

"*Burying Daisy Doe* is a gripping story that exposes the secrets of a small Southern town caught up in three generations of evil. It took the courage of Star Cavanaugh, searching for her grandmother's and father's murderers, to uncover the truth in a tale that will keep you in suspense to the end."

—**Patricia Bradley**, author of the Logan Point, Memphis Cold Case Novels, and Natchez Trace Park Rangers series

"I'm reminded yet again why Ramona Richards is one of my favorite suspense writers. And this may be her best book yet! Riveting from the beginning and filled with suspense . . . I bet you can't just read one chapter!"

—**Kathy Harris**, author of The Deadly Secrets series

"*Burying Daisy Doe* is Ramona Richards's most chilling, most captivating work yet. When Star Cavanaugh moves into Pineville to investigate the cold case murders of her grandmother and her father, she has no idea of the Pandora's Box she is about to open . . . and I had no idea how late I was about to stay up reading to find out what happened next. The intricate storyline goes beyond a simple 'hero versus villain' suspense tale to the dueling capacities for good and evil that reside in us all. *Burying Daisy Doe* is the kind of book that makes you want to sleep with the light on yet compels you to read into the night, as answers reveal more questions. It kept me guessing and kept me up late . . . and I can't recommend it highly enough."

—**Jodie Bailey**, award-winning author of romantic military suspense

"I absolutely loved *Burying Daisy Doe* and cannot wait for the next Star Cavanaugh Cold Case. Richards seamlessly combined all the things I love into one fabulous story: a heroine to root for—and a hunky police chief she'd be a fool to resist—a tightly-plotted mystery, a small town peppered with lovable, quirky characters, and ultimately, justice for those who'd waited much too long to receive it. This series will definitely go on my 'auto-buy' list. Highly recommended!"

—**Connie Mann**, author of the Safe Harbor and Florida Wildlife Warriors series

A STAR CAVANAUGH COLD CASE

BURYING
DAISY
DOE

RAMONA RICHARDS



KREGEL
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Burying Daisy Doe: A Star Cavanaugh Cold Case

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CHAPTER ONE

Pineville, Alabama, 1954

WHEN THE WOMAN with the daisy in her hair sauntered into the Pineville Drugstore and Soda Fountain that hazy Saturday morning in May 1954, every man in the room turned and looked. Her lavender dress fit loosely, and the lightweight fabric, cinched at the waist with a matching belt, flowed easily around her as she walked. Thick curls undulated around her face with each step toward the counter, the strands so black that a bluish highlight caressed each one. Her lips formed a tight red bow in the middle of a face pale with carefully applied powder. More than one of the old farmers sitting at the cluster of tables near the soda fountain found himself staring unwaveringly at the stranger.

Roscoe Carver stared too, from his chair in the colored section of the fountain's tables. His fourteen-year-old body responded to the woman's long legs and curvy hips in a way that would have made his mother pray for his soul and his father for his life. Noticing Roscoe's gaze, his father squeezed his arm in the same grip that could pull a mule out of the mud. Roscoe flinched, his eyes darting to his father's tense face.

Ebenezer Carver shook his head, his voice a taut whisper. "Don't you be gawking at no white woman. Doc barely lets us sit inside as it is."

Confusion shot through Roscoe. "White? But she's—" The grip tightened. "White!" The word was a harsh whisper. "Don't let them catch you looking!"

Almost in reflex, Roscoe looked down at the table. It wasn't the first time he'd heard the warning. It would not be the last. He squelched

BURYING DAISY DOE

the rage it produced in his gut and found a safer outlet for his anger and curiosity: He watched the woman in the broad mirrors behind the soda fountain in furtive glances that danced between her and his plate. Unlike his father, who focused only on his food, the white men in the fountain area stared openly at the woman, occasionally nudging each other and motioning at her with quick points or nods of their heads.

Her curls glistened as they bounced out of control around her shoulders and down her back, as if she'd forgotten to brush her hair that morning. Low-heeled pumps, a light lavender that almost matched the dress, thwacked on the yellow tile floor, as if they, too, were a size too big. She ordered a root beer float instead of breakfast, and Doc Taylor started drawing it up, being that his fountain girl Ruthie had the day off. The woman clopped over to the magazine rack and picked up one with the latest movie gossip. After studying the display a moment, she plucked up a comic book as well. She paid for all three, then leaned against the fountain, sipping the float.

Roscoe tried to finish his breakfast, but his attention kept turning back to the woman's reflection in the mirror. Maybe his father was right; she was white. But Roscoe knew that she didn't look like any white woman around Pineville. And there was that thick makeup. She faced the fountain again, and Roscoe studied her profile. The wide dark eyes, prominent cheekbones, and sloping jawline. The smooth curls of her hair weren't straightened like his mama's, but Roscoe had never seen a white girl with hair that rich and black. Maybe his daddy had. His father had traveled, been overseas with the army during the war. He'd seen lots of things no one around here had.

The woman set the soda glass down and stirred the ice cream into the mixture. Doc tried to talk to her, but she met his questions with soft shakes of her head, and after a bit, he gave up and went to the high counter at the back where he made up prescriptions. The girl ate the ice cream slowly and dabbed her lips.

The clop of her shoes echoed against the high ceiling as she strolled toward the door, the magazine and comic book tucked neatly under one arm, her hips swaying beneath the pale purple dress.

RAMONA RICHARDS

Roscoe finally looked back at his biscuit, now cold on his plate. *Beautiful, so beautiful that she should never be forgotten.*

A thought he remembered with pain the next morning. This time he stared openly at her—her face, her nude body, the waxen look of her bloodless skin. Beautiful, even dead, with those scarlet lips now a bluish gray, marred by a dark protruding tongue. She lay at the edge of his daddy's newly planted cornfield, a leather strap around her neck, a bright daisy crushed beside her.

He stared, then ran to get his father, knowing that he would never forget that face.

