



# Murder at Woodward Retreat

Book 10

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**\*PREVIEW\***

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## Chapter I

Sunday, April 26, 1931

**A**nn Venner picked her way through the shadows in the showroom of Slade Stone's car dealership, almost bumping into a new Buick on display. She turned into the doorway of the sales office and froze. A crumpled body, a man, lay on the floor. And her husband, Nick, stood over him.

Nick looked up and saw her, his face wild-eyed and pale. Her heart skipped and her mouth went dry. She cried out and threw herself backwards, grasping desperately at the edge of the doorframe to keep from falling.

Shadows filled the office with foreboding dread. The man on the floor, when Ann forced herself to look at him, was Adam Creighton, Nick's fellow salesman. His friend. Just last night, they'd shared dinner with him and his wife. The men had complained about an extra project. They had refused to give any details, but both had been moody and stressed.

Neither of them should have been here on a Sunday. The car lot was closed.

Nick's eyes darted back and forth, his face reddening like a creature out of a nightmare. Rage made him shiver. Blood covered his hands and stained his clothing. He motioned with a gun, speaking low and hoarse in a voice that didn't sound like his own. "Get out of here."

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She stumbled out of the doorway, turned, and sprinted across the dark showroom floor, dodging around the black outline of a new Buick. Voices echoed behind her. She pushed the door open with sweaty palms, fighting lightheadedness. Her three-inch heels weren't made for running.

*Ping! Ping!* Gunfire made her gasp. She crashed through the doorway and raced across the parking lot, fumbling to find the keys in the bottom of her purse while she ran. A second set of footsteps pounded. Her fingers touched metal. She grabbed the key, slid behind the wheel of her car, and tossed her purse on the seat beside her.

When she pulled out of the parking lot, her tires squealed. In the rear-view mirror, she saw Nick standing in the lot behind her and waving his arms. He chased after her.

She accelerated, pressing her foot against the pedal until the engine roared. Houses and cars flew by. Her fingers went numb on the wheel. She panted for breath, feeling her heart thud against her ribs. Why had Nick done it? Pressure built behind her eyes. She blinked back tears. Why? She wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it herself. How could she have been so wrong about him for so many years? What else might he be hiding from her?

Houses came into focus. Back in her own neighborhood, Ann eased her foot off the accelerator and pulled into her driveway. Her house—their house—Nick's house—the one place she wanted to be, and the first place he'd look for her.

Ann dashed inside, shut the door, and locked it. She ran to the bedroom, dragged her suitcase out of the closet, and began throwing random articles of clothing into it, hardly glancing at what her fingers touched. Nick could show up at any moment. She ransacked the dresser, leaving the drawers open, then grabbed her silver-backed hairbrush and held it close for a moment. An heirloom from her grandmother, it would have broken her heart to leave it behind. She grabbed the small wad of cash that she had saved under her socks and shoved it into her suitcase.

Pounding rattled the front door. They didn't usually lock it. Ann snapped her suitcase shut and hefted it off the bed. It would

be difficult to carry while running. Knowing that Nick didn't carry a key, she lugged the suitcase to the front door.

Nick stared through the window. In the dim evening light, his face looked red and blotchy. He sputtered and huffed. The desperation in his eyes terrified her. He raised his reddish stained hand to the glass. "Ann, please let me explain."

Ann clutched her suitcase, backed away, and started to turn toward the kitchen. He disappeared. She glanced through the window, catching a glimpse of him as he disappeared around the back corner of the house. Quickly, she unlocked the front door and sprinted to the driveway. She heaved the awkward suitcase into the back of her coupe, clambered behind the wheel, dug out her key, and jammed it into the ignition.

"Ann, wait!" Nick dashed across the yard, racing toward her. "Ann!"

She frantically started the engine and shifted into reverse. He grabbed the passenger door and pulled it open, leaning inside and clawing at her. The metallic, nauseous scent of blood came with him.

"Get away from me!" She stomped on the gas pedal. The engine revved and the car shot backwards, sending Nick spinning aside. He fell and rolled over. Even knowing what he'd just done, the sight of him flailing in the driveway still horrified her.

