
Chapter 1

BOSTON, *spring, 1890*

"Mama, I got another letter from Edna," Cara said as she hurried through the front door toward the stairs leading to her bedroom, waving the envelope in her hand.

"Let me know what she says," Lydia said with a chuckle. Her two daughters had always been very close. They were only a year apart in age, but many people mistook them for twins. They were very close, often finishing each other's sentences. They looked similar in some ways. They were both just a couple inches over five feet tall, and both had pretty, light brown eyes. However, Edna had her father's dark brown, almost black, hair while Cara had her mother's light brown hair with natural golden streaks through it.

Lydia had been worried when Edna announced she'd answered an ad for a mail order bride and had been exchanging letters with a rancher in the small town of Elk Run in Texas. A few months later, she had agreed to move out there and marry him. She felt better now that Edna seemed to be extremely happy there, and she and Cara had been sending letters back and forth weekly. She missed Edna,

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but what every mother wanted more than anything else was for her children to find the special person for them and to be happy. It seemed that had happened for Edna.

Lydia's husband, Clyde Hinton, walked into the house several moments later. "Cara sure looks forward to her weekly letter from Edna. When she stepped out of the schoolhouse and saw me walking down the boardwalk carrying a letter, she hurried to catch up with me to get her letter."

"They may be several states apart now, but those two will always be close," Lydia agreed. "I'm glad to see it." She went to the stairs and yelled up, "Cara, Papa's home and supper's ready. Can you come set the table, please?"

Cara appeared a couple minutes later, still holding her letter but frowning a bit. "I'm sorry, Mama, I should have set the table and helped you finish supper before I went to my room, but—"

"I know, you wanted to read your letter. I understand, Cara. You don't look very happy after reading it, though. Is anything wrong?"

"I don't know. Let me help you get supper on the table, then I'll tell you what she said. Maybe I'm just worrying too much."

Clyde and Lydia both looked at their daughter, concern etched on their faces. Clyde went to wash his hands while Lydia and Cara got supper on the table. As soon as they had passed the food, Lydia turned to Cara. "Now, what did Edna say in her letter that seems to have you a bit upset?"

"She saw a man kill a lady."

Her shocked parents dropped their forks and looked at each other, then at her. Clyde was the first to find his voice. "What? Where did it happen? Did the sheriff arrest the man? Will she have to testify?"

"She didn't go to the sheriff."

Lydia stood. "What do you mean, she didn't go to the sheriff?"

"Here," Cara said, handing her the letter. "Read it for yourself. Maybe I missed something or read it wrong."

Clyde stood next to his wife and they read Edna's letter together, while Cara paced. Clyde took a deep breath and exhaled slowly when he'd finished reading it, and Lydia sat back down in her chair. Cara sat down as well. "So, what do you think?" she asked.

"I think we need to write her a letter right away," Lydia said. "As I read this, it seems she was taking a walk in some nearby woods when she came upon an abandoned cabin. She looked in the window to see if there was anything inside and was shocked to see a man and a woman inside. It looked to her like they were struggling, and he was pulling her over toward a bed that was in the corner of the cabin. As they struggled, she fell and hit her head on the corner of the bed. He went to her, but she didn't move. He seemed scared, not sure what to do. Edna turned and left quickly, not wanting him to know she'd seen what had happened. She ran back home. She said she didn't tell her husband because he would be upset that she was in the woods."

"That doesn't make sense," Clyde said. "Why would he be upset that she was in the woods, and how could he possibly be so upset that she wouldn't go to the sheriff?" He shook his head. "I don't understand this at all. Lydia, you'd better sit down right after we eat and write her a letter. I'll post it tomorrow. She needs to go talk to the sheriff."

"Papa, she said she's afraid the people of Elk Run, the closest town to their ranch, will be upset, and she wants them to accept her in their community."

"I can't understand why she thinks helping the sheriff catch a killer in their town would upset them," he said. "Wouldn't they want the man to be found and put in jail?"

"In her past letters, she's talked about how different things are out there," Cara tried to explain. "Some of it seems rather odd to me, but she's trying hard to fit in."