CHAPTER TWO

Pineville, Alabama, Present Day

ROSCOE CARVER STARED at me, the look in his rheumy eyes steadily moving from bored to puzzled, then to intrigued. I had been working at the Pineville drugstore only a month, doing a short-order dance during the morning shift with the cook behind the soda fountain and grill. We served up breakfast, mostly, with the occasional ice cream treats. This was Roscoe's first appearance in the sunrise crowd, having just returned from a long stay at the hospital in Gadsden after his last stroke. His daughter, Imajean, had told me Roscoe had eaten breakfast at the drugstore most of his life. He'd once had a store on the square and knew the breakfast hour was prime for new gossip and potential clients. Even retired, he still came, and he always made the drugstore his first stop after getting out of the hospital.

"Still stuck in the past, that man is," his grandson Charles had muttered, causing his mama to make a shushing noise at him. Charles, who gave a whole new definition to tall, dark, and handsome, had no clue how encouraging his words were to me.

A guy stuck in the past was exactly what I needed. Especially if his name was Roscoe Carver. I had searched the morning rush every day, dodging between the tables as I delivered plates of hot biscuits, gravy, grits, and an assortment of eggs, looking just for him.

Now he was looking at me. Roscoe had emerged from Charles's beloved red 1992 Thunderbird like a king descending to his court. Charles sped off to work as Roscoe moved slowly into the drugstore, using a four-point cane for balance, weaving among the scattering of tables, and

acknowledging the dozens of greetings that sailed his way, the handshakes, and the welcome-backs. Miss Doris Rankin even rose from her table with “the girls” and gave him a gentle hug. Everyone wanted to know where Imajean was (“Working too hard”) and how Charles was doing (“Spending too much money and time on that Spencer girl”).

He moved his girth almost gracefully toward a table in the middle, and he eased down in the chair slowly, settling with a huff of air, as if getting off his feet brought serious relief. He rearranged the napkin holder, the cream and sugar, and the salt and pepper shakers, then leaned back. He clutched his hands over his stomach and looked around, ready to rule.

He spotted me quickly, the new blonde behind the familiar counter. His glance skirted over me head to toe at first, then he sniffed, as if testing the air, and settled in for a long examination.

I set a thick white mug down in front of him, extending the silver-and-glass pot that had become the morning extension of my right hand. “Coffee OK, sir?”

He cleared his throat. “Please.” The word had a whispery *h* at the end, and the left side of his face didn’t quite cooperate with the right. Left-overs from the stroke.

I poured the coffee, careful not to splash any, ignoring the heads that turned my way, like NASCAR spectators waiting for a crash. Pouring too fast or too hard caused the coffee to hit the bottom and bounce back out, usually all over the customer. The way I found this out was now legendary among the drugstore patrons, alienating a few but endearing me to a number of folks who disliked a certain Alabama legislator who had seen the drugstore as the perfect campaign stop. They loved that part of the story, but they rarely hoped I’d repeat the event.

I picked up the tiny pitcher from the middle of the table to check the cream level. Almost full. Most of the morning folks liked their coffee black—the stronger the better.

“You’re a drive-in, aren’t you?” His lispy voice sounded like new tires on gravel.

I paused. The question still caught me off guard, even after I figured out what it meant. Once upon a time, Pineville had been a small, isolated

BURYING DAISY DOE

town, with the folks here reveling in their own self-sufficiency and survival. But it was now an easy driving distance from Gadsden and Birmingham, less than an hour for each up and down I-59. As in so many other small towns in America, developers had snatched up abandoned or unwanted farmland, constructing a series of fast-built, vinyl-siding-encased subdivisions. The ones that had popped up around the Pineville exit were mostly populated by commuters whose lives centered on the work and culture of the two cities, allowing them to arrive home only to sleep and attend the occasional school function or football game.

Vic Beason, editor of the local Pineville paper, had dubbed them “drive-ins.” It was not a compliment.

“Actually, I’m a move-in.” I pulled my order pad out of the apron pocket. “Can’t stand being cooped up in a car.” I pulled my pencil from behind my ear and pointed it at the ceiling. “For now, I live upstairs in Doc’s rental room. What can I get ya?”

“Didn’t realize Doc had hired a new girl. You’re a tall one. Surely you ain’t gonna stay upstairs in that dump for long. You have people here? Must. I see it in your face.”

He wasn’t supposed to see it *that* soon. “No sir, not here. I do have a grandma down in Birmingham. She’s got an Airstream I’m going to bring up soon. Doc said I can park it in his back yard for now. Eggs? Toast?”

“Three eggs, over easy, yellows runny. Toast, extra brown, dry. Grits, extra butter. Bacon, larger order. Large OJ, if there’s any left. Is it one of the classic Airstreams or one of those new fancy RVs? You sure I don’t know your people?” Every *s* ended with the whoosh.

A dozen answers flitted through my head as I scribbled. Finally, out came one that wasn’t a lie. “I’m afraid my people aren’t from around here. And it’s a classic. A 1969 Overlander.”

“Humph.” This sound came from deep within his gut and rode out on a thick exhale, not so much a word as a noise I would have associated with Jabba the Hutt, had I been less polite.

“I’ll get this in.” I scooted to the counter and the short-order grill. Rafe, the cook who worked wonders with eggs and gravy but kept a stash of pot taped to the underside of the dumpster out back, plucked

the order slip from my hand and stuck it on the metal rack over the steaming kettle of grits. The marijuana, which he rarely used on the job, was, in part, retaliation against the pharmacist for some unknown slight. Rafe was a man of action, and he seldom spoke more than three words during the morning shift.

He motioned toward two plates near the edge of the grill, and I switched out the coffeepot for a fuller one, balanced the plates, and headed back to the floor.

After only a month, a new respect for servers had been born, and I prayed I'd never have to do this for real. To make a living at it. Some people have a calling for it. I did not. But there was no better way to find out what was going on in Pineville, or any other small town in the South, for that matter. Like a bartender, my job gave me instant access and a built-in trust.

Take Miss Doris, for instance. She and her girls—all of them retired businesswomen—clustered in the drugstore every morning to talk God, guns, and guys. Bible study with a twist, and they knew every iota of gossip floating around town. Miss Doris never met a stranger and had spotted me for a kindred soul right away, a woman who was as interested in the town's goings-on as she was. She had invited me to the Pine Grove Baptist Church, a white clapboard structure that was the spiritual heart of the town. According to her, Sunday school was the best place for news as well as soul saving.

