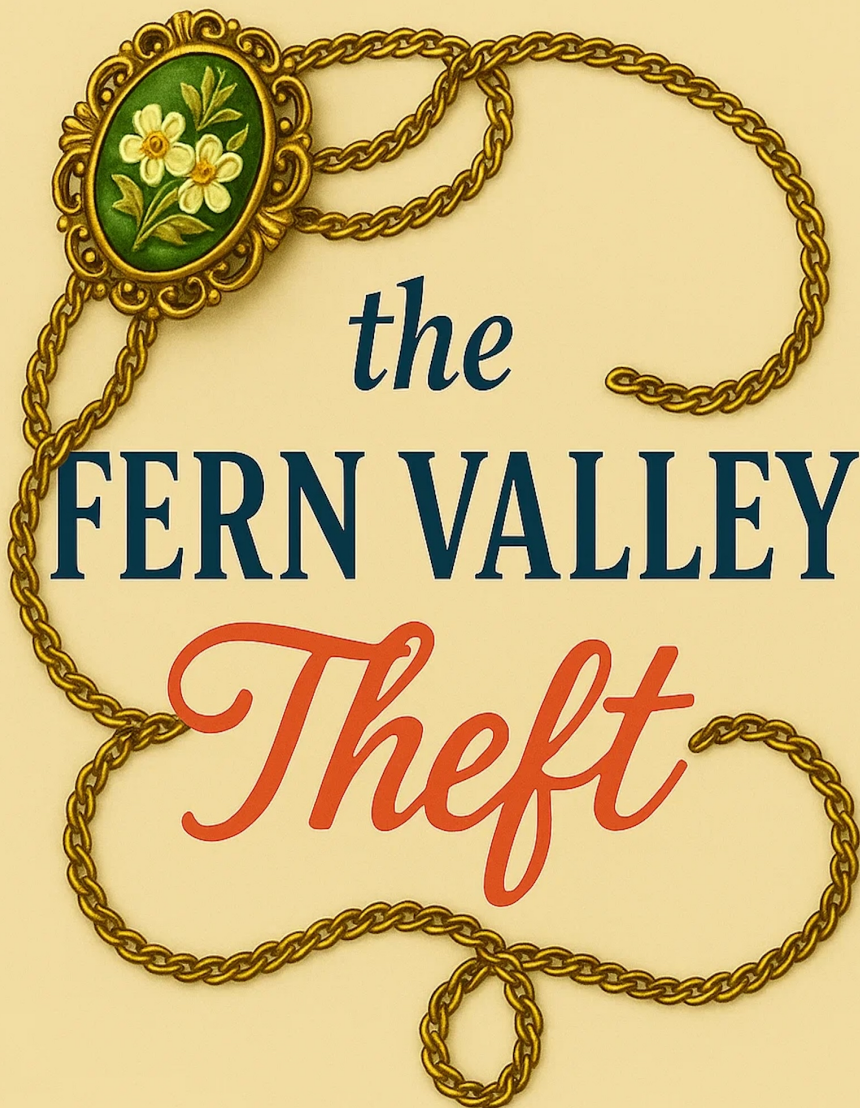


ASHLEY HOLLOW



the

FERN VALLEY

Theft

A FERN VALLEY COZY MYSTERY

THE FERN VALLEY THEFT

FERN VALLEY COZY MYSTERY SERIES
BOOK 0.5

ASHLEY HOLLOW



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INTRODUCTION

Not everything is ideal in idyllic Fern Valley.

The town square bubbles with secrets.

It takes a widow with wild curiosity and good coffee, to expose the deception.

Welcome to small-town scandal served with a side of suspicion

Ethel, the mayor's widow, has a knack for eavesdropping and entirely too much time on her hands.

Her mornings start with coffee and the latest batch of town rumors.

Every snippet of gossip is a clue, every neighbor acts like a riddle. But when the townspeople's favorite target becomes the headline of suspicion, she trades her teacup for a magnifying glass.

The gruff farmer in the corner, with soil on his boots and secrets in his eyes, suddenly has her full attention.

As whispers turn sharp and cookies go stale, Ethel wades even deeper into the swirl of stories.

Her makeshift sleuthing sweeps secrets out from under every doily.

Not every crumb points to crooks; some lead straight to red herrings.

Ethel may be hunting for the truth, but one nosy question too many... and this cozy mystery could turn hotter than her morning brew.

COFFEE SHOP CONFRONTATION

The door of Ruby's Café swung open with a bang, sending the morning bell into a wild jingle. Ethel Cromwell, widow of Fern Valley's beloved Mayor Thomas, smiled into her teacup. Wednesday mornings at Ruby's were better than any television show and the real-life characters were far more fun to watch.

"Did anyone try Martha's new zucchini bread at Sunday's potluck?" Ethel asked, her eyes twinkling with hidden mischief.

"I did! I swear I tasted something unusual in there," Mr. Jenkins said from table number 3.

"Cardamom," declared Edna Proust, the sharp-nosed postmistress, seated across Ethel. "Far too much of it!" She adjusted her pearl necklace with fingers that had sorted Fern Valley's mail for nearly forty years.

"Cinnamon, surely," countered Mr. Jenkins.

"It was nutmeg, you old fools," Dotty Whipple chimed in beside Ethel, her wild sun-bleached hair bobbing as she spoke. The sprightly florist's mismatched floral outfit seemed to vibrate with energy. "And she put in twice what

the recipe called for. My cousin Bertha does the same thing. Ruins perfectly good bread that way!"

Ethel bit back a smile. "Actually, it was ginger. I suggested she try it. Told her it would 'bring out the zucchini's natural sweetness.'" She chuckled. She'd always enjoyed her small tricks, harmless ways to liven up the predictable patterns of small-town life. Thomas had called it her "benevolent mischief."

The café erupted in good-natured argument about baking spices. Six months after Thomas' passing, these morning gatherings had become Ethel's lifeline. The big house on Maple Street felt too quiet now, the evenings stretching endlessly without Thomas' newspaper rustling or his soft snores from his favorite armchair. But here, surrounded by familiar faces and the comforting hum of gossip, she could almost forget the empty space he'd left beside her.

Her nimble fingers returned to her crossword puzzle as the talk swirled around her. "Eight letters," she mused aloud, tapping her pen. "'What's often hidden behind prickly outsides.'"

"Nonsense," replied Edna promptly.

"Actually, I was thinking 'kindness,'" Ethel said.

The bell jangled again, its third disturbance in fifteen minutes, Ethel noted. A sudden hush fell over the café. The abrupt silence, followed by the unmistakable squelch of mud-caked boots on the clean floor, announced Hal Briggs' arrival.

"Speaking of prickly outsides," Dotty whispered, not bothering to lower her voice much. Her small dog *Peony* yapped from beneath the table, as if agreeing with her owner.

Ethel's pencil paused mid-clue. She leaned forward

slightly, her reading glasses slipping down her nose as she peered over them, her crossword puzzle forgotten.

Hal stomped to the counter, leaving a trail of dirt behind him that matched the stains on his clothes. The permanent downward curve of his mouth suggested he'd been born disappointed and had found daily confirmation ever since.

"Coffee. Black." The words scraped out of his throat like they'd been dragged over gravel.

Ruby Fletcher, the busy café owner with blonde bangs and sharp eyes, slid a mug across the counter. "That'll be two-fifty, Hal. And please, the boots? We've talked about this."

Hal grunted, dropping exact change before shuffling toward his corner table.

"Poor man needs more than coffee to sweeten that mood," Edna muttered.

Ethel rose, setting down her half-finished crossword. Where others saw a grump, she saw a puzzle. The emptiness that followed her home each evening seemed less daunting when she had something to figure out.

