

CHAPTER ONE

'A death to mourn'

"Is someone there?" The hair on the back of Hattie Taylor's neck stood on end as she stepped onto the second-floor landing of The Whitewood Boarding House. The gaslight chandelier overhead flickered and swayed casting shadows on the wall. At the same time, a whisper of air blew past raising goosebumps on her arms, causing her to turn around, as if someone brushed by her. She shivered.

"Hello?" she whispered again.

Robert Squire, their permanent boarder, was down stairs making coffee and no other guests occupied the upstairs rooms except for Mrs. Whitewood.

She shrugged and tried to explain the odd sensation away. "I must speak to Cal about the draft up here. Spring is almost here, the sun is shining, and yet, it is positively chilly on this floor."

She smiled at the thought of her new husband, Cal, and pictured him hovered over some broken object, forehead wrinkled, mouth set in a hard line, and an errant lock of dark hair in his eyes as he went about the task.

They made a good pair. Her no nonsense, straight forward attitude complimented his devil-may-care personality.

A newlywed and married to the love of her life, she dreamed of tomorrow and their long-awaited honeymoon. Even in the worst of times her handsome husband brought warmth to her heart and joy to a life filled with grief and heartache. Their long-awaited honeymoon, scheduled for tomorrow morning, marked the new beginning of their life together.

However, life will change for her today, a shift in the cosmos, a sudden detour in direction dictated by a strange twist of fate. A door into her soul, the key to unlock it, and a disturbing discovery will make her question her future with Cal.

Cook's day off gave her a chance to spoil her mentor, Mrs. Whitewood, with breakfast in bed. She enjoyed the rare smile the old woman bestowed upon her, a result of unorthodox coaxing on her part.

An unspoken bond continued to deepen between the two women over the last few months, and she wanted to share this time together before she and Cal departed for the honeymoon.

She entered the first door on the right with a cheery, “Good morning! Look what I brought you this glorious day.”

Instead of the familiar grumbling from the old lady, the room offered only silence.

She hesitated, thoughts distorted, until her focus fastened on the dead body of the proprietor of the famous Whitewood Boarding House.

A delicate china teacup, filled with the morning tea, rattled on its saucer and almost sloshed over the side as the breakfast tray threatened to slip out of her unsteady grip.

The pungent aroma of mint snapped her back into reality. A bright red rose, encased in a crystal vase, stood sentry on the tray, accompanied by white linen napkins embroidered with a rose design, a favorite flower of Mrs. Whitewood. All these cheerful trappings didn’t fit anymore. Neither did her bright, yellow morning dress.

The chill in the hallway found its way into the bedroom and swirled around her shoulders.

The seventy-two-year-old woman was dead, evidenced by the blue color around her lips and the white parchment-like skin.

“Not now, Mrs. Whitewood. Please, not now,” she whispered.

She wondered, for a brief moment, if the woman could hear the words though no longer of this world. The plea sounded selfish when said aloud. Pangs of disappointment, along with conflicting waves of guilt welled up; the two emotions warring at the prospect of postponing their trip and the fact she just lost a dear friend.

The bud vase tipped over. She surveyed the room, not sure what to do with the tray, and decided on a chair by the bed.

In an effort to avoid this awful reality, she fussed with the tray, straightened the vase, and centered the teacup, her breath coming in shallow gulps.

I need Cal, but he won't return from the school until this afternoon.

Compelled to look, a curious need to reach out and touch the white hair of the dead woman surfaced, but she quelled the impulse and dropped her hand. Instead a chaotic procession of thoughts bombarded her brain. *I could call his mother, but I should tell him myself. Robert needs to be informed, as well.* She whirled around, and searched the room as if to find an answer of some sort.

Streams of sunshine spread bright spots of light across the bare wooden floor highlighting a faint sprinkle of dust. A folded newspaper sat on the tray.

Detroit Times, Monday, April 4th, 1929.

Mrs. Whitewood began each day reading the morning news.

"I'm afraid today's news will go unread," she said with a sob. Another headline came to mind. 'Detroit mourns death of Whitewood Boarding House proprietor, Mrs. Whitewood.'

Tears spilled over. She swished them away, squared her shoulders, and took a deep breath, ready to tackle whatever came next. "What should I do first? I suppose notify someone. The police? The coroner?"

She found it difficult to stare at the body, but also impossible to tear her gaze away. Flashes of memories brought both joy and sadness.

Mrs. Whitewood's kindness provided the opportunity to meet Cal and the reason she now held the title of proprietor of Whitewood Boarding House.

Images of the first day in the United States, alone, with little money, and searching for the man betrothed to her since childhood pained her. Her parents died in an automobile accident, not even a year ago and left a small pittance on which to live. The only hope—to find Peter Kirby, betrothed to her since infancy. Instead, she arrived to find him engaged to Ruth Squire.

Devastated and angry, she threatened Peter with a law suit, but his kindness steered her toward a more sensible solution. That's how she came to live at the boarding house and how she met Cal Taylor.

A light knock on the open door brought her back to the present.

Robert Squire, peeked in. "Hattie, how is Mrs. Whitewood today? I thought I might come and join her for breakfast this morning."

"Robert...I, she..."

In a single stride, Robert stood beside her. "Hattie, what's wrong? You're pale as a ghost."

Unable to speak, she turned back to the still form on the bed.

Robert moved around her and lifted the small withered hand as if to find a pulse.

"It's no use, Robert. She's gone."

He returned the lifeless hand back on the comforter with careful reverence. "So, she is Hattie. So, she is."

"I'm not sure what to do first. I need to tell Cal. Should I call the coroner first or the police? I'm not aware of any next of kin. I can't even think of what to do."

Robert patted her hand. "I'll call the coroner. You call Cal. He needs to be here with you. We must try to find relatives. Did she ever mention children or siblings?"

"No, I never thought to ask. Frankly, it didn't occur to me she would die. She was always so spry and ornery."

He pulled a sheet over the body and placed an arm around Hattie's shoulder. "Call Cal. You shouldn't handle this without him. Cook is off today, correct? We should give her a call. She's worked here a long time and might have a way to contact the family. If not, we need to go through the office drawers and see what we can find. Surely, she left instructions for something like this."

The sheet covered body looked so small.

"Should we leave the body alone?" A strange protective mode took the place of the initial shock.

Robert smiled. "She's not going anywhere, my dear."

"Of course not." A half-hearted smile played at her lips.

Together, they exited the bedroom with a final glance at the body.

Robert went to use the telephone in the kitchen.

Mrs. Whitewood's small office reflected a neat and tidy personality, everything in its place, a testament to how she ran the business.

Determined, she said out loud, "It shouldn't take long to find some connection to family in her papers. Cal's working, so I'll go through the desk before I call him. I need to call Cook, as well."

The small white bureau stood in the center of the room, exactly as Mrs. Whitewood left it. A crystal paper weight decorated one corner; a notepad occupied the middle of the desk, while a white feathered pen stood in a brass holder nearby, accompanied by the inkwell. She hoped the drawers held the needed information, but found invading the privacy of the dead woman uncomfortable.

"There is no other choice. I must look."

The top drawer was the logical place to begin. The small gold knob felt cold and smooth in her hand and opened with little effort. She smiled at the neatness inside. Everything arranged just so. A silver letter opener, the boarding house ledger, bills in a stack to be paid, a book of phone numbers. The main keys sat ready in a small container in the corner.

"I must remember to pay these bills. Nothing else to see here."