She started on that last part pretty soon as well. God and I hadn't been on speaking terms in a while now, despite my grandmother's best efforts. I'd attended Pine Grove Baptist last Sunday, although not for the preaching and singing. By Monday at lunch, Miss Doris had filled this new kindred soul in on more local gossip than I could keep straight without a scorecard, as well as working on my heathen soul. I was far more interested in the former.

Local gossip is an essential tool in my real job.

I grabbed another plate from Rafe, delivered it along with another shot of coffee, then caught my breath as I stopped to combine the contents of the two pots and start a fresh one. The smell of the burnt coffee made my nose twitch as I dumped out the old grounds.

BURYING DAISY DOE

“Got anything left for me, sugar?” Even with my back to the counter, I knew the owner of the thick, and quite fake, Southern accent.

I dropped my own a few notches into Hollywood hick. “Sure, honeybabe. I’ve got lots for you right here.” I turned, empty mug and coffee-pot at ready.

Mike Luinetti’s grin broadened, and his accent returned to normal, settling somewhere between Pittsburgh and Erie. “You’re getting to be a girl I can count on.” He slid onto a stool, his uniform shirt ominously tight.

A quick glance over his shoulder showed Miss Doris’s slightly mischievous smile. Not surprisingly, she’d been the first to notice that since I took over the morning shift, Mike had started eating breakfast every day at the drugstore, with a few extra pounds as a result.

I certainly didn’t mind the playful chatting. While he had focused on the fact that we were both transplants, I considered it a stroke of luck that the first man in Pineville to show an interest just happened to be the local police chief. Besides, with the dark looks of his Sicilian father, flirting with the man wasn’t exactly a chore. His dark-blue eyes, a gift from his German mother, provided a mesmerizing contrast, and I pitied any miscreant who tried to stare him down.

I set the mug in front of Mike and filled it. “You can always count on me, kind sir. So what can I get ya?” I pulled the pencil and pad to ready.

He paused, his blue eyes still bright, but a more serious expression on his face. “How about a real date?”

I blinked. Twice. “Are you asking me out?” Finally. We’d been flirting for a month. Apparently we both could give *reticent* a new definition.

He cleared his throat and shot a quick glance over his shoulder. The grin on Miss Doris’s face had moved from mischievous to wicked.

He focused back on me. “Yes.”

“When?”

He was Boy Scout prepared. “Saturday night. I’ll pick you up at six, and we can drive into Gadsden for dinner. We could do a movie or go to one of the clubs . . .” He stopped. “What’s wrong?”

I stood a bit straighter, annoyed at myself. Having a good poker face was a fundamental part of a being a private investigator, and even more

so for a cop. I could do it, but it wasn't one of my natural skills. I had to struggle to maintain it, or my eyebrows twitched, my lips puckered, and my eyes went through more gyrations than an actor in a melodrama.

I cleared my throat. "Miss Doris has her great-granddaughter this weekend. Carly. I told her I'd babysit so she and the girls could go to a retirement dinner." There would be a new "girl" at the drugstore table come next Monday.

Stoicism apparently wasn't one of his gifts either. The disappointment shone on his face.

I made a peace offering. "How about Friday?"

He grimaced. "Work." As chief, Mike should have been able to keep regular hours, but he filled in when needed. It was a small force.

I shifted my weight to one foot and held up a finger at two guys motioning for more coffee. "Well, since I suspect Miss Doris is at least a little bit behind this, my guess is that she'd be OK if you helped me take care of Carly. She's only seven. Her bedtime's at eight. We could do takeout from Baker's, maybe watch a DVD."

Mike's eyes narrowed, and his examination of me almost turned official. "Are you serious?"

I nodded. "And honestly, I prefer talking on a first date to being entertained."

He remained silent a moment, still watching for any sign I was joking. Finally he nodded. "What do you want from Baker's?"

He took my order, then I took his. I handed the slip to Rafe, then hit the floor again with the fresh pot of coffee. I filled cups and checked on everyone's progress, then delivered a plate of brown toast and runny eggs to Roscoe, who nodded his thanks and pointed at his mug for more coffee.

Most people watch the cup when I pour, in case they need to dodge a bit. Roscoe, however, watched me. As I tilted the pot back upright, he clicked his tongue against the back of his upper teeth. "I know your face. I must know your people. What's your name?"

"Star O'Connell."

His eyebrows narrowed. "I don't know any O'Connells around here."

"No sir. Most of the ones I know are up in Tennessee." Plus, it was my

BURYING DAISY DOE

married name, no longer in use officially. No need to bring that up. A touch on my arm told me the adjacent table needed coffee. “You let me know if you need anything else.”

I poured the coffee into the waiting cups and returned to the counter. Rafe had finished Mike’s breakfast and slid the plate to the young chief. Mike grabbed it on the fly and pulled a napkin from the holder near the cash register. I changed out the pots again and filled Mike’s cup. His stare got my attention. “What?”

“You want to tell me what’s making you jumpy?”

“I’m not jumpy.”

“You forgot my silverware.”

I stopped, looking all around his plate. His hands waited on either side of it, empty. “Sorry,” I muttered, then I dug a rolled napkin from a gray side-work tub under the counter.

As I placed it in front of him, he closed his fingers around my wrist. “What’s wrong?”

My breath caught. In all our flirting and banter, Mike had never touched me. The warmth of his hand and the concern in his eyes stopped me in my tracks, even though I knew the answer to his question all too well.

Roscoe. I’d been waiting and hoping he’d show up for a month. Now I found myself wanting to hold him at bay, not answering the very questions that could open a door and get to the real reason I was here—an investigation. My mouth was as dry as Roscoe’s extra-brown toast, and I kept flashing on two of the crime scene photos waiting up in my room, in a file I’d reviewed yet one more time just last night.

One, with a faded “1954” penciled on the back, showed a waxen female corpse, posed in the exact same position as the Black Dahlia. Murdered in 1947, the body of the Black Dahlia, Elizabeth Short, had been dumped at the edge of a deserted lot in LA, her arms arched over her head. The body in my photo, with the same hair and frame, had been found at the edge of a cornfield near Pineville. Unlike the Black Dahlia, this one, while still intact, had no real name as far as the public knew, just the nickname. The handwriting on the back of the photo identified her only as “Daisy Doe.”