"I'm going to say good morning," she announced to the table.

"Might as well try talking to a fence post," Dotty quipped. "At least the post won't glare at you."

The warning didn't stop her. Ethel went over to Hal's table with the same determination she once used when convincing the town council to fund the new library wing. "Good morning, Mr. Briggs. Nice weather for July, isn't it?" she offered with a cheer in her voice.

Hal looked up briefly. His bushy eyebrows crashed together like thunderclouds before a storm, his eyes narrowing to slits beneath them. The corners of his mouth sank even deeper, as if her cheerfulness physically pained

him. Without a word, he lifted his coffee mug like a shield between them.

"Those tomatoes you brought to the Harvest Festival last year were wonderful," Ethel continued with the same tone. "I've been trying to grow vegetables again. Perhaps you might have some tips?"

Hal's chair scraped against the floor as he shifted his entire body away from her, angling toward the wall. A stranger might have missed the clear message, but in Fern Valley, this qualified as elaborate communication.

"Well, perhaps another time," Ethel said, keeping her smile in place despite the brush-off. The loneliness she worked so hard to hide from everyone slithered up her throat briefly before she swallowed it back down.

As she turned to leave, Ruby's voice rose from behind the counter.

"What do you mean 'it never arrived'?" The café owner's normally friendly tone had an edge sharp enough to cut pie. She was on the phone, but her eyes locked on Hal. Hanging up quickly, she marched over to his table. "Hal Briggs, we had an agreement!"

Hal's shoulders crept up toward his ears like a turtle retreating partway into its shell. His calloused fingers gripped his coffee mug so tightly that his knuckles blanched. "Wasn't my fault. Truck broke down three days ago. Can't deliver with nothing to deliver with. Told your nephew yesterday when he called."

"I don't have a nephew!" Ruby's cheeks turned bright red. "And that delivery was due three days ago, not yesterday!"

The café fell silent, everyone freezing mid-bite and mid-sip. Ethel stepped back, noting how Ruby's knuckles turned white around the counter edge, how a vein pulsed in Hal's

temple, and most interestingly, how the newspaper in the corner rustled slightly, lowering just enough to reveal a pair of watchful eyes.

A tall, thin man Ethel had never seen before sat partially hidden behind his newspaper. Unlike Fern Valley's usual residents, his clothes bore no trace of garden soil or pet hair. His collar remained crisp, his shoes unscuffed. A newcomer, then.

"I never agreed to Tuesday," Hal stood now, his voice rising to match Ruby's. "Check your books again."

"My books are fine!" Ruby slapped a ledger onto the counter. "Twenty bushels of apples, due Monday! Your signature, right there!"

"That's not my writing," Hal growled, stepping closer to look at the page.

The stranger had caught Ethel's interest and she wanted to figure *him* out since Hal was a closed bridge.

She moved closer to the stranger's table, pretending to get a napkin from the nearby holder.

"Quite the morning show," she offered with a soft tone. "Are you just passing through Fern Valley?"

The man jumped slightly, his newspaper crinkling as he gripped it tighter. "Just, ah, enjoying the local... ah, color." His accent wasn't from around here, something Midwestern, maybe.

"We certainly have plenty of that," Ethel chuckled warmly. "I'm Ethel Cromwell, the late mayor's wife."

"Lyle," he replied after a pause. "Lyle Housman." He didn't offer his hand or say more, quickly raising his newspaper again like a shield.

The bell above the door let out its fourth and most violent jingle of the morning as the door flew open. Chief Randall Tinsley burst in, his breathing labored as if he'd

run the three blocks from the police station. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his uniform, already straining across his substantial midsection, seemed to fight against all that effort.

"Thank goodness," Ruby exclaimed. "Chief, I was just about to call you. This man—"

"Not now, Ruby," the Chief cut in, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

His next words fell into the room like stones into a still pond, rippling silence across every corner. "We've got bigger problems."

Ethel felt a familiar thrill, the same one she got when reaching the most exciting part of a mystery novel. She perked up, waiting.

Chief Tinsley looked around the room. "Mrs. Eleanor Pendleton's antique family brooch has been stolen. The one that's been in her family since the Civil War." He paused dramatically his gaze stopping on Hal. "And your truck was seen parked outside her property last night, Briggs."

Gasps filled the café. Edna clutched her pearl necklace. Dotty's spoon clattered against her cup.

"That's impossible," Hal growled. "My truck hasn't left the farm in three days. It's broken down. Ask Ruby." The irony seemed lost on him as he pointed toward the still-angry café owner.

"Witnesses say different." The Chief's chest expanded like a rooster preparing to crow as he hooked his thumbs into his belt. "I'm afraid you'll need to come with me to answer some questions."

A TOWN FULL OF SUSPECTS

THE café door hadn't even finished swinging shut behind Chief Tinsley and a protesting Hal Briggs when the eruption began. It was as if someone had kicked over a beehive: a dozen conversations burst forth at once, voices climbing over each other like ivy on the town hall.

"I always said that man was trouble," Edna declared. "Remember when Mrs. Finley's prize roses went missing? His farm borders her property!"

"And my garden gnomes," Mr. Jenkins added, slapping the table. "Three this year alone!"

Dotty nodded. "And didn't he call Eleanor a 'nosy old bat' at the Spring Fair?"

Ethel sat back in her chair, letting the storm of accusations wash around her. She watched Ruby Fletcher behind the counter, the café owner's hands trembling slightly as she wiped the same spot on the counter over and over. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, the kind that came from many sleepless nights.

The half-eaten muffins and cooling coffees lay forgotten

as Fern Valley's morning crowd indulged in their favorite sport: speculation.

"He's always been a hermit. Who knows what goes on at that farm?" This from Mrs. Pinkerton, whose gift for dramatic pause would have impressed any stage director. "My Harold says Hal's barn is full of... *unusual* equipment."

"Farm equipment, Margaret," Ethel finally interjected, unable to let that particular insinuation hang in the air. "For farming."

Mrs. Pinkerton turned to her with raised eyebrows. "Well, Ethel, you've always been soft on the cranky ones. What do you make of all this? You were sitting right there when it happened."

All eyes shifted to Ethel, not in the commanding way she'd once commanded a town meeting, but with the eager curiosity of neighbors seeking another perspective to fuel the gossip mill.

"I think," Ethel said carefully, "that there are some odd coincidences here. Hal claims his truck is broken down, yet someone saw it at Eleanor's. And this business about a nephew calling Ruby when Hal doesn't have one? Something isn't quite right."

"Maybe he stole the brooch to pay his bills," suggested Mr. Jenkins. "Farming's not easy these days."

"Or to get back at Eleanor for that argument," added Edna, ever ready to assign the worst motives.

Ethel rose, tea cup in hand. "I think I'll get a refill before jumping to conclusions. The morning's been exciting enough without adding fiction to fact."

At the counter, Ruby kept scrubbing the same spot, her knuckles white around the cloth. Her shoulders hunched like she was carrying a sack of flour on her back.

"Quite the morning," Ethel offered gently, sliding her cup across the counter. "Earl Grey, if you don't mind, Ruby."

"First my delivery disaster, now the police," Ruby muttered, tossing the cloth aside. She grabbed the tea canister with more force than necessary, the lid clattering as she set it down. "Friday's apple pie special is ruined. That's my biggest seller! The weekend crowd comes specifically for those pies."

She measured tea leaves into Ethel's cup with trembling hands, some spilling onto the counter. "The bank won't be happy about another slow weekend. Two more payments behind and they'll start making threats again."