"How did she say things are different?" Lydia asked. "What could possibly make her think her husband would be upset with her for taking a walk in the woods, or that turning a killer in to the sheriff would upset the local people? How different can things be?"

"She said husbands there see it as their responsibility to protect their wives and keep them safe."

"I can understand that," Clyde said, "as it's still a frontier there. I'm glad that's the case, but how can her husband protect her if she won't tell him what she saw?"

"But from her past letters, I think I understand why she's hesitant to tell him. I don't agree with it, but I think I understand it," Cara said. She tried to pick her words carefully and explain it in a way they would understand, although she admitted it was still rather confusing to herself. "Ladies there are expected to take care of the house and the children."

"That's no different than here," her mother said, sounding rather exasperated. "What does that have to do with not telling her husband or the sheriff what she saw?"

"They're also expected to listen to their husbands, who are protecting them. Women are told not to walk in the woods alone. Apparently, the men often go in the woods hunting, but they tell the ladies to stay out of them because of the wild animals. Edna said she assumed the bigger, dangerous wild animals would stay deeper in the woods, and it would be safe to walk at the edge of them."

"Ah," Clyde said, nodding his head as he seemed to begin to understand things. "Edna was always fascinated with the outdoors, including woods and wild critters, as she referred to them."

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"Exactly," Cara said. "Of course, there aren't many trees near us since we live in Boston, but whenever we would go riding in the country, she watched carefully anytime we went past a woods, no matter how small it was."

"You're right," Lydia said. "I'd forgotten that. She often wondered how many little critters lived in there, and what kind. She used to say she figured the cute little rabbits and squirrels and things probably lived at the edge of the woods, which is why we would occasionally see them out in a meadow or at a brook, while the bigger bears and wolves stayed deeper in the woods, hidden from us, where they felt safer."

"Yes, she did," Cara agreed. "She told me in her last letter that she used to walk along the edge of the woods, looking in. She never saw any wildlife, so she was thinking it would be safe to go in the woods to walk, as long as she didn't go in very far. In my last letter to her, I told her maybe she should ask her husband about it first, since I don't know anything about what kind of wildlife they have around there or where in the woods they might be. I'm guessing she decided it would be safe, and as she was walking, she saw an old cabin."

"Edna has always been curious," Clyde said. "If she saw an old, abandoned cabin, I'm sure she would want to go investigate."

"Yes, she would," Lydia agreed. "She has always been curious and very interested in history. I'm sure she would want to know how the earlier cabins differed from the houses now. She probably went to look at it, never expecting to see anyone there. But I still don't understand why she wouldn't report what she saw."

"I figure it's one of two reasons," Cara said slowly, as she was obviously thinking about the situation. "If she reported it to her husband, he would be upset with her for not heeding

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his warning not to go in the woods. She's a newlywed and probably doesn't want to upset her new husband. But also, if they went to the sheriff, word would get around town. She said Elk Run is a small town that has an extremely healthy gossip mill, and everybody knows everything that happens. Everyone in town would soon know the new lady in the area didn't listen to her new husband."

Clyde nodded his head in understanding. "That would make her look bad in her new town but would also reflect poorly on Frank. People would think he couldn't control his new wife, and I'm sure she wouldn't want that."

"That's what I thought, too," Cara said. "Edna loves Frank and was worried about making him proud of her. She knew she could be a good wife as far as cooking and keeping a house, but she said in several of her letters that things are so different out there, she hoped she didn't do something that women just don't do out there and embarrass him."

"Yes, I can see Edna being concerned about that," Lydia said. "But I still think she should talk to Frank and tell him what she saw. Then they can decide together whether they should go to the sheriff."

"I do, too," Cara said. "Papa, what do you think?"

"I agree. You're right, we don't know how different life is out there, but Frank will know what she should do. Turning in a killer seems pretty important to me."

"That's what I'll tell her. I'll write a letter right after supper and tell her we talked about it and this is what we think she should do."