According to the records I'd found, "Daisy" was buried in the Pine Grove Baptist Church cemetery, still considered an "unknown" individual. Only she wasn't truly unknown—not to me, nor to her son, Bobby, who'd returned to Pineville in 1984, looking for her killer. He'd been murdered just as she was, and dumped in the same location. Which explained the second photo in my file.

A photo of my father's murder.

Roscoe was my greatest living source of information about both crimes. Somewhere deep in that mind curious about the local connections of a stranger lay answers that might be dangerous to both of us. Maybe . . . maybe it was time to step out a bit, get a look at the local files, and not just the ones I had been able to put together from resources on the other side of the country.

"Star?"

Mike's voice pulled me from the past. My cheeks grew warm as I swallowed and turned my hand, squeezing his fingers. His eyes widened at the gesture, and he tightened his grip. Firm and reassuring, and my throat constricted.

Maybe—just maybe—another door had been opened.

My voice rasped a bit as I whispered. "Saturday. If you can wait, I'll tell you everything Saturday."

A crease appeared between his brows, his expression now more cop than friend. "So this is more than you being a little nervous this morning."

I nodded, then pulled away from him. Folks needed coffee.

I felt his eyes follow me, the way a street officer would watch a suspect walk away from his cruiser. My stomach tensed, and I took a deep breath. I had to trust someone.

I just hoped Mike was the wisest choice. And that it didn't get both of us killed.

CHAPTER THREE

Pineville, Alabama, 1954

ROSCOE RAN, THE broad leaves of the corn plants slashing at him like airborne needles. He tripped over a clod of dirt, landing hard on his elbows, but he bit back the cry of pain and rolled over onto his back, gulping in air and trying to listen for the pursuit.

The shouts of the two men chasing him sounded flat, deadened by the tall stalks of corn, but they were no more than thirty yards off to his left. Over them, he could hear the bass of his father's voice, still confronting the other men crowding the front yard, white-sheeted figures illuminated by the cross they'd lit an hour earlier. Looking up, Roscoe could see the pale light of the flames against the night sky.

Fear oozed from Roscoe's skin, an acrid odor that made him glad the men had not brought dogs. His muscles tensed, cramping as his feet dug into the clods, pushing him backward, the seat of his jeans scraping hard in the dirt. Roscoe knew he'd never felt anything this intense, this consuming. The black community in Pineville had always kept to themselves for the most part, and the local KKK had been reluctant to turn on them—too many of the white men under the white sheets had been raised by black housekeepers and maids who could easily recognize voices, shoes, even the expressions in their eyes. Anonymity was a vital element to the Klan.

So this was the first time Roscoe had seen the sheets, felt the heat of the flaming cross, run with the fear of being killed.

That woman, he thought bitterly. The KKK thought he'd murdered Daisy Doe.

Roscoe forced himself to sit still, huddled tight between two thick stalks. The corn closed around him, a shield. If he ran, they'd hear. He caught his breath, his hands clutching the earth beneath him, his thoughts a desperate prayer of salvation. As he listened, they passed him, still too far to the left, then circled back, this time too far to the right.

By now, a flashing red light had joined that of the flames. Sheriff JoeLee Wilkes was no friend of blacks. He wasn't fond of the Klan either, but he was too smart to cross them too hard. Then, as Roscoe listened, he heard the sound of true salvation: the voice of Reverend Billy Mitchell, which boomed out over all other shouts and catcalls. JoeLee had apparently stopped for reinforcements. He wouldn't stand up to the Klan, but Reverend Billy, the white preacher of the Pine Grove Baptist Church, despised the Klan with every fiber of his being. Everybody knew it, and everybody knew the good reverend could call down the angels of heaven and the brimstone of hell when he got riled up. Nobody crossed Reverend Billy, not even the Klan, not if they valued their eternal souls.

Roscoe's fear slipped away as Reverend Billy moved into full-blown preacher mode, calling down the wrath of the Lord on the men. Within seconds, all Roscoe could hear was the pastor and the crackling of fire-ridden wood.

Still, he remained on the ground, waiting. There he stayed until the flames died, the red light vanished, and Reverend Billy hushed. Finally, his daddy called his name, and Roscoe returned home.

Daisy Doe's killer remained a mystery, but Roscoe never again doubted God's ability to answer the desperate prayers of young boys.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pineville, Alabama, Present Day

THAT AFTERNOON, I returned to the studio apartment over the drugstore and took a long, hot shower. Serving for the six-hour morning shift left me grimy, with a thin film of smoky bacon grease on my skin and a scent of stale biscuits and grits in my hair. Sometimes more than the *scent* of grits clung to the blond locks. Grits, I'd decided some time back, could easily be used in the absence of rubber cement.

Thoroughly scrubbed, I propped open the ancient windows and sprawled across my bed, letting a brisk spring breeze waft over my damp body. I massaged my scalp again and pulled my wet hair up and back, getting it off my neck and splaying it like a halo around my head.

This was the quietest, most pleasant moment of my day, and I cherished the silence and cool air. Although the drugstore was on a street corner overlooking the Pineville town square, early afternoon was a time when most folks were huddled away in their offices and plants, or they tooted along on giant tractors on distant fields. Several of the shops on the square closed at one for an hour or so. Sometimes longer, when July and August brought a smothering afternoon heat that made trees limp and hair spray useless. Early April still held a gentle freshness in the wind, which raised a few goose bumps as my skin air dried.

I stared at the ceiling, counting the water stains and thinking about my mother, especially the art, photos, and letters that had cluttered her tiny apartment, remaining for me to clean out after her death six months ago. I grew up with this eclectic collection, often coming home from dates to find her poring over crumbling cardboard boxes and

endless notebooks of memories, tendrils of her still-blond hair escaping her scarf and slicked to her soft, creased cheeks by silent tears.

By the time I reached my teens, I hated her, hated my father for dying in the way he did, and hated God for the life he'd left us with by raining these murders down on us. So I tried to destroy the evidence. When my mother caught me trying to burn a box, I found myself on a plane for Birmingham, where I lived with Gran and Papa, my mother's parents, while my mother pulled herself together, stored the boxes, and finished a nursing degree.