"Mmm," Ethel nodded sympathetically. "This delivery issue seems to have hit at the worst time. Did Hal sign for previous deliveries himself? I'm just curious about his usual routine."

Ruby's jaw tightened. Her eyes darted quickly to the door as if checking who might be listening. "No. Usually his niece handles it. Millie. Sweet girl, works at the farm while saving for nursing school." She poured steaming water into the cup, a little sloshing over the side. "But this signature... I don't know. I should have looked closer."

"May I?" Ethel gestured toward the ledger that still lay open on the counter.

Ruby hesitated, then pushed it toward her with a sigh. "Be my guest. Not that it helps my empty pie case."

Ethel studied the page carefully. The signature read "H. Briggs" in tight, controlled lettering: too controlled, she thought, for hands that wrestled with farm equipment daily. Nothing like the scrawl she remembered from town petitions Hal occasionally signed. Interesting.

"When exactly was this delivery scheduled?" she asked, casually turning a page to examine previous entries.

"Monday morning. But then someone called, claiming to be Hal's nephew, to reschedule for Tuesday." Ruby tied and untied her apron strings nervously. "Now I've got weekend customers coming and no apples for my special. The frozen ones just don't taste the same."

"A nephew who doesn't exist... curious." Ethel took her tea with a thoughtful nod. "Thank you, Ruby."

Fresh tea in hand, Ethel surveyed the café. In the far corner, partially hidden behind his newspaper, sat Lyle Housman. His eyes darted from speaker to speaker, his face a carefully composed mask. Not a muscle twitched around his thin lips. His eyebrows remained perfectly level, neither rising in surprise nor furrowing in concern at the wild accusations flying around the room. Only his knuckles, white against the newspaper's edge, suggested any emotion at all.

Ethel made her way toward his table, pausing occasionally to catch snippets of conversation. Mr. Jenkins was now elaborating on the value of his missing garden gnomes. Dotty was recounting every encounter she'd ever had with Hal Briggs, each one apparently more suspicious than the last.

"Quite the drama for a Wednesday morning," Ethel remarked as she reached Lyle's table. "You picked an eventful day to visit our little town."

Lyle lowered his newspaper reluctantly. "Small towns are always... educational."

"And what brings you to Fern Valley, Mr. Housman? Business or pleasure?"

His fingers drummed once against the table, then stilled. "Property. I'm looking at some land. Near the old mill."

"Curious choice," Ethel said lightly. "Not much out there except Eleanor Pendleton's estate and Hal's farm."

His shoulders tensed slightly. "Just exploring options."

"Of course. Have you been in town long?"

"Just overnight. At the motel." He glanced toward the door. "If you'll excuse me, I should..."

A commotion near the front window interrupted them as someone claimed to have seen Hal's truck parked behind the hardware store just yesterday.

"That's impossible," countered another voice. "I saw him walking home from the feed store. Said his truck was in the shop!"

The sudden debate made Ethel realize she'd had two cups of tea this morning. "If you'll excuse me," she murmured to Lyle, rising from her chair. "I need to visit the ladies' room."

As she approached the door marked "Ladies," she heard a faint sound from further down the hall. It was the quiet click of the back door closing. No one had passed her in the hallway, yet someone had clearly just exited.

After a quick visit to the restroom, Ethel followed her instincts toward the back door. It was slightly ajar, allowing a sliver of daylight to cut across the dim hallway. She pushed it open and stepped into the alley behind the café.

The scent of coffee grounds from the café's trash bin mingled with the mustier smell of old rainwater. Three steps from the café's back door, Ethel froze. There, pressed into a patch of damp earth where a drainpipe had leaked, was a clear footprint.

Not the heavy tread of work boots like Hal's: it was the neat imprint of a dress shoe, size ten or eleven at least. Beside it, another, and another, leading away from the café toward the end of the alley.

Ethel followed the trail, her heart quickening. The footprints disappeared where the alley met the street, blending into the harder surface of the sidewalk.

She straightened, a chill that had nothing to do with the alley's shadows running through her. She hurried back into the café, coming out from the hallway to find the atmosphere had calmed somewhat. Glancing toward where she'd left Lyle, she stopped in her tracks.

The table was empty. His half-finished coffee and newspaper remained, but the man himself had vanished.

TOO MANY RED HERRINGS

Ethel grabbed her purse and cardigan, hastily dropping exact change on the café table. The mystery of the vanished stranger and those footprints tugged at her like a fish on a line. She needed another look.

"Heading out already?" Ruby called from behind the counter.

"Wonderful tea as always!" Ethel replied, already halfway to the door.

Outside, she circled around to the alley again, determined to examine those footprints more carefully.

Hal Briggs might be the grumpiest man in three counties, but a thief? The same man who'd silently shoveled her driveway after every snowstorm since Thomas died, refusing thanks or payment? The man who grew extra vegetables specifically to leave anonymously at the food bank's doorstep?

No, something else was happening in Fern Valley. Ethel made a decision. She would get to the bottom of this mess and clear his name.

Her only experience with detective work came from her favorite mystery shows: Inspector Lewis, Murder She Wrote, and Midsomer Murders. But really, how hard could it be?

"Hold on, Hal," she declared like a woman on a mission. "Amateur sleuthing is in session."

After six months of crossword puzzles and recipe experiments, the thrill of a real mystery made her feel more alive than she had since Thomas passed.

"Well, well! Are you starting a garden back here, Ethel Cromwell?"

The voice startled her. Ethel turned to find Dotty Whipple standing at the other end of the alley with her small, scruffy dog with mismatched eyes.

"Dotty! You startled me." Ethel straightened, brushing invisible dirt from her cardigan. "Just admiring Ruby's ferns. The shade here seems to suit them."

"Ferns, my foot," Dotty snorted. "You're snooping. And I don't blame you one bit. This morning was more exciting than the time Reverend Miller's toupee blew off during the Easter service." She yanked on the leash as her dog, Peony, lunged for a suspicious puddle. "Peony! That is not water for lady dogs!"

Ethel smiled despite herself. "What brings you to the alley?"

"Taking my shortcut to the shop after walking Peony here around back." Dotty leaned in, lowering her voice to a stage whisper that could probably be heard three stores down. "And I'll tell you something for free. You're not the first person poking around back here. Last night, closing up late after my flower delivery, I saw someone sneaking between the recycling bins." She pointed to the large blue containers at the far end. "Wearing a big hat, pulled down low. Very suspicious."

"A big hat?" Ethel's interest piqued. "What time was this?"

"Around nine, maybe? I'd stayed late arranging Mrs. Henderson's anniversary bouquet - forty years! Can you imagine being married to that man for forty years? His nose whistles when he breathes." Dotty shuddered. "Anyway, this person was definitely up to no good."

"Did you tell Chief Tinsley?"

Dotty rolled her eyes. "That man couldn't find a rose in a daisy patch. Besides, skulking isn't illegal, more's the pity." The little dog was chewing on grass now which made Dotty groan.

But it gave Ethel an idea.

"Thanks for the chat, Dotty. I think I'll take a walk around town, clear my head after all this morning's excitement."

"Mmm-hmm." Dotty's knowing smile suggested she didn't believe a word. "Well, if you happen to clear your head past the bakery you might hear something about the man who was asking questions about Eleanor's brooch last week. Before it went missing."

Ethel's eyebrows shot up. "Someone was asking about the brooch?"

"That's the rumor Marion at the bakery told me. I'd start there: her cinnamon rolls are freshest before noon." Dotty winked and tugged Peony away. "Come along, you little grass muncher."

Ethel made her way through town, stopping first at Marion's Bakery. The smell of sugar and warm bread pulled her in, making her stomach growl despite the morning's teas.

