagne flutes. Paul eats like a man who's been living on Cheetos and Pop-Tarts.

I offer to help clean up, but the server loads all the dishes into a covered cart, then whisks it out of the suite. I wish Thomas could've come along tonight. It's been ages since we've had a real date. Obligatory church pot-lucks and Republican dinners don't really count.

Paul pushes his chair in and saunters over to the couch before I register how offensive that is. Not only did he forget to excuse himself, he didn't even offer to wheel his hostess over to join him. Possessed by a strange fury, I jump up. Shoving my chair back, I walk to the opposite end of the long table and grab Miranda's wheelchair handles. I feel like popping a wheelie and running over lazy-hiney Paul.

He doesn't seem to notice my self-righteous production, but Miranda does. "I'll get my chair, dear." Her eyes darken as she puts her hands on the wheels. "You know I can handle it."

“Sorry, Miranda.” I trail behind her across the room, then help shift her onto the couch. She reaches for the drawer, and I fight an impulse to tell Paul “Goodnight, time to go.” Why should Miranda share the letter with him? Why’s she dating him anyway? And why can’t I stand this guy?

“Do you need help, Miranda?” He leans over and pushes the drawer in for her. Truly valiant.

Miranda charges right in with characteristic openness. “Paul, I got this strange letter. I want you to take a look.”

Taking the envelope, he pulls out the letter and slowly reads it. “Hm. Who would have something against me?”

Not a word of concern about Miranda. He doesn’t even mention the handwriting. Either Miranda is imagining things—highly unlikely—or Paul paid no attention to how his wife wrote. Who doesn’t recognize his wife’s handwriting, no matter how long she’s been dead? I feel like I have lockjaw, my teeth are clenched so hard.

Miranda gives me a look. I try to read her thoughts. Does she want me to say something? Might as well.

“Paul, do you recognize anything familiar about that letter?”

He looks at the stamp, examining the postmark. “No, should I? This person is from Arizona?” His fingers are long and thin, like his legs. Granddaddy longlegs.

I glance at Miranda, who’s picking at her pillow tassels. Her steel-gray and white hair still looks perfect—she probably had it set on hot rollers this afternoon. All for this ill-mannered ingrate.

I force a polite smile. “Just asking—trying to figure out who sent this to Miranda.”

He hands the letter back, then yawns and looks at his watch.

“Ten o’clock already? I’d better skedaddle on home now, ladies.” He stands, extending those long legs and stretching his hand toward me. “So nice to meet you, Tess. You’re every bit as lovely as Miranda made you out to be.”

“Thanks. I had to meet the man who’s been spending so much time with my friend.”

Paul reaches down and gives Miranda a half-hug. “Delicious meal, my dear,” he whispers, loud enough for me to hear.

The moment Paul pulls the thin door closed, Miranda launches into me.

“*What* was all that hullabaloo with my wheelchair? What got into you, Tess?”

“I don’t like the way he treats you. And Miranda, he didn’t recognize Rose’s writing!”

“Treats me? He treats me just fine.” She sighs and gives me a slight nod. “But I did notice about the handwriting.”

I try a different tack. “Just wondering...what was your husband like? You hardly ever talk about him.”

“Russell? Good lands.” Her eyelids give her tiredness away, despite her careful application of concealer and eye makeup. “Well, Russell always called me his spicy fireball. He was so quiet...but when he talked, you’d better believe he had something important to say.”

“Did he get along with Paul?” Suddenly I need to know this.

Miranda peers out the window, as if she can see into the black night. “I’m getting tired, honey. How about we talk more next week?”

This feels like a polite Southern brush-off. I kiss the Grande Dame’s head, then help her into her wheelchair. She’ll push her

call button soon, and an assistant will come and help her get ready for bed. We can revisit this topic later.

In the crisp fall air of the parking lot, silent except for the crunch of leaves beneath my boots, it hits me. Miranda Michaels is the closest thing I've ever had to a grandma, on top of being my best friend. I'll be hanged before some jackanapes takes advantage of her. Paul Campbell had better watch his back.