He picked himself up, rubbed his elbows, and waved, shouting while his face turned darker red. "Ann!"

She turned the car around and accelerated. The motion made the door click shut, but not hard enough to slam it. It still rattled. She couldn't stop. Another car was parked in front of the house, one she didn't recognize. Nick must have taken it from Slade's car lot.

The sun angled below the horizon. Other cars drove with their headlights glaring. She snapped hers on, barely recognizing the downtown area. Advertising signs blinked in bright colors.

All of her friends were Nick's friends, too. Nobody would believe what she'd seen. She couldn't ask any of them for help. She rubbed her face and blinked to focus. As the adrenaline wore

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off, exhaustion set in—numb and dreamlike. None of the local hotels would provide safety. She needed someplace farther away.

The downtown faded behind her. She turned the car west and stayed on the main roads. Miles later, after leaving the city behind, her hands finally stopped shaking. Her headlights flashed across a sign at the side of the road. Woodward Retreat.

She'd been there before. A few months ago, with Nick. Quiet, secluded cabins in the woods had been a restful location for a vacation. The proprietress was an old woman, somewhat deaf, who probably wouldn't remember her.

The place would be almost perfect. There wasn't room to park near the cabins—she knew that from the last visit—so she left her car at the side of the driveway. A metallic flash on the seat beside her caught her attention. She picked up a car key. Nick must have dropped it. She slipped it into her purse and lugged her suitcase toward the registration office.





## Chapter II

“I just hope it’s quiet here.” Early Monday afternoon, Detective Lieutenant Marx stepped out of the taxi and went to get the suitcases out of the trunk while Lowan paid the driver. Wind rustled through the trees. Branches creaked. The lack of traffic noise disconcerted him.

After a long winter and a cold spring, most of the trees had finally started budding into leaves. The fresh burst of green contrasted with the dull gray sky. A few scattered raindrops pelted him in the face and splotted onto the dirt road, sending up the smell of damp earth.

“It should be.” Lowan put his wallet away and moved slowly around the car. The cab had left them at the registration office of Woodward Retreat, a collection of vacation cabins in a secluded area west of Milford Falls.

“Can’t say much for the weather.” Marx glanced at the sky while holding both suitcases. Captain Kramer had put him off duty until he recovered from a mild case of memory loss. It hadn’t quite been a week, but not a single fragment of the missing day had returned. The harder he tried to remember, the blanker his mind became.

Part of him worried that he’d never remember. And he’d never be allowed to return to work.

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Lowan stopped and stared at the porch steps. He was recovering from broken ribs, and the past two weeks had been far too eventful. They both needed this vacation.

“Here.” Marx set the suitcases on the porch, then took Lowan’s arm to help him up the steps. He knocked on the door and waited. When nobody answered, he turned the knob and pushed the door open. “Hello?”

Lowan stepped inside behind him and glanced around. Debris, papers, and misplaced objects were scattered across the room. Dust floated in the beams of light from the front window.

“Looks like the place just got raided.” Marx set a pile of newspapers on the floor to clear off a chair by the desk for Lowan.

“The resident could be a poor housekeeper.” Lowan settled stiffly into the chair, keeping his expression blank and his arm against his side. His breathing sounded shallow.

“I suppose.” Marx began to circle the room, making a systematic inspection of the disorder. His line of work had made him permanently suspicious of everything. The amount of clutter, including dishes on the desk, gave him the impression that this wasn’t just an office building. Somebody lived here, probably in the back room.

The bookcase was jammed with everything from amateur artwork to outdated repair manuals and overdue bills. He touched the middle shelf and rubbed his fingers. Given the layer of dust, this particular mess wasn’t recent. Beside it, papers overflowed from a filing cabinet. The drawers were stuck open, threatening to make the cabinet top-heavy. He didn’t want to get caught prying.

Rummaging sounds came from the next room. Drawers slammed. Marx stepped close enough to see through the doorway. A woman who appeared to be at least seventy searched through dresser drawers in a small bedroom, pulling them open, digging, and sliding them shut again while muttering.