"Ethel! Heard about the excitement at Ruby's," Marion called from behind the counter, her round face flushed from

the ovens. "Shame about Hal. Always paid for his weekly sourdough in exact change."

"About that," Ethel said, selecting a cinnamon roll. "I heard someone was asking about Eleanor's brooch last week?"

Marion's eyes widened. "Where'd you hear that? It was just yesterday! Man came in, city clothes, asking if I knew Eleanor Pendleton." She leaned forward. "I didn't like his look. Too smooth, you know? Like a catalog model, but with shifty eyes."

"This man," Ethel asked carefully, "did he mention being related to Eleanor?"

"No, just an antique collector. Why?"

Ethel took a bite of her cinnamon roll to buy time. "Just curious about the stranger asking about Eleanor's jewelry right before it goes missing."

Marion's eyebrows shot up. "If you're playing detective, you might want to check with Mrs. Winters at the library. Hal's in there at least once a week. She'd know his routine better than most."

Perfect suggestion. Ethel thanked Marion and headed across the town square to the library, brushing cinnamon sugar from her cardigan. If Hal really was a regular at the library, that hardly fit the profile of a jewelry thief. Plus, Mrs. Winters saw everyone in town. She might know something about this mysterious "collector," too.

The library's familiar hush welcomed her as she entered the century-old building. Mrs. Winters was reshelving books, her silver hair pinned in a neat bun.

"Hal Briggs, a thief?" Mrs. Winters shook her head when Ethel brought up the morning's events. "That man reads Thoreau and Emerson. Self-checkout, mind you. Never

wants help. He's got a philosopher's soul beneath all that gruff, I'll tell you that."

"When did you last see him?" Ethel asked, helping to stack a wobbling pile of returns.

"Returned 'Walden' and checked out beekeeping guides. He walked three miles with that knee of his." Mrs. Winters shook her head. "Day after, some polished stranger asked about old Fern Valley families. Too curious for my liking."

Then Mrs. Winters leaned closer. "If you're looking for town comings and goings, you know who keeps the best watch: Edna at the post office. That woman could tell you what color socks the mayor wore three Tuesdays ago."

"Thank you Mrs. Winters," Ethel said and headed out.

The post office was Ethel's logical next stop. If someone was posing as relatives of townsfolk, Edna would be the first to spot the deception. Nobody knew Fern Valley's family connections better than the woman who had handled their mail for decades.

The post office bell jingled as Ethel entered. Edna Proust was sorting mail with military precision.

"Well, look who's playing detective," Edna remarked, eyeing Ethel over her half-moon glasses. "I suppose next you'll be asking for Hal's mail delivery schedule."

"Actually, I was wondering if you've seen any strange happenings in town recently that you think has something to do with the missing brooch?"

Edna's hands paused over the mail slots. "Funny you should ask. Had a man come in Tuesday, asking if we delivered to Eleanor Pendleton's estate. Said he was her nephew." She sniffed. "Eleanor doesn't have a nephew. I've sorted her Christmas cards for twenty-seven years, and there's never been a nephew. Told him so, too."

"What did he look like?"

"Tall. Brown hair. Boring clothes, if you ask me. But those shoes were polished so bright you could see your face in them."

Ethel tapped her fingers thoughtfully on the counter.

"Did he happen to mention why he was looking for Eleanor?"

"Said he was delivering something valuable. Needed her signature." Edna's eyes narrowed.

"So a man claiming to be Eleanor's nephew, was trying to find her house..." Ethel mused aloud. "And Eleanor's antique brooch goes missing that same night."

"When you put it that way..." Edna leaned forward. "You should go talk to Walter Graham at the jewelry shop. If someone's interested in valuable jewelry in Fern Valley, Walter would be the first to know. He's appraised every engagement ring and family heirloom in town for forty years."

Of course! If this mystery man was after Eleanor's brooch, he might have been gathering information from multiple sources. Walter's shop was just a block away, and as the only jeweler in town, he'd certainly know something. If she was correct, the mystery man's next steps was the jewelry store.

"Edna, you're brilliant," Ethel said, already heading for the door. "If anyone sends me a nephew in the mail, tell him I'm busy solving a mystery."

"Nephews sprouting up like dandelions after a rain," Ethel muttered to herself as she hurried down Main Street. "Next thing you know, I'll discover I have a nephew I never knew about."

As she passed Town Hall, a familiar voice called her name. Chief Randall Tinsley stood on the steps, his uniform

straining slightly at the buttons after what had clearly been a substantial lunch.

"Mrs. Cromwell! Got a minute?" He puffed down the steps toward her. "Been hearing things. About you asking questions all over town." He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief despite the mild temperature. "Now, I respect you as the former mayor's wife and all, but this is police business."

"I'm simply chatting with friends, Randall," Ethel replied with the same pleasant smile she'd used when declining Temperance Society invitations. "Surely that's not against the law?"

"Chatting, huh?" His expression suggested he found this as believable as crop circles in the town square. "Look, Hal Briggs had motive, opportunity, and his truck was spotted at the scene. Open and shut."

"And yet his truck is supposedly broken down, and he was seen walking home from town on Monday with a library book."

The Chief's face reddened. "That's... that's circumstantial! Leave the detective work to the professionals, Ethel. We've got this handled."

"Of course you do and I hope you've let that poor man go back to his farm and not held him back without evidence," she patted his arm kindly as he stuttered for words. "How's your mother's arthritis by the way? Those blueberry muffins I sent over help with the swelling?"

Thoroughly distracted by talk of his mother and baked goods, the Chief eventually wandered back to his office, though not without a final warning glance that Ethel cheerfully ignored.

The sun was inching to its peak when she reached Walter's Jewelry. The small shop had been a Fern Valley

fixture for decades, its owner as carefully maintained as the timepieces he repaired. Walter Graham, well into his seventies, peered at her through the same magnifying glass he used for watch mechanisms.

"Ethel Cromwell! Haven't seen you since you brought in Thomas' grandfather's pocket watch." His voice held the genteel precision of someone who dealt in small, valuable things. "What brings you in today?"

"Just browsing," Ethel replied, examining a display of pins similar to Eleanor's missing brooch. "Tell me, Walter, has anyone been asking about antique jewelry lately? Eleanor's brooch, perhaps?"

Walter carefully set down his tools. "As a matter of fact, yes. Fellow came in Monday, asking about Civil War era pieces. Said he was a collector." His brow furrowed. "Didn't like him. Too interested in value over craftsmanship."

"Was he tall, neatly dressed, shiny shoes?"

Walter nodded. "That's the one. Left without buying anything."

Ethel thanked him and walked around to the back of the shop, where the alley continued. Eleanor's house was on the far edge of town, but if someone had been tracking her movements or casing her home, this back route would provide good cover.

As she scanned the narrow passage, something caught her eye. A small scrap of fabric snagged on the rough wooden fence behind the jewelry shop. Ethel moved closer, her heart quickening. The torn piece of cloth was unmistakable: red and black plaid flannel, worn thin at the edges, exactly like the shirt Hal Briggs had been wearing that very morning.

THE SECRET LIFE OF FARMER HAL

Ethel held the scrap of red and black plaid fabric between her fingers, frowning. The piece could have been torn days ago, or deliberately planted last night. Either way, she needed to speak with Hal directly.

The walk home gave her time to think. If she was going to confront a man the entire town had already decided was guilty, she'd need strategy. And baked goods.

"Honey catches more flies than vinegar," Thomas had always said, "but a good batch of scones can pry secrets from a brick wall."