Her parents both nodded in agreement, and they finished their evening meal. As she was helping her mama wash the dishes and clean the kitchen afterward, she sighed. "Actually, I may have to wait until tomorrow to write my letter to Edna. My older students took a test today and I have to grade those this evening. I like to have them get their tests back the next

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day so they know how they did. Then we'll go over anything they missed so they understand before we go on."

"You're a good teacher, Cara. Your father and I are proud of you."

"I've always wanted to be a teacher. Since this is my first year, I worry about how I'm doing, but the children seem to be learning pretty well, so I hope that means I'm doing all right."

"I've heard several comments from mothers of students in your classroom, and they're all pleased. I think you're doing a fine job."

"I hope so. I do love teaching."

"So much that you don't seem to have any time left for courting."

"Mama, please stop worrying about me finding a man to marry. I'm not courting anyone right now because I haven't found anyone who's caught my attention yet. When I meet the right man, I'm sure I'll know it."

"But you don't even talk to the young men much after church anymore."

"Most of them seem like nice young men, but like I said, none of them have done anything to stand out to me. If one of them does, or a new man moves to town, if they ask me out, I will certainly accept. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to start grading some papers."

Cara and Clyde considered themselves fortunate. The school Cara taught at was just down one block and around the corner from where her father worked, and they were both within walking distance of their home, so on nice days, they generally walked to work. She usually stayed at the school after the children went home, cleaning, grading

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papers and preparing for the next day. It was one of the smallest schoolhouses in Boston, with just three classrooms. There were two doors in each classroom. One led to a central hall, and one led directly outside from each classroom. Her father generally stopped on his way past and checked her room. If she was still there, they walked home together.

She enjoyed that time she spent with her father, especially since Edna had moved away. They talked about many things as they walked, and she felt they'd become closer during the past seven months that she had been teaching. They were coming to the end of the school year and she knew she would miss their nightly walk-and-talk sessions over the summer. They had already asked her to return to teach the next year, and she intended to do just that. She loved teaching, as well as being able to walk to school and back home with her father. As she finished cleaning her classroom the day after receiving Edna's letter, she let her mind wander a bit.

Her life was wonderful. The only thing that she wished was different right now was that her sister was close by. She was only a year older than Edna, and while she went on to school to become a teacher, Edna hadn't been interested in finding employment. She wanted to get married and raise a family. Like Cara, however, she hadn't found a local man who appealed to her, so when she saw the ad for a mail order bride, she'd answered it.

She hadn't held out much hope, but when he had replied, she had been impressed with his letter. The two had corresponded for a few months, and Edna had felt she'd fallen in love with Frank Gorman through his letters. When he offered to send enough money for her to purchase a ticket to Elk Run, Texas, along with enough for food during the trip, she accepted and was excited to begin her new life. The

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only thing she hadn't been happy about was leaving her family, especially Cara.

From the time she arrived and became his bride, the sisters began their weekly letter routine. Each one would send a letter weekly, responding to the letter they'd received from the other. By hearing from Edna every week, she still felt close to her and they were still able to share their secrets and feelings. She'd been delighted when Frank sent a letter to Clyde and Lydia, inviting them to Texas for a visit. In the alternative, if they weren't able to get away, he said if they would see that Cara got on the train, he would personally be at the train station to meet her and watch out for her while she visited them. When she was ready to return home, he would help her on the train and let them know when she would return.

Her parents had too many obligations in Boston, between his work, his ailing mother they routinely checked in on, and Lydia's father who had been injured, but they eventually agreed to allow Cara to go for a visit. She was looking forward to seeing her sister again, meeting her husband, and seeing Texas.

Bringing her mind back to the present, a quick glance at the clock on the wall told her it was about time for her father to arrive. She finished up, grabbed her sweater and was headed for the door just as her father knocked and opened the door.

When they reached their home, Lydia was sitting on the porch, enjoying the warm spring weather while she waited for them. While they ate their evening meal, they discussed what they felt Cara should include in the letter she wrote to Edna. Once the kitchen was cleaned, she went to her room and took her time writing the letter. When it was finished, she read the pertinent portion of it to her parents, to be sure they thought she'd gotten their feelings through to her sister.