“Hello?” Marx hesitated and coughed. When she didn’t notice, he coughed louder and shuffled his feet.

She glanced up suddenly. Her eyebrows arched and she stared. "I didn't hear you come in." She blustered past him into the main room.

He stepped back and waited for her to take her place behind the registration desk. "I'm Joe Marx, and this is Lowan. We have a reservation."

"My secretary called earlier," Lowan said.

"I'm Sally Woodward." She slid into the chair behind the desk, rummaged around under the papers until she found a pair of glasses, then squinted through them at her notes. "Ah, yes, I have you in Cabin Seventeen." She slid the top desk drawer open, dug through a pile of keys until she found one with the correct tag, tossed it onto the desk, and stuck her nose back into the drawer and kept digging. Making frustrated noises, she slammed the top drawer shut and pulled the bottom one open and repeated the process.

"Is something wrong?" Marx hesitated to take the key, since she hadn't directly indicated that he should.

"It's nothing." She pushed the drawer shut, removed her glasses, and rubbed her face. "I was just looking for something. I can't imagine what I did with it. I've had a couple of things go missing lately . . ." She trailed off and shook her head.

"Anything of value?" Lowan asked.

"Not particularly. I mean, valuable to me, but not exactly worth a fortune. An emerald brooch, a figurine, and now, my husband's medals from his military service. They were in a leather case, and I just showed them to the Porters a few days ago, so I know they were here. I thought I put them back in the drawer." Mrs. Woodward rummaged through in the papers on her desk until she found the register. She flipped it open to the correct page and turned it around for them. "Could you sign here?"

Lowan took the register first and filled it out.

"Are you both from Milford Falls?" Mrs. Woodward glanced at the completed section and handed the book to Marx.

"Yeah." He added his name and address to the book, then reached for the key.

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“Cabin Seventeen is just down the path that way.” She took the registration book, flipped it closed, and motioned with it. “There’s another path that circles the waterfall. Have you been here before?”

“No.”

“It’s just a small waterfall. Sometimes people are disappointed. There’s a much bigger one five miles upstream, but that’s on private property. The property line is clearly marked; please stay on our side of it. We have plenty of hiking trails available, and this is a beautiful time of the year. The Porters are in Cabin Fifteen. You’ll adore them. Mrs. Porter is such a dear, and Mr. Porter reminds me of my own husband. Then, your neighbor in Cabin Sixteen, is Ann Smith. Sweet girl, just came in last night. The man in the cabin on the opposite side of you also seems very quiet. He’s been here for a month already, and mostly keeps to himself, but he does have a dog. I hope that doesn’t bother you. Any questions?”

“The telephone . . .?” Marx phrased it as a question, motioning with the key in his hand.

“The cabins don’t have their own telephones, but you’re welcome to use the one here in the office for local calls during business hours. The restroom facilities are in the building behind this one. If you need anything else, just ask.”

“Thanks.” He turned to Lowan, who reluctantly stood. They walked outside together. Marx handed the key to Lowan and then picked up their suitcases. “Cabin Seventeen . . .”

“I hope it is not far.” Lowan watched his steps. The dirt path was pitted and bumpy, broken by occasional tree roots. The small cabins were close together, but thick foliage surrounding them provided the illusion of privacy.

Running water tinkled in the distance. Birds chirped. Marx wanted to hurry so he could put the suitcases down, but gritted his teeth and walked slowly enough to keep pace with Lowan. He hadn’t had a vacation . . . ever. He barely had days off. Unstructured time was a foreign concept. “After we unpack, what do we do?”

“Nothing at all.” Lowan paused to breathe. “I intend to sit beside the waterfall and listen to the birds for the next week. Perhaps I will take extended naps in the afternoons.”

“Hmm.” Marx shifted his grip on the suitcases. The sky darkened. He might enjoy exploring the woods surrounding the retreat if the weather cooperated.

The path curved. The cabins were identical apart from the number plaques. At Cabin Fifteen, a couple reclining in lawn chairs waved. Lowan paused for a greeting before moving on.