By four o'clock that afternoon, Ethel's kitchen smelled of butter and cinnamon. The warm scones nestled in a basket lined with a checkered cloth. A peace offering worth its weight in gossip. She tucked the torn piece of flannel into her cardigan pocket and set off for Hal's farm on the outskirts of town.

The three-mile walk took her past Eleanor Pendleton's sprawling estate, and finally the rutted dirt road that led to Briggs Farm.

The old farmhouse stood stubbornly against the after-

noon sky. A battered pickup truck sat in the yard, hood propped open. Nearby, rusted farm equipment rested like sleeping dinosaurs.

Ethel paused at the gate, suddenly aware of the absurdity of her mission. She was a sixty-eight-year-old widow with scones and a scrap of fabric, preparing to interrogate a man who communicated primarily in grunts. Jessica Fletcher, the fictional mystery-solving widow from her favorite TV show "Murder, She Wrote," would be proud.

The sharp bark of a dog announced her arrival before she could knock. The door swung open to reveal Hal Briggs, scowling beneath his ever-present cap, a coffee mug clutched in one hand.

"Mrs. Cromwell." His greeting landed somewhere between a question and a complaint.

"Good morning, Hal. I thought you might like some company." She lifted the basket, letting the buttery aroma speak for itself. "Fresh scones. Still warm."

Hal's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but his nose twitched. After a long moment, he stepped back from the doorway.

"Coffee's hot," he muttered, which Ethel correctly interpreted as the closest thing to an invitation she was likely to get.

The farmhouse kitchen was surprisingly clean, if spartan. But what caught Ethel's eye sat on the counter: a half-eaten apple pie in a blue ceramic dish she didn't recognize from any of the town bakers.

"Homemade pie?" she asked, setting her basket on the table. "I didn't know you baked, Hal."

"Don't." He poured coffee into a chipped mug and slid it toward her.

Ethel sipped her coffee, strong enough to stand a spoon in, and studied the room. Muddy boot prints tracked across

the worn linoleum, but they didn't match the size or tread pattern of Hal's work boots by the door. Smaller. And there, tucked halfway under a cabinet, something that definitely didn't belong in a bachelor farmer's kitchen: a textbook on human anatomy.

"I'll be direct, Hal. The whole town is talking about Eleanor's missing brooch and your supposed truck sighting."

Hal snorted. "Truck's been broken down since Monday. Fuel pump."

"But I found something interesting yesterday." She pulled out the fabric scrap and placed it on the table between them. "Behind Walter Graham's jewelry shop. Looks exactly like your shirt."

Hal's coffee mug stopped halfway to his lips. His eyes darted to a wooden box on the highest kitchen shelf, then back to Ethel so quickly she almost missed it.

"Not mine," he said, but his ears had turned red. Hal Briggs might be many things, but a skilled liar wasn't one of them.

"It's the exact same pattern as what you're wearing right now, Hal." Ethel gently pushed the fabric closer to him. "Walter told me someone was in his shop Monday asking about Civil War jewelry, specifically about items like Eleanor's brooch. The very next day, this piece of your shirt turns up caught on the fence behind his store."

Hal shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Don't know anything about any brooch. Or trucks."

Ethel leaned back, feeling a twinge of frustration. But then, she remembered something.

"But you do have a niece. Ruby mentioned her. Millie is it? Who handles your deliveries? The one saving for nursing school? What if she's—"

The mug hit the table with a thud, coffee sloshing over the rim. "What do you want, Mrs. Cromwell?"

"The truth about that fabric, Hal. How did it end up behind the jewelry shop if you weren't there?"

Hal stood abruptly and paced to the window. His shoulders hunched as if carrying a weight far heavier than suspicion of theft. Outside, the wind rustled through the cornfield, whispering secrets neither of them could hear.

"Went to check some estimates. Been helping someone," he finally said, voice low and rough.

"Sounds like you keep your secrets close to you," Ethel observed, trying connect the dots.

He almost smiled back, almost, when a noise outside made them both turn. The door burst open, revealing a young woman with dark hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, her face flushed with exertion and distress.

"Uncle Hal! Someone ransacked the barn last night!"

MIDNIGHT MISCHIEF

Ethel was on her feet before Millie had finished speaking. The young woman stood in the doorway, chest heaving, her nursing scrubs wrinkled from what must have been a rushed drive from her hospital shift. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, but panic had brought a flush to her cheeks.

"Where?" Hal said, already reaching for his cap.

The three of them hurried across the muddy yard, their breath forming small clouds in the cool evening air. Ethel had to quicken her pace to keep up with Hal's long strides and Millie's nervous energy. The large red barn loomed ahead, its weathered doors hanging open like a mouth frozen mid-scream.

"I came to get the evening top up for the animals," Millie explained. "Found it like this."

Inside, chaos reigned. Hay bales had been slashed open, their golden contents strewn across the dirt floor. Feed bags were torn, creating small mountains of grain. Tools that once hung in neat rows on the wall now lay scattered like fallen soldiers. Even the ancient tractor hadn't been spared,

its seat cushion was sliced open, stuffing spilling out like cotton snow.

"Good heavens," Ethel murmured, taking in the destruction. "Someone was certainly looking for something specific."

Hal moved silently through the mess.

"Millie, dear," Ethel said gently, "would you mind helping me look around? Two pairs of eyes are better than one."

The girl hesitated, glancing at her uncle. When Hal nodded, she reluctantly joined Ethel in the center of the barn.

"What are we looking for?" Millie asked.

"Anything that doesn't belong," Ethel replied, channeling her inner Jessica Fletcher. "The person who did this might have left something behind. Clues often hide in plain sight."

They began a careful examination of the barn, working in opposite directions. Ethel moved methodically, her attention to detail serving her well. She crouched to examine some unusual marks in the dirt near the barn's back entrance.

"Tire tracks," she called out. "Maybe a car?"

Hal joined her, frowning at the distinct treads pressed into the soft earth. "Nobody drives cars back here."

"Exactly," Ethel said. "And look, they're fresh. The edges are still sharp, not worn down by rain or wind."

As they continued searching, Millie's voice rang out from behind a stack of hay bales. "Found something!"

She held up a crumpled napkin, unmistakably from Ruby's Café. The pink rosebud logo in the corner was a dead giveaway.

"That's not mine," Hal grunted. "Haven't been to the café since morning."

She took the napkin from Millie, carefully unfolding it. "No writing, but it looks fresh. Not stained or weathered."

"There's more," Millie said, leading them to a disturbed area near the barn's far wall. "I noticed something shining when the sunlight hit it just right."

The three of them began sifting through the scattered hay. Ethel's fingers brushed against something small and metallic. She picked it up, holding it to the light streaming through a crack in the barn wall.

It was a small ornate pin, about the size of a quarter, with intricate filigree work around the edges. In the center, a tiny pearl glowed softly.

"Is this...?" Ethel began.

"Part of Eleanor's brooch," Hal finished, his voice unusually quiet. "The centerpiece is bigger—cameo of a woman's profile. This is just one of the decorative pieces around the edge."

Ethel raised an eyebrow. "You seem to know it well."

Hal's ears reddened. "Seen it at town functions. Eleanor never shuts up about its history."

"So whoever stole the brooch was here," Millie said, wrapping her arms around herself as if suddenly cold. "But why? And why tear the place apart?"

"Perhaps they dropped this piece during the initial theft," Ethel mused, "and came back to find it. Or maybe they were looking for something else entirely."

She pulled a small notebook from her cardigan pocket. It was a habit from her days as the mayor's wife, always prepared to jot down community concerns or potluck assignments.

"Millie, did you happen to be at Ruby's Café last night?"