But the boxes never went away, not for her, and—eventually—not for me either. They destroyed my family. They got my father murdered. They had helped destroy my marriage and my faith. They led me to hide my heritage behind my maternal grandparents' last name. They estranged me from my own mother, and they killed her before she turned sixty.

But they also made me a cop. They made me a cold case detective. Now I had to finish it. Before they destroyed me completely.

I slid off the bed and into a pair of shorts and T-shirt. My damp feet made soft padding sounds on the hardwood floor as I headed for the card table that doubled as office and dining room. Old and wobbly but serviceable, it perched under the window next to the bed. The files I had brought with me were in a carry-on bag underneath, and I pulled out the one closest to the front, just as I had almost every day since I'd arrived in Alabama. I'd handled it so often that its edges were soft and foxed, like an over-read book.

When I'd rekindled this investigation, I'd narrowed Mother's collection down to one box, but this file was the heart of it, and I went through it daily, even though its contents lived in my head like old friends. I'd also studied Pineville inside and out, poring over history books, online archive sites, and joining social media groups. Once I'd put together as much information as I could from the boxes and the web, I knew the next step meant injecting myself into Pineville.

And it was the good citizens of Pineville who made it all possible. The Pineville pharmacist, a lanky man in his late seventies who still carried the Taylor name, had been thinking about closing down the century-old soda fountain after the previous waitress retired. The community

BURYING DAISY DOE

set up a protest that rattled the windows, and he relented. When my web wanderings turned up the job notice in the Gadsden paper, I called Gran.

“Timing is everything, Gran.”

“God’s timing always is, sugar.”

I sighed and pressed my hands down on the file. God and Gran had this tight-knit relationship that I respected but didn’t quite understand. Not for any lack of trying on her part. Gran belonged to a denomination that took Christ’s instructions on spreading the Word more seriously than most. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe in God—I did. So much so that I felt betrayed by the way he’d abandoned Daisy Doe and my father . . . and me. Gran, however, had hopes for her last remaining relative, and I knew I was the frequent topic of her prayers.

After spending a few days in Birmingham with Gran, I moved to Pineville and took the job at the drugstore. She told me that once I got settled, we’d clean out the Overlander so I could have a more permanent place. Well . . . as permanent as a silver egg-shaped house on wheels could be.

Since then, I’d studied the files and continued the research while I got to know the folks of a small town that was almost straight out of Faulkner, quirks and all.

Starting with Miss Doris. Everyone called her “Miss Doris,” although she’d been married to Mr. George Rankin for more than fifty years. He was the younger man she’d fallen in love with on a dance floor a few years after World War II, and at eighty-four and seventy-seven, they still danced, although they had given up competing in ballrooms all over the world. Their five kids had been born in five different countries. Their friends and the church they attended seemed to have forgiven both the dancing and the rather short time frame between their wedding anniversary and the birthdate of their oldest child, a boy who now was senior pastor at a megachurch in Dallas. I suspected the megachurch connection did a lot to smooth over that unfortunate time shortage.

Miss Doris had become my gentle gold mine and as big an advocate for God in my life as my grandmother. She’d been in Pineville all her

life, save the globetrotting trips, and her memory of the forties and fifties made my remembrances of last week sound awkward and vague. She was also head of the women's group at Pine Grove Baptist, and her collection of friends, her "girls," hailed from some of the most historical and society-entrenched families in Pineville. They had owned businesses and run charities and could lay a burn on an errant child or wayward spouse with a scald that would have made the most dominant of Southern matriarchs pleased as punch.

They loved to talk, each and every one. After all, it wasn't as if I learned all that about Miss Doris and Mr. George from the internet. But I decided caution should still reign, especially when nosing into a topic that wasn't likely to come up much over afternoon tea.

Returning to the bed, I stacked the pillows against the white iron frame, brushed my feet off, and crawled back up, sitting tailor fashion. I took five deep breaths, let them out slowly, and snapped open the file.

My ritual.

For almost thirty years, Mother had collected every snippet about my father she could find, almost as if it would somehow keep Daddy alive. Until his death in 1984, he'd done the same about his mother, and some of the clippings and notes in those boxes dated back to the fifties.

But I'd been so young when he died that I barely remembered Daddy. A few stark days stood out—my first day of preschool, times when he carried me on his shoulders, a picnic, my first ride at Disneyland—but mostly I remembered a slight scent that was part tobacco, part cologne, and a fuzzy recollection of a dark-haired man who grinned every time he looked at me.

That face, however, bore little resemblance to the photos Mama had left behind, and even less to the shots of his crime scene.

Which was the first photo in my file . . . and the reason for those deep breaths.

Two bodies this time, at the edge of the same cornfield where Daisy Doe had been dumped, this time discovered by two farmhands who showed up for work. My father and the investigator he worked with, both resting on their sides, their hands tied behind them with duct tape. Their belts were still around their necks, their faces distorted by

BURYING DAISY DOE

strangulation. Standing around them were the law enforcement officers at the time, including aging, rotund Sheriff JoeLee Wilkes, who had closed the case quickly, unsolved and unsolvable. Sloppy procedure stood out even in the still photo, and I could only imagine what limited efforts Wilkes had taken to “solve” the crime. The bodies had been packed up and shipped home the day after the coroner ruled on the cause of death.

My mother never stopped gathering information about Pineville, and my own research had added mounds of information as well, all in preparation for me to return to this town that had changed our lives forever. I knew this town—at least on the surface. Wilkes had died a few years after my father, the last sheriff to reign alone over Pine County. The area grew rapidly in the late seventies and early eighties, and Pineville had turned municipal, hiring a police chief and a small staff of officers. The sheriff and his office moved to another city, maintaining authority over the rural areas of the county.

I ran my finger over the details in the picture. Next to Wilkes stood two deputies who must have been only in their twenties. I’d had an artist age them, and one I had already spotted around town. Dean Sowers, a haunted-looking man in his late fifties, spent most of his time in a patrol car, late at night, his shadowed gaze moving from one empty store to another. It was a killer shift, playing security guard for a town with a crime rate almost in the negative numbers.

Dean was number three on my interview list, right behind Roscoe and Doris.