At the next cabin, a thin woman fumbled with the lock on the door. The key made scraping sounds. She glanced up at them, choked on a startled exclamation, and darted around the corner like a fleeing rabbit.

“What was that all about?” Marx stared in the direction of her disappearance.

“Some things do not concern us.” Lowan unlocked their cabin and pushed the door open.

Before stepping inside, Marx took one last look at the neighboring cabins. A man rose from one of the chairs in front of Cabin Eighteen. He stared at them with his arms folded. A large mixed-breed dog lounged at his feet. Marx set the suitcases down and waved awkwardly. The other man glared for a moment, then turned his back on Marx and stepped into his own cabin.



## Chapter III

**M**arx stepped inside the cabin, waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, and then looked around. A damp and musty odor permeated the atmosphere. One table with two chairs took up the center of the room. Two narrow beds on opposite sides of the room, and a coal stove at the back.

“No electricity?” Marx set Lowan’s suitcase on one of the beds and took his own across the room to the other. An oil lantern sat on the table, along with a box of matches. “I should’ve brought a deck of cards.”

“I have very little interest in most card games.” Lowan checked his suitcase, closed it again, and stepped back. “I intend to visit the waterfall first. The weather may not last through the afternoon.”

“Yeah, sure.” Marx stepped outside and waited.

Lowan locked the cabin door and put the key into his pocket. Signs along the path pointed in the direction of the waterfall. The path twisted through the dense woods and past several other cabins.

A sign directed them onto a side path. Multiple varieties of birds chirped. They sounded as if they were scolding each other. Running water trickled in the distance. He couldn't see much of the sky through the trees, but the forest felt unnaturally shadowy.

The path turned again, bringing them into a small clearing. A wide, shallow stream bubbled over smooth rocks. If the weather was warmer, Marx might have indulged in the childish urge to frolic through the stream barefoot and search for frogs. No. The absurdity of the idea made him cringe. He put his head down and tried to forget it.

The waterfall wasn't more than a foot high. Picturesque, but not overwhelmingly impressive. A bench had been positioned beside it, facing the water. Lowan approached and carefully eased himself onto it. "I feel as if I had very little effect on the outcome of my most recent case, even if it did end favorably." He motioned for Marx to join him.

"At least, nobody can tell you that you can't go back to work. I mean, it's different if you take time off just because you want to." He sat, but leaned over, set his elbows on his knees, rested his chin on his hands, and stared at his shoes. The damp air smelled fishy. High-pitched chirping grated on his nerves. "My head doesn't hurt anymore. I don't know why I still can't remember anything. Just that one whole day . . ."

"Marx, I am sorry." Lowan touched his arm.

Marx flinched and jerked away. "It's not your fault." He leaped off the bench and paced, overcome by the urge to do something. Anything. The muscles in his neck and shoulders knotted. Sitting around and feeling sorry for himself never solved any problems. "I think I'll take a walk."

Blind to his surroundings, he stalked down the path. His own footsteps and the sound of his breathing blocked out the

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singing birds. He tripped over protruding tree roots. Frustration surged. He plunged forward, almost jogging, until he found himself out of breath. His vision blurred, his head spun, and his nerves ached.

Amnesia was an enemy that he couldn't fight.

He blinked until his eyesight focused, then glanced around. Cabin Eighteen was beside him. The dog sat in front of the door, staring at him. It didn't look friendly, and it wasn't tied up. After a moment of indecision, it barked once. A man pulled back the curtain and looked through the window.

Marx moved away. He collected his thoughts and reminded himself that strolling through the woods was supposed to be enjoyable. A cold wind blew through his coat. Raindrops pattered against the leaves. A few drops broke through the coverage and thudded onto the brim of his hat. He shook himself and pulled his coat closer. The precipitation didn't last, so he kept walking.

He looped around the cabin trail and checked his watch, surprised that the time was only a little after noon. As dark and dreary as the weather had become, a few of the vacationers had settled into their cabins and lit their lamps. Windows flickered with a warm orange glow. He returned to the trail that led to the waterfall, stopped at an intersection, and glanced the opposite way.