The young woman's eyes widened slightly. "Yes, after my shift around nine-thirty."

"Do you remember who else was there?" Ethel began writing in her neat, precise handwriting.

"Um, Mr. Jenkins was finishing his pie. The Wilsons were having their usual evening tea. Oh, and that new man in town—the one with the fancy shoes. Lyle something."

Ethel's pencil paused. "Lyle Housman?"

Millie nodded. "That's him. He was sitting in the corner, pretending to read a newspaper, but..." She hesitated.

"But what, dear?" Ethel prompted gently.

"He kept watching the door. And checking his watch. Like he was waiting for someone." Millie twisted the hem of her scrub top between her fingers. "After I left, I realized I'd forgotten my thermos. When I went back to get it, I saw him outside, skulking around the alley with a flashlight."

Ethel tapped her pencil against her notebook. "Eleanor's brooch went missing last night. Hal was brought in for questioning this morning. Now your barn is ransacked, and we find a piece of the missing brooch."

"Someone's trying to frame Uncle Hal," Millie said, her voice hardening with protective anger. "But why?"

I don't know, but I do know that you'd need help to clean this up," she offered. "I can't leave you with this mess."

The next hour passed in companionable work. Hal repaired what could be fixed, Millie tended to the distressed animals, and Ethel helped organize the scattered tools and sweep up the worst of the hay. By sunset, the barn looked significantly better, though evidence of the invasion remained in slashed cushions and splintered wood.

As the sun began to set, painting the fields gold and pink, Ethel gathered her things. The brooch fragment was carefully wrapped in tissue in her pocket, her notebook filled with observations and names.

"I should head back before dark," she said. "Thank you

for the coffee, Hal. And for trusting me enough to let me help."

Hal nodded, which Ethel interpreted as effusive gratitude by his standards.

"I'll drive you," Millie offered. "It's too far to walk, especially with night coming."

"Oh, I couldn't—"

"I insist," Millie said firmly. "Uncle Hal would never forgive me if I let you walk home alone after all this."

Ethel smiled, sensing the gesture was as much about continuing their conversation as it was about her safety. "Well, when you put it that way..."

She was halfway to Millie's car when she heard the distinctive sound of breaking glass followed by Hal's startled shout. They whirled around to see him standing in the doorway of the farmhouse, holding something in his hand.

"Uncle Hal?" Millie called, already running back.

Ethel followed as quickly as her sensible shoes would allow. Inside, shards of glass from the kitchen window littered the floor, glinting dangerously in the fading light. A rock the size of a fist lay among them.

"Are you hurt?" Ethel asked, searching Hal for any signs of injury.

He shook his head, silently handing her what he held. It was a piece of paper that had been wrapped around the rock. Unfolding it, Ethel read the crude, block-lettered message aloud:

"KEEP YOUR NOSE OUT OF WHAT DOESN'T CONCERN YOU."

THE GOSSIP CIRCLE TIGHTENS

Arriving at Ruby's Café earlier than usual the next morning, Ethel clutched her handbag tightly, as if guarding the threatening note that was tucked safely inside. Sleep had eluded her most of the night, her mind spinning with broken windows, ransacked barns, and jewelry fragments hidden in hay. She'd called Millie first thing to check on Hal. He was still grumpy but unharmed, and the window already patched with cardboard and duct tape.

The bell above the café door announced her arrival with its familiar jingle. Ruby glanced up from behind the counter. The dark circles shadowing her eyes were not as dark anymore. The café was nearly empty, just as Ethel had hoped. The morning rush wouldn't start for another half hour.

"Early bird special?" Ruby asked, already reaching for a teacup.

"Earl Grey, please," Ethel replied, scanning the café. To her delight, she spotted Edna Proust at her usual table by

the window, the morning newspaper spread before her. Perfect.

With teacup in hand, Ethel made her way to Edna's table. "Mind if I join you? Such a lovely view of the square from here."

Edna looked up, adjusting her reading glasses. "Be my guest. Though I doubt the view's what brought you out at this hour. Still playing detective?"

"Just enjoying my tea," Ethel said innocently, sliding into the seat across from Edna. "Oh look, there's Dotty opening her flower shop."

As if she'd heard her name from across the street, Dotty spotted them through the window and waved enthusiastically. Moments later, the bell jingled again as she bustled in, a whirlwind of clashing patterns and jangling bracelets.

"Morning, ladies! Discussing the great brooch heist, are we?" She pulled out a chair without waiting for an invitation. "I was just telling my delivery boy—"

"Dotty! Just the person," Ethel smiled. "We were hoping you'd join us."

The bell jingled once more as Mrs. Winters from the library entered, silver hair pinned in its usual neat bun. She spotted the group and raised an eyebrow.

"Well, well. If this isn't the most informed gathering in Fern Valley," she said, approaching their table. "Room for one more?"

"We were just about to send a search party for you," Edna said dryly, but she shifted to make space.

Ethel smiled to herself. Her impromptu gossip circle was complete, and entirely natural-looking to anyone watching. Ruby approached with a fresh pot of tea and additional cups.

"Looks like a committee meeting," Ruby observed. "Planning the next town fair already?"

"Just catching up," Ethel replied. "Though we were discussing poor Hal Briggs. Such a shame about the misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?" Edna sniffed as Ruby poured tea for everyone and took a seat. "The man was seen at Eleanor's the night her brooch disappeared."

"Actually," Ethel corrected gently, "someone reported seeing his truck there. But his truck has been broken down since Monday. I confirmed myself and so did others."

Ruby's hand trembled slightly, tea sloshing dangerously close to the cup's rim. "People see what they want to see," she muttered.

"Speaking of seeing things," Ethel continued smoothly, "I hear there's been unusual activity around town at night. Dotty, didn't you mention spotting someone with a flashlight in the alley behind your shop recently?"

Dotty, who had been reaching for a sugar cube, froze mid-motion. Her normally animated face went oddly blank. "Did I? So many things happen around this town, who can keep track?"

Ethel frowned. "But you were quite specific yesterday at the library. Said it was a tall man in a hat, skulking—that was your word, 'skulking'—around the recycling bins."

Dotty's cheeks flushed. "Well, it was probably just someone looking for bottles to recycle. People need to make ends meet these days, you know."

"Speaking of making ends meet," Ethel said, stirring her tea thoughtfully, "did everyone see the notice about the bank's new extended Friday hours? Apparently they've been quite busy lately."

"First I've heard of it," Mrs. Winters said.

"Oh yes," Edna nodded. "Mr. Peterson was telling me they've had a surge in deposits this week. Quite unusual for this time of year."

Ruby shifted in her seat. "People saving for summer vacations, probably."

"Or paying off debts," Ethel suggested, watching Ruby carefully. "Always a relief when one can catch up on overdue payments."

Ruby's cup clattered against its saucer. "I should check on Parker in the kitchen. Those cinnamon rolls won't frost themselves." She hurried away, the back of her neck visibly flushed.

"Well, that was interesting," Mrs. Winters murmured once Ruby was out of earshot.

"What was?" Dotty asked, suddenly very interested in arranging her napkin.

"Ruby's reaction," Ethel replied. "Just yesterday she was lamenting to me about being two months behind on her loan. Said the bank was threatening to call it in."

"Really?" Edna raised an eyebrow. "How curious that she'd be so touchy about the subject today."

"Maybe she won the lottery," Dotty suggested, but her usual enthusiasm seemed forced.

"Or maybe," Mrs. Winters said quietly, "there's another explanation. Did you know I saw that stranger, Lyle Housman, lingering outside the library after closing time on Tuesday? Just standing there in the shadows, watching the café."