When they approved of the wording, she finished it, adding the personal things between the sisters, and got it ready to mail. Her father assured her he would post it the next day, as the post office was a couple doors beyond his office.

She told her parents good-night and went upstairs to her room, but she hadn't gotten the door closed yet when she heard a knock on the door downstairs. It was late and she couldn't imagine who would be calling at this time of night or what they wanted, but she feared it wasn't good. No one came visiting at this time of night with good news. She turned around and went back downstairs. She got to the kitchen just as a delivery person handed her father a telegram and left. She saw the way her parents looked at each other and knew they were having similar thoughts as she—this can't be good.

Clyde opened the envelope, quickly read the telegram, and collapsed into the chair Lydia had pulled out for him. "No," he mumbled. "It can't be."

Lydia took the telegram and read it. Her face immediately turned white. Cara helped her mother to another chair and took the telegram, sitting down herself before reading it. After reading it, she looked up at her parents. "Edna is dead? What happened? This doesn't say much."

"It's a telegram, honey. The sheriff said he's sending a letter today that will explain all they know. It sounds to me like they didn't know who she was, but they found a letter in her pocket from you."

"It said 'letter in pocket, no envelope'," Cara said. "In the last letter I sent, I told her nothing new has happened in Boston, and I signed it, from your loving sister. I'm glad I signed my last name. We started doing that as a joke between us since we no longer share the same last name. I guess that explains why they sent the telegram to my family, but does

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that mean they don't know who she is, so they haven't contacted Frank?"

Clyde read the telegram again. "That's a good question, Cara. Maybe I had better send a telegram tomorrow to Frank and make sure he knows."

Cara looked confused as she shook her head. "I don't understand. It sounds like they found her in an unoccupied house. If that's true, she had to have been missing, but why wouldn't Frank have told us? It doesn't make sense. Maybe there's been some kind of mistake."

"We'd all love for that to be the case, Cara, but unfortunately, I don't think it's likely. She had your letter in her pocket. You're right, though, I would have thought he would have let us know if she was missing."

"Something's not right," Cara said. "I hope the sheriff's letter gets here soon. Maybe that will tell us something that will make more sense. This is from the sheriff of Clemson, Texas, but I don't even know where that is. Is it even close to where she and Frank live?"

They were too upset to sleep, so after lots of tears and trying to comfort each other, they talked more about what could possibly have happened to their dear daughter and sister. The more they talked, the more upset Cara became, and it centered around Edna's husband, Frank. "None of us have met him, so we really don't know anything about him. For all we know, if she is dead, he could have been the one who killed her. That might be why he didn't contact us to let us know she's missing."

"That's true," Lydia noted, "but Edna loved him. She's generally a good judge of people, and she seemed quite smitten with him, both from his letters and after she'd met him in person."

"That's true enough," Cara conceded. "I guess we just have to wait and see what the sheriff says."

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"I still think I need to send a telegram to Frank and ask if she's missing," Clyde said. "If they're searching for her, he deserves to know about the telegram we got. He could check in with this sheriff from Clemson."

"I agree," Cara said a bit hesitantly, "but maybe you shouldn't tell him she was found at Clemson until we know more about what happened."

After some thought, Clyde agreed. "As much as I hate to even think about it, you might be right, Cara. If he did have any part in her death, we don't want to tell him what we know. Maybe, instead, we should give this sheriff Frank's name and let him look into the matter, see if he had anything to do with her death."

Cara nodded. "That's what I would do because I find it odd that he didn't even contact us to let us know she was missing."

"On the other hand," Lydia said, "if Frank is not involved, if she's missing, he may be terribly worried and trying to find her. He may not have contacted us because he didn't have anything to tell us other than she's missing. Maybe he's thinking she just wandered off and got lost."

Cara considered her mother's words carefully, while listening to her father as he spoke. "You're right, Lydia, we don't know when this happened. If he went out to the fields this morning and came back in this evening, he wouldn't have known she was missing until then. I would say the first thing he would do is search his ranch, and he may be out there doing that right now, hoping to find her, without getting us all upset and worried."