Another trail branched off into the woods, away from the cabins. He hadn't noticed it earlier. A quick glance at the sky showed no significant change. Dull gray and dreary. If the weather had held out this long, he could risk a few more minutes outdoors. The urge to explore dragged him down the new path.

He settled into long strides, noticing his surroundings. The earlier exertion had worn off most of his frustration.



Now, the singing birds didn't annoy him quite so much. Two squirrels skittered across his path, chasing each other up the trunk of a tree. They chattered and scolded, then disappeared into the branches.

The nagging feeling of being watched made him turn around. A woman sat on a log several yards away—the same woman he had seen earlier outside of Cabin Sixteen. She half-rose from her seat, moving slowly, her posture tense. She stared without blinking.

“Hi.” He kept his voice moderately quiet, added a slight wave, and avoided direct eye contact, trying his best not to scare her again. The approach might have worked on a timid stray dog.

The woman bolted, moving faster than he thought possible through the underbrush. If she had gone straight up one of the trees after the squirrels, it wouldn't have surprised him. Her crashing footsteps faded.

He shrugged and moved on, hoping that they weren't far enough from civilization that bears or wolves might be a concern. That thought automatically made him slip his hand under his jacket. He'd left his gun in his suitcase, now locked in the cabin, and Lowan had the key. If he'd thought of bears earlier, he would have taken it with him. He felt undressed without it.

Shadows darkened. He walked faster, catching himself making a mental map of the trails. Entrances and exits, alternate routes, potential resources, concealment and cover. Thirteen years of police experience prevented him from turning off the suspicious side of his nature.

He didn't want any other kind of job. The thought of losing the only career he'd ever known brought on another stress headache. Playing the piano at a theater had never

been anything but part time money. And he couldn't go back to it now that all the movies had switched to sound films.

Scattered raindrops splashed his face again. He ducked and kept walking. Signs on the trees ahead warned against trespassing. A wire fence ran in a straight line. The trail turned parallel to the adjacent property line. Raindrops fell harder. He broke into a jog. The trail crossed a rickety, narrow bridge and looped around beside the river. Water battered against the rocks.

Rain saturated his coat. Half a mile farther, another rotten bridge brought him back to the opposite side and connected him to the starting point. His shoes began to slip in the mud. He rushed toward the waterfall and found Lowan's bench empty, then ran back the way he had come. Wind shook the branches and tore at the new leaves.

He found Lowan halfway to the cabin.

"The rain began suddenly." Lowan took the key from his pocket and handed it to Marx. Water dripped from the brim of his hat. "I could not move quickly enough to avoid it."

Marx took the key and jogged ahead. He unlocked the door and pulled it open. Lowan limped through, shivering. They both pulled off their soaking coats and draped them over the chairs. Water drained onto the floor. Lowan stepped toward the stove, as if expecting heat.

"Here, let me do that." Marx couldn't imagine expecting Lowan to do the lifting and bending involved in tending the stove. He shoveled coal, checked the dampers, found some old newspaper in a box near the coal bin, and grabbed the matches off the table. "It might take a while to warm up in here. I brought a small pot and some canned food." Their vacation had been hastily planned, and they hadn't discussed meals.

“I brought sandwich ingredients.” Lowan lit the lamp, brought several items from his suitcase, and sat down to assemble his contribution for their dinner. Turkey and a tomato. “Depending on what is available nearby, we may need to return to town tomorrow for more.”

Rain drummed against the roof, driven by a howling wind. The sound of water dripping made Marx turn. Water splashed onto the middle of the floor and formed a spreading puddle. “I didn’t bring a bucket. At least it’s not over anything important. What a vacation this is turning out to be.” He shoveled more coal into the crackling fire.

Lowan glanced up from his dinner preparations.

The door flew open. The storm raged through the doorway. A woman dodged inside and shoved it closed, gasping and shivering. She turned around, then threw herself back against the door. “What are you doing in my cabin?”

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