"Tuesday?" Edna leaned forward. "That's the day he came to the post office asking about Eleanor Pendleton's address. Claimed to be her nephew."

"Which we know is nonsense," Ethel added. "Eleanor has no nephews."

"He seemed very interested in the older homes in town," Mrs. Winters continued. "Requested all our historical records about founding families. Particularly the Pendletons."

"And their valuables, no doubt," Edna muttered.

Dotty, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, suddenly blurted, "My delivery boy Billy saw Ruby at the bank yesterday morning. Said she was making a deposit and looked happier than he'd seen her in months." She immediately pressed her fingers to her lips, as if shocked by her own revelation.

"A deposit?" Ethel echoed. "The day after Eleanor's brooch went missing? That's quite a coincidence."

"It could be perfectly innocent," Mrs. Winters cautioned. "Perhaps a relative sent money."

"Ruby doesn't have relatives," Edna stated flatly. "At least none that acknowledge her after that business with her ex-husband."

The four women fell silent, the implications hanging in the air between them like an unfinished sentence. Ethel watched her friends' faces as concern, doubt, and growing suspicion reflected in each.

"Ladies," she said finally, lowering her voice conspiratorially, "I have a proposition. A bit of... neighborhood watch, shall we say?"

Three pairs of curious eyes fixed on her.

"I believe something suspicious is happening at closing time around here. Would you be willing to help me observe tonight?"

Dotty clapped her hands. "A stakeout! Like in those detective shows!"

"Precisely," Ethel smiled. "But with more comfortable shoes and thermoses of tea."

Mrs. Winters adjusted her glasses. "My arthritis might object, but my curiosity wins. Count me in."

"I suppose someone needs to keep you all out of trouble," Edna sighed, but her eyes twinkled with interest.

They spent the next few minutes planning their surveillance. Dotty would stay late at her flower shop, which offered a clear view of the café's front entrance. Mrs. Winters would position herself in the library's side reading room, overlooking the street. Edna would take a bench in the square, pretending to enjoy the evening air. And Ethel would monitor the back alley where footprints and fabric had already been found.

"Remember, we're just watching," Ethel cautioned. "No confrontations, no matter what we see."

They parted ways, anticipation buzzing between them like electricity. For the rest of the day, Ethel kept herself busy with errands and a visit to Eleanor Pendleton, ostensibly to drop off a sympathy card for her missing brooch, but really to confirm it hadn't mysteriously reappeared.

By eight-thirty that evening, Ethel was in position, tucked into the shadowed doorway of the hardware store's back entrance. From there, she had a clear view of Ruby's Café's rear door and the alley that ran behind the shops. The evening air held the lingering warmth of a summer day, cricket song rising from nearby gardens.

At nine-fifteen, right on schedule, her small walkie-talkie crackled to life. It was a yard sale find that had delighted Thomas during their bird-watching phase.

"Bookworm to Cookie," came Mrs. Winters' voice, using the code names Dotty had enthusiastically assigned. "Subject is closing up shop. Turning off main lights now."

"Flower Power confirms," Dotty's voice followed. "Front door locked. Blinds drawn."

Ethel smiled at their commitment to the role. "Cookie standing by," she whispered into the device.

Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen. Just as Ethel was beginning to think their stakeout might be fruitless, the café's back door opened. Ruby stepped out, glancing both ways before pulling a jacket tighter around herself despite the mild evening. She moved swiftly down the alley away from where Ethel hid.

"Target on the move," Ethel whispered into the walkie-talkie. "Heading east in the alley."

"Envelope sees someone entering the square from Main Street," came Edna's calm reply. "Male, tall, wearing a hat."

Ethel's pulse quickened. Keeping to the shadows, she followed Ruby at a distance. The café owner paused at the alley's end, checking her watch. A moment later, a figure rounded the corner and the streetlight revealed that it was Lyle Housman, his polished shoes gleaming even in the dim light.

Ruby stepped forward. "You're late."

"Had to make sure I wasn't followed," Lyle replied, his voice low but carrying in the quiet evening. "This town has too many nosy old women."

Ethel pressed against the brick wall, grateful for the lengthening shadows. The pair moved deeper into the alley, stopping near a stack of empty crates, close enough for Ethel to hear, if she strained.

"Do you have it?" Ruby asked.

"You know I just sold the other stuff. But for this? Half now, half when the job's done," Lyle replied. "That was the deal."

"The deal was you'd be in and out clean," Ruby hissed. "Not leaving evidence all over town!"

"There were complications," Lyle snapped back. "But it's

nearly finished. We split the proceeds tomorrow, and I'm gone."

"You'd better be. The whole town's talking, and that Cromwell woman is asking questions."

Lyle scoffed. "What's she going to do? Bore me to death with tea parties?"

Ruby's voice lowered further. "Don't underestimate her. She sees things."

Their voices dropped, becoming indistinct murmurs. Ethel inched closer, heart pounding. A crate creaked beneath her foot, and she froze.

The conversation ahead stopped abruptly.

"What was that?" Lyle demanded.

"Probably a cat," Ruby said. "Let me see it again."

There was a rustle of fabric, and then a flash as Lyle pulled something from his pocket. Even from a distance, Ethel could see it gleaming in the faint light from a nearby window—an ornate setting with an oval center, too large for a ring. A brooch.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Lyle murmured. "Worth every bit of trouble."

A sudden noise from the street—a car backfiring—made them both jump. Lyle hastily pocketed the brooch.

"Tomorrow. Midnight. The old mill," Ruby said quickly. "Don't be late again."

"I'll bring your cut," Lyle promised. "Just make sure no one follows you."

With that, he turned and hurried away, footsteps fading into the night. Ruby stood motionless for a long moment before heading back toward the café's rear entrance.

Ruby disappeared through the rear door.

Ethel remained frozen. Ruby Fletcher, Fern Valley's pie

queen, was in on the theft. And tomorrow, she'd collect her cut.

The walkie-talkie in Ethel's pocket crackled softly.

"Cookie? Cookie, come in," Dotty's worried voice whispered. "Did you see anything?"

Ethel lifted the device with a shaking hand, her eyes still fixed on Ruby's retreating form.

"I saw and heard everything," she whispered back. "And it's worse than we thought."

A THIEF UNMASKED

The day after the stakeout, Ethel spent hours in her kitchen baking scones. Baking had always helped her think, and Thomas had claimed her best ideas came with flour on her cheeks. By the time the last batch emerged golden from the oven, she had a plan.

Three phone calls later, everything was set. Ethel packed the still-warm scones into a basket, tucked her notebook into her cardigan pocket, and headed toward Ruby's Café just as the late afternoon shadows stretched across Fern Valley.

The café was nearly empty, just a couple lingering over coffee in the corner. Ruby looked up as the bell announced Ethel's arrival, surprise flashing across her tired face.

"We're closing in fifteen minutes," she said, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Perfect timing, then," Ethel replied cheerfully. "I thought you might enjoy some fresh scones. A thank-you for your hospitality."

Ruby's eyes narrowed slightly. "That's... thoughtful."

"I've invited a few others to join us," Ethel continued, setting her basket on the counter. "Hope you don't mind."

Before Ruby could respond, the bell jingled again. Chief Tinsley entered, his straining buttons reacting as he sniffed the air appreciatively.

"Ethel! You mentioned coffee and scones?" He patted his stomach. "Just what the doctor ordered after a long day."

Ruby's smile stiffened. "Chief."

The bell jingled twice more in quick succession as Hal and Millie entered. Hal looked as uncomfortable in the café as a cat in a rainstorm, his cap clutched in his hands. Millie offered an apologetic smile.

"Mrs. Cromwell invited us," she explained to Ruby. "Said it was important."