My fingernail scraped relentlessly at a dry patch on the side of my foot, showering the bed sheet with minuscule bits of skin. My anxiety showing. I needed to get to work. I’d inherited Daddy’s sense of patience—Mother had always said it was nonexistent—and the waiting wore on my nerves. Yet whenever I got the urge to dive into the investigation, confronting witnesses and opening old wounds, I reminded myself that his exuberant impatience had gotten Daddy killed.

Not exactly what I wanted to achieve this time around.

You’re afraid.

I leaned back against the pillows, stretching my legs out and putting

that dry spot out of reach of my twitchy fingers. The word echoed a bit in my head. *Afraid*.

Well, yes and no. I definitely didn't want to wind up with a belt around my neck. But I'd spent more than a decade as a cop and a year as a private investigator, and the prospect of a new investigation usually put a tingle on my skin, not a clammy sweat. I knew how to protect myself.

I turned the picture over. Underneath was a pencil drawing my mother had done of my father, in one of her "find myself with art" phases. It was a loving rendering of Daddy as a bad boy, wearing leather and straddling a Harley. Copied from a photo taken during his early law school days, it showed a trim, wiry man with a daring glint in his eyes. He was smiling, hands on hips, thick ebony hair down around his shoulders, tossed by a wayward breeze. This was the man that my mother talked about for the rest of her life. The wild boy she'd fallen for, not the driven lawyer who'd so frequently abandoned his wife and daughter for the one cold case that consumed him—and eventually took his life.

I slid my fingers under the remaining documents in the file, pulling out the one that had started it all, had given my father his ambition, his zealous drive.

Another crime scene photo. Daisy Doe to the citizens of Pineville. Esther Spire to me and the son who'd loved her enough to die for her.

Same field. Same cause of death. Clippings from the Alabama papers at the time had compared her death to the Black Dahlia case in LA. The young beauty dumped. The mysterious young boy she'd left behind. In my files, the clippings gave way to page after page of my father's memories, scribbles he'd started as a teen, trying to hold on to the last bits of memories he had of his mother. They continued into his twenties, stopping abruptly about the time he'd entered law school. What emerged was a portrait of a temperamental, loving woman who'd doted on her only child but who had loved to grab handfuls of adventure. She collected unusual friends, soldiers, artists, musicians. She'd survived World War II in France, where she'd been part of the Resistance. A Jew who'd survived the Nazis only to die in a cornfield in Alabama.

To my mother and me—the two people who'd loved them the most—

BURYING DAISY DOE

Esther Spire and her son had been cut from the same romanticized cloth. As a cop, I knew all too well that the truth had a dark side.

My eyes watered. Maybe that was it. I knew that solving the murders would turn everything I knew about them upside down. Right now, they were tragic, golden people. But in murder, there was no gold, and tragedy could take a twisted path.

Maybe what I was afraid of was losing them all over again.

I stood up, wiped my eyes, and walked to the window. I inhaled, letting the air out slowly, as my eyes scanned the street below. I could stop now, before the investigation really began. File everything away. Go back to Nashville, to my life, to all I'd left behind to pursue this case. These cases. Forget about my father's murder. Forget Esther Spire.

Esther. Hebrew for *star*. My father had passed her name and looks to me, along with that apparently irresistible drive of our family to wind up in this tiny Southern town. Unlike them, however, I had no intention of dying here.

But Roscoe had returned home. Now was the moment to decide. Go, or dive into the deep end.

On the opposite side of the street, a delivery truck rumbled away from the curb, like a curtain opening on a brightly lit stage. In front of the hardware store behind the truck, Roscoe Carver sat in an unpainted rocker staring up at my window.

CHAPTER FIVE

Birmingham, Alabama, 1954

THE YOUNG BOY'S face peered up at Roscoe from the newspaper. The sharp cheekbones, broad face, and dark eyes echoed those of Daisy Doe. Mother. Son. The boy's black hair had been parted on the left and mired down with some type of hair goo, but a number of curls had escaped the plastering, drooping over his forehead and ears like sun-darkened vines.

Roscoe picked up the paper, folding it in his lap. Heavily creased by previous readers, it had been left behind on the bench by a man who'd hopped the last bus of the afternoon. Roscoe peered one more time at the store across the street, where his mother and her sister shopped for their husbands' birthdays. His aunt, a flamboyant preacher's wife, had more money to spend today than his father would make on the farm all year, and she was all too eager to share with her sister. They'd already been in there almost two hours.

He sighed and gazed back at the paper, running one finger over the headline: "Do You Know This Boy?" Underneath, a paragraph described how he'd been found at a motel near Pineville, apparently the son of a woman who'd been murdered there. He didn't speak, had no identification, and gave no signs he could even read. They had put him in an orphanage in Birmingham and called him Bobby Doe. The cops would like to find his father, to question him about the boy and his mother. So far, no luck.

"Too bad, kid. Guess they don't know it wasn't your daddy what killed her," Roscoe murmured.

BURYING DAISY DOE

Roscoe wanted to remember the beauty with the daisy in her hair. There were other memories, however, he'd give his eyeteeth to forget.

Across the street, his mother emerged, calling to him. "Guess I'm stuck with them all," he said, tearing the picture of Bobby Doe out of the paper and stuffing it in his pocket.

CHAPTER SIX

Pineville, Alabama, Present Day

THE TWO DAYS between Thursday breakfast with Roscoe and Saturday dinner with Mike passed with little more than my own continued obsession with the files under my table. Neither of the men put in an appearance at the drugstore on Friday morning, and I drove into Gadsden that afternoon to do some light shopping and make copies of a few things in the files. *Be careful* still rang loud and strong in my head, so I made a small, selective list of items to show Mike. I copied them in case he wanted to take them with him after hearing exactly why I had moved to Pineville.

My gut told me that he wouldn't be pleased with the news. Fine-tuned by the streets of Nashville, that instinct had proved more reliable than my head knowledge at times, and I wanted to be as prepared as possible for his reaction. What I didn't want was for him to think that any flirting I aimed in his direction had been solely because he was the police chief and a source for my investigation.

Or was it?

That was when I found myself in an artsy boutique, staring at a rack of designer jeans, wondering how my rear would look in them and if the stenciling on the thighs was too young for me.