"That's true," Cara admitted. "If something happened to her this morning, but he didn't find out until this evening, it makes sense he would be out looking for her, not going to town to send us a telegram."

"We can't assume anything," Clyde said.

"I see that now," Cara finally agreed, "but I still say we should send a telegram asking if she's missing. Then once we get his response, we can decide what we want to tell him. If he's innocent and doesn't know she's dead, if we tell him what the sheriff's telegram says, he can try to get more details."

"But if we ask if she's missing, won't he want to know what we know?" Lydia asked.

"Probably," Clyde agreed. "He would have to assume we know something, or why we would ask."

"Maybe he would think she sent us a letter saying she was unhappy and going to leave or return home," Cara suggested. "Even if he realizes we know something, his response might give us a clue. I think we should send a telegram asking if she's missing, and then see what we think after we get his response."

"I agree," Clyde said, and Lydia nodded her agreement.

After very little sleep, all three were up early the next morning. Cora walked to the home of one of the other two teachers at the school where she taught and told her about the telegram they'd received. After giving her condolences and giving her a hug, the teacher told her not to worry, that she and the other teacher would split the kids in her class between their two classes for a few days so she could take some time to try to find out what happened and grieve.

Clyde went to the telegraph office early and sent the telegram to Frank. He told the telegraph operator he was expecting a reply and would be in his office just a few doors down. He waited anxiously for a response, but none came until he was getting ready to go home. The operator delivered it to him personally. "Clyde, my shift is over so I brought it over to you myself. Jed will be there all night, though, so if you need to send a response, he can do it for you."

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"Thanks, I appreciate it. I'm going to take this home so my family and I can decide what we want to send in response, but then I'll come back in." He hurried home to share the telegram with them.

Lydia and Cara met him at the door as he walked in the house holding up a telegram. "Did Frank respond?" Cara asked. "What did he say?"

"It's a short telegram. I asked if Edna is missing. His reply was, 'Yes. Did she contact you? Thought she was happy.' I'm not sure what to make of it or how to respond."

"I wonder how long she's been missing and why he didn't contact us," Cara said.

"It sounds like he thinks she was unhappy and left," Lydia said.

Cara looked at her parents. "When was he going to tell us?"

"Obviously, we don't know," Clyde said, "but in fairness, we also don't know how long she's been missing or what was going on there, either."

"School's almost out here," Cara said. "As soon as it's out, I think I'm going to go see what I can find out. I'll see where Clemson is. If it's close, I'll talk to the sheriff who sent the telegram, and then I'll go meet Frank. Maybe I can get a feeling for him, if he had something to do with her death. If it looks or sounds like he did, I'll need to talk to the local sheriff. If he had something to do with it, he needs to pay for it."

"Cara, you can't go there by yourself and look into this matter," Lydia said emphatically.

"Why not? Mama, she was my sister and I loved her. She deserved better than this."

"I agree, honey. She was my daughter and I loved her, too, but it sounds dangerous. I certainly don't want to risk losing both my daughters."

"I'll be careful."

"Slow down, Cara," Clyde said. "Let's wait until we get the letter from the sheriff before we do anything like that. His letter should get here in a day or two, and it might answer some of our questions." After discussing it further, they all agreed that would be the best thing to do. It was hard to wait, but hopefully, the letter would shed some light on what happened.

Cara agreed, but the more she thought about it, the more sure she was that she would be making a trip to Texas. If her beloved sister was dead and found in another town, something wasn't right. She could have wandered off and gotten lost, but it certainly wasn't likely she would wander off far enough to seek shelter in an empty house in another town. Even if she did, how did she die? The other option, which unfortunately seemed more likely, was that someone killed her, and whoever that person was needed to pay for it.

At this point, it was hard for her not to be upset with Frank. Edna had said men out there protect their wives. It was yet to be determined if he was the one who killed her, but he certainly hadn't protected her, either.