"Did she now?" Ruby's voice had a dangerous edge.

"Please, everyone have a seat," Ethel gestured to the largest table. "Ruby, would you mind locking the door? I think we need some privacy."

For a moment, Ethel thought Ruby might refuse. Then, with a tight smile, she flipped the sign to "Closed" and turned the lock with a decisive click.

Once they were all seated with coffee and scones - even Hal grudgingly accepted a cup - Ethel cleared her throat.

"I've asked you all here because I believe I've solved the mystery of Eleanor Pendleton's missing brooch."

Chief Tinsley raised his eyebrows. "Mrs. Cromwell, we've already—"

"Arrested the wrong person," Ethel finished for him. "No offense, Chief, but the evidence against Hal was circumstantial at best."

"His truck was seen at Eleanor's," the Chief protested.

"A truck *like* his," Ethel corrected. "But Hal's truck has been broken down since Monday. Mrs. Winters saw him

walking to the library that afternoon. He checked out a book on beekeeping.”

Hal grunted in confirmation.

“Furthermore,” Ethel continued, “the barn at Hal’s farm was ransacked yesterday. Someone was looking for something, or planting evidence.” She pulled the small metal pin from her pocket. “We found this in the hay. It’s part of Eleanor’s brooch.”

Chief Tinsley leaned forward, suddenly alert. “And you didn’t report this?”

“We were going to,” Millie jumped in, “but then someone threw a rock through Uncle Hal’s window with a threatening note.”

“A note saying ‘Keep your nose out of what doesn’t concern you,’” Ethel added. “Which only convinced me more that Hal was being framed.”

Ruby shifted in her seat, her coffee untouched. “This is all very interesting, but why are we having this conversation in my café?”

Ethel smiled gently. “Because last night, my friends and I saw you meeting with Lyle Housman in the alley. We heard you discussing ‘splitting the proceeds’ and saw him flash what appeared to be Eleanor’s brooch.”

The color drained from Ruby’s face. For a long moment, the only sound was the slow tick of the wall clock and Hal’s sharp intake of breath.

“Ruby?” Chief Tinsley said quietly. “Is this true?”

Ruby’s hands trembled as she gripped her coffee cup. “It’s not what you think.”

“Then perhaps you should explain,” Ethel suggested. “Starting with why you suddenly had enough money to catch up on your bank payments the day after Eleanor’s brooch disappeared.”

"And why your napkin was in my barn," Hal added gruffly.

Ruby looked from face to face, seeming to calculate her options. Finally, her shoulders slumped.

"It wasn't supposed to go this far, I swear," she whispered as her lips trembled. "Lyle said no one would get hurt."

"Lyle Housman?" the Chief clarified. "The man staying at the motel?"

Ruby nodded. "My brother-in-law. From my ex-husband's side. He showed up last week, said he had a 'business opportunity' that could solve my money problems." She laughed bitterly. "The bank was about to foreclose, you know this. I was desperate."

"So you stole Eleanor's brooch?" Chief Tinsley asked.

"No!" Ruby's head snapped up, shaking side to side. "Lyle did. I just... helped create a distraction. And suggested Hal as a scapegoat." She glanced at the farmer, shame coloring her cheeks. "The town already thinks the worst of you. It was easy to make them believe you'd done it."

"By having Lyle drive a truck similar to Hal's past Eleanor's house?" Ethel guessed.

Ruby nodded. "And by calling myself pretending to be Hal's nephew about the delivery. I knew it would create confusion."

"But why tear apart my barn?" Hal demanded.

"That wasn't part of the plan," Ruby insisted. "Lyle must have dropped a piece of the brooch during the theft. He panicked when he realized it was missing."

Chief Tinsley pulled out his notebook. "Where is Lyle now? And the brooch?"

"He's staying at the motel until tonight. We're supposed to meet at midnight at the old mill to split the money from

the brooch sale." Ruby's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's in his room, in a wooden box under the bed."

"Well," the Chief said, standing, "I think it's time Mr. Housman and I had a chat."

"I'll need statements from everyone," he added, looking particularly at Ethel. "And next time, Mrs. Cromwell, please leave the detective work to the professionals."

Ethel smiled sweetly and said, "Of course, Chief. Though I did rather enjoy my first case." To which he replied with a naughty huff.

After the Chief left with Ruby to retrieve the brooch, a heavy silence fell over the table. Millie fidgeted with her napkin while Hal stared into his cooling coffee.

"I'm sorry, Hal," Ethel said finally. "About the town being so quick to judge you."

Hal shrugged, but his usual scowl had softened slightly. "Used to it."

"Well, you shouldn't be," Ethel replied firmly. "You're a good man. Grumpy as a wet cat, mind you, but good."

A sound escaped Hal that might, with generous interpretation, have been a chuckle. "You're not so bad yourself. For a nosy widow."

"High praise indeed," Ethel smiled.

"Uncle Hal," Millie prompted, nudging him gently.

Hal cleared his throat. "Next time you're at the café," he said gruffly, "coffee's on me. Just one cup, that's it."

"I'll hold you to that," Ethel replied, touched by the gesture.

Two days later, order had been restored to Fern Valley. Lyle Housman was in custody, the brooch had been returned to an ecstatic Eleanor Pendleton, and Ruby was facing charges with a strong likelihood of probation due to her cooperation. Hal's name had been cleared, though he

seemed more relieved about the reduced gossip than concerned with his reputation.

Ethel sat at her usual table in Ruby's Café which was temporarily being run by Ruby's assistant Parker. She was enjoying both her Earl Grey and the admiring glances from her fellow patrons. Solving a crime, it seemed, had elevated her status from "mayor's widow" to local celebrity.

Edna slid into the seat across from her, eyes gleaming with fresh gossip. "Have you heard about Walter Graham's missing watch collection? Apparently, his ex-wife visited last weekend, and now his prized grandfather's pocket watch has vanished."

"How intriguing," Ethel replied, filing the information away. "Though I think I'll leave that mystery to someone else. One adventure is enough for me."

"Pity," Edna sniffed. "You have quite the talent for it."

After finishing her tea, Ethel stopped by the post office to mail a thank-you note to Millie. The young postal clerk handed her a small stack of mail in return.

"This came for you yesterday, Mrs. Cromwell," he said, pointing to a cream-colored envelope at the bottom of the pile. "No return address, but it's got that fancy wax seal. Looks important."

Ethel examined the envelope as she walked home. Her name and address were written in elegant, flowing script she didn't recognize. The wax seal bore no family crest or initials, just a simple design of what appeared to be a key.

Curious, she opened it once she was settled in her favorite armchair. Inside was a single sheet of heavy stationery, the same cream color as the envelope. The message was brief, written in the same flowing script:

"Dear Mrs. Cromwell,

Your recent detective work has not gone unnoticed. There are

more secrets buried in Fern Valley than most realize: some dating back to its founding. Should you wish to discover the truth about the town's oldest mystery, look beneath the cornerstone of the library. What you find there may surprise you.

A Friend."

Ethel read the note twice, then a third time, her heart beating a little faster with each reading. She'd only just solved one mystery, and already another was calling to her. She glanced at the framed photo of Thomas on the side table, his kind eyes crinkling with the hint of a smile.

"What do you think, dear?" she asked the empty room. "Should I leave well enough alone?"

But deep down, she already knew the answer. After all, crossword puzzles could only satisfy her curiosity for so long. And Fern Valley, it seemed, had secrets that had been waiting decades for someone like Ethel Cromwell to uncover them.



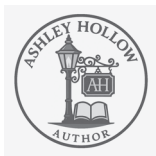
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