OK, so maybe my thoughts about the black-haired Pennsylvania boy hadn't been entirely confined to business. He made me laugh. Not many people had been able to do that lately, and I was always a sucker for any man who could make me laugh. Then there was those eyes, that uncanny blue in an otherwise dark palette. That his intense focus could be unnerving annoyed me. I needed to be stronger than that.

BURYING DAISY DOE

I passed on the jeans. While Star the PI could afford them and wanted a pair so much that her mouth watered, they cost more than Star the counter waitress made in a week. A good fit and fancy stitching across my backside just weren't worth the risk of someone noticing that I was spending far more than I made. I already knew the gossip line had focused on Mike and me. More attention wasn't what I wanted at the moment. I left the boutique and headed for Walmart, where I picked up a couple of cute T-shirts and a serviceable pair of khakis—cheap, cool, and perfect for the day job.

Back in Pineville, I slipped into a tank top, shorts, and my favorite cross-trainers. Time for a good run. When I'd first started working behind the counter, I'd stopped running. Figured I got enough exercise totting breakfasts around the room. My energy level dropped, however, so I started up again, usually after a nap in the heat of the afternoon. This turned out to be a wise move on my part. If I waited late enough, the folks who lived near the square had arrived home. Some pattered about in the yard, watering flowers and plucking weeds. Others just lounged, stretching their legs on an expansive front porch. The more they saw me trotting around the neighborhood, the more they waved or stopped me to chat.

You want to get to know a small town? Walk the streets.

Settled in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the heart of Pineville still looked and felt like a postcard of a Southern community from that time. The drugstore sat on the southeast corner of a pristine square featuring a stark-white Georgian-style courthouse. With twin two-hundred-year-old oaks and a manicured lawn, the courthouse was more park than cityscape. An ornate wrought iron gazebo stood to one side of the courthouse, nestled up against a cluster of stone soldiers. A much-debated statue of a confederate soldier was the oldest, and the town council had finally solved the debate by commissioning statues representing infantry soldiers from every conflict since the Revolutionary War. It had taken most of the city's budget for two years and left folks angry about potholes, darkened street lights, a lack of Christmas decorations, and wild dogs. Of course, now there was a petition, currently tabled, to add a statue of a female soldier, while another had raised the issue of the confederate soldier yet again.

I wouldn't be a small-town politician if you paid me. Brings out the worst in people, I swear it does, being in the public eye.

As I moved from a brisk walk into a slow jog, one of Pineville's most visible politicians, Ellis Patton, waved at me. He stood next to the driver's door of his ancient pickup, keys in hand. On the passenger side waited Dandridge Patton, his grandson and heir apparent. As usual, rumors swirled around the local politicians, as in any small town. One of them had the thirty-something Dandridge being groomed for political office, starting with his grandfather's job.

I love small-town rumors. My research had revealed a lot about the town, but Miss Doris and her girls had been busy filling in the blank spaces with some of the juiciest tidbits.

And everyone in town knew that Dandridge might be waiting a long time to take over for his grandfather. Ellis was nowhere near ready for retirement. He stood tall and ramrod straight despite being seventy-plus, had been mayor for the past twelve years. He lived in an elegant Victorian just off the square, a huge home he'd inherited from his daddy, just as he had most of his income and his political position. Despite being able to pay for his children's and grandchildren's Ivy League educations in cash—a fact one of the local bank tellers still whispered about on occasion—he drove a red ramshackle 1976 Ford pickup with a white topper and a couple of bullet holes. "Huntin' accidents," he'd joke, although his political rivals whispered, "Jealous husbands" behind their hands. Ellis usually wore khakis or jeans and white oxford-cloth shirts to the office. No tie, naturally.

They were his trademark common-folks signatures. Hokey, and the citizens of Pineville knew it was a facade, even as they reelected him three times, with a fourth term likely. No term limits in Pineville. But at least, Miss Doris once confided, he'd never been convicted of a felony. Yet.

Gotta love Southern politics—almost as much as small-town rumors.

Dandridge's—Dan's—father, Thomas, had joined the military after college and had died somewhere overseas, although no one was real sure of the circumstances. That was when Dan came under his grandfather's tutelage, although the local scuttlebutt was that the apple didn't just

BURYING DAISY DOE

fall far from the tree but had dropped at least one county over. No one thought Dan was up to the task, at least not yet. Another reason Ellis had most likely refused to retire.

I waved back and shifted my route closer to the pickup. “Hey, Mr. Mayor! Dandridge!”

Dan threw up a hand in a friendly wave, but Ellis paused, grinning. “Hey, Miss Star. You sure do pretty-up things here on the square.”

I pranced in place, ignoring his glance below my neckline. “Everything still running safe and sound here in Pineville?”

He nodded once, a gesture of fatherly reassurance. “Always. No place safer.”

“One reason I’m here.”

“You ready to sell that Carryall yet? I’ll give you a good price.”

I grinned. He asked me the same thing almost every time I saw him. He’d coveted my 1966 GMC Carryall since the day I drove into town. “Now, you know Belle’s not for sale. She’s been in the family a long time. Would you trade your truck for her?”

He chuckled. “Nope. You got me there.”

“I heard it was your daddy’s truck.”

“True dat. Well, you know what they say. You’ll never get what you don’t ask for.”

“True that. Have a good evening, Your Honor.”

“You too, Miss Star.” They slammed their doors, and Ellis backed out of the spot, careful to check for me in his rearview.

I’d think it was to avoid hitting me if they hadn’t paused just a little too long, patriarch and grandson watching as I jogged out of the square.

I picked up speed and turned off the square down Maple Street, where the maples that gave the street its name were so old they formed a thick canopy arch overhead. One of the three streets recently designated as “Historic Pineville,” Maple ran due north for eight blocks before dead-ending at the city park. The eight houses closest to the square were neat, efficient Federal boxes sitting so near the sidewalk that the front “lawns” were mere strips of wild ginger and silver-gray pussy toes. The back yards, however, were acre-sized refuges, complete with restored

outbuildings that had once been slave quarters, kitchens, and smoke-houses. Now they were guest cottages, garages, and pool houses.

