

Chapter One

Liz MacLean tucked her slim right foot under her slender left knee as she sat on the parlour floor. “I wonder why Grand left this place to us?” She reached for another book of wallpaper samples. “I would’ve thought the logical person to leave it to would be Allan, after all he is his son.”

“Yeah, but Allan hasn’t been around for years. I didn’t even remember what he looked like, I hadn’t seen him in so long.” Cassie sat cross-legged on the other side of the area rug.

Liz laughed. “I know, I had to be introduced to him myself at Grand’s funeral.”

“Hard to say why we inherited. Grand was a funny one. I didn’t think he took much notice of either of us.” She flipped another page in her sample book. “Oh, look, wouldn’t that go just lovely in here.” She pointed to a garish swirl of red and purple roses climbing up a grey trellis and giggled.

“Now, Sis, be serious. We’ve got to decide today. That one at the wallpaper place warned me severely to have this stuff back by five today, and she’s a cross one. She’s liable to have the Mounties after us if I don’t get it back.”

“Okay, okay. Here’s a reasonable one. How about that for this room and the one with the primroses and lace that you found, for the dining room?”

“Annie would have loved doing this,” said Liz. “She always had such a good eye for colour and texture. Much better than either of us.”

“She did, didn’t she?” Cassie turned down the corner of the page of another pattern. “This one’s a possibility too. What made you think of her now?”

“I don’t know, I’ve been thinking about her a lot lately. Maybe it’s just because Grand died and it reminded me of her funeral. It was the first one I was ever at, you know.”

“Did it make as big an impression on you as it did on me?” asked Cassie. “All those people!”

“Yes, and most of them are dead now, too. A lot happens in fifteen years, doesn’t it?” Liz scrambled to her feet and stretched. “Mm, I’m getting stiff sitting on the floor. How about a cuppa tea?”

“Did Grand leave us that too?”

“He left us everything, even his long johns,” replied Liz. “We’re mistresses of all we survey!” She skipped a few steps across the room.

“Well, all I can say is, I’m glad that he left us some money too,” grumbled Cassie, rolling to her knees from her seat on the floor. “A school teacher and a secretary could never afford to do the renovations we’re planning without help from somewhere.”

A few minutes later the girls climbed the stairs with sample books and mugs of tea in hand. “I dread the thought of rooting out all those old closets,” said Liz. “Dear knows what’s made nests in there by this time. I don’t think they’ve been cleaned out since Aunt Lizzie did it last.”

“Grand sure missed her when she died. He was never the same again.”

“He wasn’t, was he,” said Liz. “I remember Aunt Lizzie well. This place always smelled so good when she was here, all warm and spicy. Annie loved to stay out here.”

She dropped her armload of books on the bed. “Now what shall we do to this room?”

“I think this was Annie’s room when she stayed here.” Cassie collapsed on the bed beside the books. “What d’you think she would have liked?”

“Yellow daisies and butterflies, I think.” Liz surveyed the room then sat down next to Cassie. “D’you remember how taken she was with butterflies?”

“She was like a butterfly herself,” said Cassie. “She was always flitting here and there, and always so gentle and happy.”

“It’s strange to think of her as our older sister, she never seemed to be the older one.”

“I know what you mean, and now since she’s been gone for so long, it’s like she’s still a child, and we’ve grown up.” Cassie flipped through the sample book in silence for a minute. “Here’s one that’ll fit Annie’s personality.” She passed the book to Liz.

“Mm,” said Liz, “I don’t know. The background’s a little dark.” She turned the book this way and that to see what the light would do to the design. “I can’t seem to get a good light on this here.” She jumped up and held it up by the mirror on the dresser. “How does this look?”

“Much better. I think it’ll do nicely.”

Liz looked into the glass. “This mirror’s in pretty good shape for being so old.”

“It’s the best one in the house.” Cassie leafed through more samples. “Now for the hallway. I think this grey and silver stripe will look nice, don’t you? Liz? Liz?”

Liz was standing in silence before the mirror gazing into it with rapt attention. Her features seemed to shift and change before her very eyes. I’m imagining it, she thought, on the edge of a nervous giggle. A shiver of apprehension rippled over her skin. Her features returned to themselves as Cassie’s urgent call penetrated her awareness. She gave herself a mental shake and turned to Cassie. “What’s that you were saying?”

“I was talking about wallpaper.” Cassie stared at her sister. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing.”

“You look awful strange for just nothing.”

“I guess I’m thinking about Annie too much today. I thought I saw her in the glass.” She shook her head at the memory. “Silly isn’t it?”

“Yeah, silly,” said Cassie. “You keep that up and people’ll be saying you’re as crazy as cousin Gertrude and her mother.”

“Well, I’m not!” Liz frowned in the direction of the mirror. A flash of pink and a suggestion of a figure disappeared the instant she looked at it. She turned her gaze away quickly and grabbed a sample book. “Let’s get on with this wallpaper business and get out of here.”

A week later Liz and Cassie arrived at the house armed with buckets and mops and other cleaning equipment. A cold grey rain swept in off the Northumberland Strait. The yard was greasy with mud, and the last leaves of autumn dipped and swirled in the wind until they fetched up against the white picket fence that separated the barnyard from the front lawn.

“Phew!” said Liz shaking the water from her raincoat on the front porch. “What a nasty day.”

“Typical November weather,” said Cassie. She opened the door with the key she had acquired at the reading of the will. “Let’s get inside and get a fire going.”

“I hope there’s wood,” said Liz. “I didn’t notice the last time we were here.”

“There’s wood. I remember seeing it. I’ll go pump some water.”

Presently the fire was going and the kettle was heating. Cassie hauled several more buckets of water to partially fill the hot water tank on the end of the stove. The girls took off their coats and hung them behind the stove to dry.

“It doesn’t take long to warm up in here once the fire’s going,” said Cassie.

“It’s a good stove and a good flue,” said Liz. “It’s a shame he didn’t have electricity.”

“He never wanted it. He said they were perfectly comfortable without it.”

“That’s not the reason,” said Liz. “They were so far from the road that when the electricity came through here, the company wouldn’t run it without having him pay for half of it. He got mad at them and wouldn’t do it at all then. So they never did have a line run.”

“How d’you know that?”

“I remember Dad talking about it when I was little. For some reason the story stayed in my mind. I was always a little afraid of Grand.”

Cassie picked up a bucket and a couple of rags. “I’m going to start in here.” She headed for the pantry. “I’ll wash dishes if you’ll wash cupboards.”

“You’re on. I hate washing dishes.” Liz dragged a chair into the pantry and climbed up on it. “Boy, it hasn’t been cleaned in here in ages,” she said as a cloud of dust descended on their heads from the top shelf. “Oh, look, here’s that little pitcher that Annie liked so well. I thought it was gone long ago.” She lifted it carefully out of the corner and handed it down to Cassie. A moment later, “See what else I’ve found, Aunt Lizzie’s sterling silver salt and pepper shakers. I haven’t seen these since she was alive.” She passed them down. “I remember she always used to use them on holidays when we’d all come out here for dinner.”

“You remember so much more than I do.” Cassie’s tone was wistful. “I hardly remember what she looked like, and Grand changed so much after she died that I didn’t like to come here anymore.”

Liz handed down a pile of plates. “I remember what she looked like. She was plump and jolly and always glad to see us. The cookie jar was always filled. Grand liked his cookies.”

“I seem to remember an apron.”

“She always wore one,” said Liz. “I think the only time she took it off was to go to church or to The River. They did all their shopping in Murray River.”

“What relation was she to us?”

“She was Grand’s wife, that’s all. Grand was Dad’s uncle, that’s why we called him Grand, because he was our grand uncle.”

“I didn’t know that.” Cassie rinsed dishes and piled them on the drain board. “I guess I just never thought about it. They were always just Grand and Aunt Lizzie to me.”

“Did you know that Allan wasn’t really their son?” Liz looked down from her task of cleaning the top shelf.

Cassie chuckled. “I guess I never questioned that either. But come to think of it, he doesn’t look like us so I’m not surprised. Where’d he come from?”

“Aunt’s family all came from New Brunswick. Her sister was going with a Frenchman from up Edmonston way and he got her in the family way and then abandoned her. Grand and Aunt Lizzie took her in when her father threw her out in disgrace. She had Allan here at the house, then she just up and left one day without the baby. So Grand and Aunt Lizzie brought him up. I guess he gets his darkness from his father.” She shook her strawberry blond curls. “He sure didn’t look like any of us.”

“Nor act like us either, if I recall correctly,” said Cassie.

Liz chuckled. “You’re right! His darkness is more than just in his looks.” A car door slammed in the yard.

Cassie peered out the pantry window into the grey rain-washed day.

“Allan?” said Liz.

“Right on,” said Cassie. “I guess I’d better let him in. I hooked the door behind me when I came in from the back porch.”

“Well, Allan, is it wet enough for you?” Liz jumped down from the chair and offered him a damp handshake.

“Plenty wet.” Allan’s tone was gruff. “What’re you two doing?”

“Cleaning cupboards,” said Cassie. “I don’t think they’ve been done since Aunt Lizzie was alive. What brings you out here?”

Allan shrugged one shoulder and shifted his dark gaze away from her. “I thought I’d have a last look around before I went back to New Brunswick. It’ll probably be the last time I’m ever here.”

“It needn’t be,” said Liz. “You’re welcome to come and visit with us any time.”

“Sure.” Allan glanced at her from the corner of his eye. He then turned to stare at them in silence.

The two girls looked at each other. “If there’s anything you want for a keepsake, Allan, you’re welcome to it.”

“Of course, anything at all,” said Liz. “Just let us know so we won’t be looking for it later.”

Allan smiled a strange half smile. “No thanks, what I wanted isn’t here any more.” He turned on his heel and went upstairs where the girls could hear him walking from room to room. Presently they heard him come down again, the front door slammed, and seconds later they saw him pass the kitchen windows on the way to his truck.

“D’you suppose we should check upstairs in case he did something up there?”

“What would he do,” asked Liz, “set the place on fire?”

“Dear knows, the mood he was in.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt, although checking up on our own family seems a sleazy thing to do, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Cassie, “but he’s not really family, is he?”

Liz sighed. “Then let’s get it over with, eh. There’ll not be much light left for cleaning at the rate we’re going.” She headed up the stairs with Cassie close behind. A swift tour of all the rooms revealed nothing and the girls returned to their work.

“He’s a strange one,” said Cassie. “I wonder what he really wanted?”

Liz shrugged and began drying dishes. “I dunno. Probably nothing. He may just have wanted to see the place one last time like he said. After all, he was born and brought up here.”