Farther out, the homes of Maple spread apart, with the houses in the center of the property and surrounded by boxwoods and thick clusters of loblolly pines and ancient oaks. Federals gave way to Georgians, Victorians, Greek Revivals, and Tidewaters, with the sole exception being an elaborate Italianate mansion four blocks from the square. This one, safely lodged on the historic register, featured an ostentatious cupola and a band-sized gazebo, which occasionally did, in fact, hold a forties swing band, hosted by the owners, George and Doris Rankin. When not a location for rollicking music, the polished red cedar deck of the gazebo supported a tasteful selection of wicker and rattan furniture and an old-fashioned double glider.

Miss Doris waved at me from the glider and motioned at me with a tea glass glistening with moisture. I slowed to a walk and took my time crossing the lawn to the gazebo. As I did, Miss Doris plucked a glass from a selection of crystal on a table near the glider and filled it with tea from a matching pitcher. Four or five glasses stood waiting, one already used. The entire town knew that Miss Doris held court in her glider every afternoon—at least while she was in town. Sugar cookies on Revere silver and dark sweet tea flavored with mint in Waterford glasses waited for any guest who happened to drop by. I once asked her why she used such priceless items in the front yard. She'd looked at me over the top of her reading glasses and announced that she was old and it made her happy. Good enough.

She brushed off the opposite side of her glider. "Sit, girl. Cool off." She handed me the glass, which I took as I sank down on the thick cushion. She didn't offer the cookies—I had turned them down enough she knew I wouldn't accept. Holding tight to the glider, she swung into the other side and pushed off gently.

We slid back and forth in the calm evening air, the slick motion of the glider creating enough breeze to dry the little bits of sweat I'd worked up on the short jog.

"You'd think you get enough exercise at the drugstore." Her voice had the soft curves of a prim, Southern charm school.

BURYING DAISY DOE

“Jogging helps me keep my energy up so I don’t give out in the mornings.”

She nodded. “I understand. George and I still have more energy when we dance than when we don’t.” She grinned. “And at our age, that makes a difference.”

I considered Miss Doris a marvel of nature. At eighty-four, she was still trim and fit, with firm arms and legs, a sweet shock of red hair, and an infectious grin. While most of her peers walked slow and moaned more about their ailments than their next trip, Miss Doris moved about her garden as if on a mission. She let the ballroom dancing take credit for her good health, along with “a few good genes.” Her husband, George, was seven years younger and still moved with the grace of a ballet company’s *prima danseur*. His dimming eyes had stopped him from driving but not from leading his lady around the dance floor.

Part of me wanted to be Miss Doris when I grew up. The other part knew I had all the grace of a deer on ice.

“Are you and Mr. George heading out again?”

She let out a long breath. “No, I don’t think we’ll be doing a lot of dancing this year.”

“How come?”

She leaned back in the glider, and it eased to a halt. “Carly.”

“What about her? Is something wrong?”

A slight movement of her head sent one of her curls astray. “No. And I appreciate you keeping her this weekend.”

“Not a problem. Did Mike explain that he’d be coming over for a bit while I’m here?”

Her smile became sly. “You two make such a cute couple.”

“Now, don’t get carried away, Miss Doris. Right now we’re just friends.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t hope.” She patted her curl back in place. “You know I don’t mind him being here. He’s a good man, even if he is a Yankee.”

“Now, Miss Dori—” The sparkle in her eyes stopped me. “Tease.”

Her thin, high laughter rattled the leaves. “You are too easy, girl.”

I sipped the tea. “What about Carly?”

Miss Doris nodded. "You know her mama is my granddaughter Ellen, who belongs to my girl Charlotte. The middle one. Carly is named for Charlotte."

I didn't know, but I nodded as if I did. All five of Miss Doris's children had married and produced a slew of kids of their own, including two who had married twice and had stepchildren. Several of her grandchildren were following the same pattern. Keeping up took a flow chart. Most of the time, I just nodded and listened.

"Well, Charlotte and Dean still work. He's out most nights. She can't take her."

"Her? Carly."

"Right. She called me—"

"Charlotte called . . ."

"Right. Ellen and Kevin are having a few . . . problems. Young couples always do, but most work them out. It seems to be getting worse for them. So they wanted Charlotte and Dean to take Carly for a few weeks, but they really can't. They live way out, hard to get sitters, and they work—"

"So they asked you to watch your great-granddaughter."

She sighed. "Carly's a sweet girl, but she *is* seven."

"Been a long time, huh?"

"It hasn't been safe for a seven-year-old to live here since 1970. And I'm just a little old to be a soccer mom."

"So you're thinking longer than a few weeks."

She didn't miss a beat. "That's why I like you, Star. You get it."

"What can I do? Other than sitting on the occasional night out with your girlfriends?"

She reached over and took my hand. "Thank you. Let's start with the babysitting. If you and Carly get along, we'll talk. I'll pay you for the time."

"Now, Miss—"

"Hush. I know you can use it, and you know we can afford it. Just look around!"

I did, mostly to notice that the light was fading. "Miss D, I need to go. Finish my jog before it gets dark."

BURYING DAISY DOE

“Well, I need to get back in as well. There’s this pesky mosquito who’s been annoying my shins like they were ribs on a spit. Let’s go in before she makes supper out of my calf.”

I picked up the tray of tea and cookies and followed her up the Italian tile path to the back door, picking my steps carefully. Dropping a cheap white mug at the drugstore could be forgiven. Centuries-old crystal and silver . . . not so much. But I loved Miss Doris’s house. The warm industrial-sized kitchen was one of the most welcoming I’d been in, with generous smells of cinnamon, basil, and sage blending easily. Black cast-iron pots and skillets hung from ceiling racks, waiting patiently for suppertime. I set the tray on a pine table in the middle of the room, well away from the edge.

I gave Miss Doris a quick peck on the cheek, then beat a hasty retreat, closing the door quietly behind me. I had a lot of thinking to do, since my world had just shifted slightly.

Carly, Miss Doris’s great-granddaughter. Ellen and Kevin. Charlotte and Dean.

I picked up speed and hit the street, remembering suddenly Gran’s words about God’s timing and how things flow together as they are intended to.

Dean was Dean Sowers. The deputy who’d once stood so still and white over my father’s corpse.