

Prologue

Parke Stockard wouldn't have ended up popped-over-the-head dead if she hadn't been bent on making mischief that morning. To be fair, though, she couldn't have known she'd messed with the wrong person this time—one who solved their Parke Stockard plight by leaving her dead at the church altar.

Waking up in her pink satin sheets that morning, she'd mulled over some malevolence. While brushing her hair model-quality blonde hair, she'd concocted even more nastiness. And, when driving her Champaign-colored BMW convertible to church, she made the fateful phone call that started the day on its slippery slope.

If Parke had—for once—rejected her baser instincts, she'd still be happily dreaming up devilment this very day. If she'd only listened to the *good* Parke buried deep in the nether regions of her murky conscience. Or had second thoughts and remembered she was on her way to *church*. But she didn't and the stage was set for murder in the sanctuary.

Early-morning summer light peeked through stained glass windows, its gentle light illuminating the flower arrangement on the altar. The withering glare Parke leveled at it should have vaporized the intrepid bouquet on the spot. Unscathed by her fury, the black-eyed Susans and daisies sassily defied her.

Parke vowed to do something about Kitty. Scavenging the roadsides for the altar arrangements was not going to work. Good Lord, next she'd be sticking Queen Anne's lace in Mason jars with chickweed filler. Dumping the weedy bouquet in a trash bag, Parke pulled out roses from her canvas tote and rapidly positioned them in a heavy crystal vase.

Intent on fixing the immediate crisis of the unsuitable arrangement and the long-term problem of the locals' ignorance, Parke didn't notice the sanctuary doors open. A harsh voice caught her attention.

"You!" Parke said scornfully. And then she picked the last fight of her life—thirty minutes later, pretty Parke Stockard was dead...

Chapter 1

Several days earlier:

It was a warm, but not yet muggy, 7:00 a.m. on what would become a blistering summer day. Sensible, elderly citizens of Bradley, North Carolina, were contentedly puttering about before the heat took a turn into truly oppressive territory. They plucked tomatoes off their backyard vines for lunch, refilled feeders for cardinals and bluebirds, wrestled with the complexities of the daily crossword, or munched leisurely bowls of Grape Nuts under humming screened-porch fans. Myrtle Clover could not be included among this placid part of the populace. An early-morning phone call had fired her up into a froth. That damned Parke Stockard.

An unwelcome glimpse of herself in a shiny, copper kitchen pot revealed an Einstein-like image scowling back at her. She patted down her wispy poof of hair into a semblance of order and squinted at the rooster clock hanging on her kitchen wall. No, it wasn't too early to call Elaine. Myrtle's toddler grandson functioned admirably as Elaine's alarm clock. What did it matter that he preferred watching the *Teletubbies* at 5:30 a.m.? In his baby head, everyone *should* be eager to watch Laa-laa wrangle her big, yellow ball from Dipsy's clutches.

Elaine answered the phone with a weary hello. The early mornings must be hitting her pretty hard. Her voice was gravelly like she'd swallowed half of Little Red's sandbox.

"Parke Stockard is bad news, Elaine. Bad news. The whole town is riled up about her. And let me tell you what she's done to *me*."

Elaine was, really, trying to listen to her mother-in-law. Ordinarily, multi-tasking was her forte. But, with the cordless phone crunched between her ear and her shoulder as she cleaned up Cheerios her son had cheerfully tossed onto the linoleum, she couldn't fully focus on the phone call. "Um. Really?" Elaine stretched to reach the crumbs on the other side of the chair and felt much older than thirty-six.

Myrtle paused for effect. This effect would have been more imposing if Elaine had been able to see Myrtle draw her octogenarian but sturdy frame to its full six feet. “She just finagled more space for her *Bradley Bugle* column.”

Elaine pulled the pepper shaker out of Little Red’s chubby two-year old fist, prompting a howl of protest. She winced at the noise. “Why is that a problem for you?”

“Because now my helpful hints column is being cut by half! Sloan Jones, the editor, called me this morning first thing to let me know. Coward. Probably hoping I’d still be snoozing in bed and he’d get my answering machine. This town needs my helpful hints a lot more than the crud Parke Stockard spews on paper. That pointless ‘Posing Prettily with Parke’ column. Wretched woman.” She paused as Little Red’s howling reached her ears. “Are you besieged? Is Little Red making that racket? What *are* you doing to my darling grandson?”

Elaine jogged towards the back of the house, the darling grandson in hot pursuit. Taking refuge in the master bedroom, she yanked the door shut, locking it quickly. She brushed her black bob out of her eyes with a yellow latex-gloved hand. Elaine hoped Little Red, now flinging his small body angrily against the door, would soon discover that the *Teletubbies* perma-played on the den TV. Looking down, she discovered she still clutched the pepper shaker. She set it down on a dresser and plucked off the latex gloves. “Nothing. He...it’s time for his nap as soon as I get off the phone with you. He got up at 4:30 for some reason today and so it’s already naptime.” She cut off her own hysterical laugh. Elaine was a morning person, but in no way interpreted 4:30 as qualifying as morning.

“Uh...,” Elaine rounded up her scattered thoughts. “I think her column is called ‘Lovely Living with Parke’, Myrtle. Why would Sloan cut your articles? Everyone raves about them.”

Myrtle plopped down at her living room desk and opened a computer file, glaring at the copy. “So my column has been kind of wacky the last couple of weeks. But you wouldn’t believe the tips people mailed in to me. I made do with that tip about Ivory soap under fitted sheets relieving leg cramps.” Myrtle snorted.

“And the tip about stopping nosebleeds,” Elaine helpfully reminded Myrtle. She noticed with relief that the screaming had trailed off and prayed his little feet were plodding off to the den.

“Oh right. That old wives’ tale about dropping a set of cold keys down the neck of the afflicted.” Myrtle morosely read the offending article off the computer screen.

“Sloan thinks I’m dabbling in the occult. But they weren’t *my* tips, after all.”

Elaine cautiously opened the bedroom door and peeked down the hall. No demented toddlers lurking there, only their sullen, teenaged French exchange student, stumbling sleepily out of the guest bedroom. Elaine apologized in rusty French for Little Red’s eruption during Jean-Marc’s quality sleep time. Unfortunately for Elaine, her French apology translated as, “I’m happy Little Red is a sunny goat.” Her foreign guest’s inexplicable eye-roll mystified Elaine.

Myrtle added some more sugar to her coffee cup. “Sloan has a crush on Parke, too.”

“Well, she’s a beautiful woman.”

“With hard eyes. Hard, beady little eyes. And that face that just screams WASP. Her nose is pointy enough to pop a balloon. Parke is pushy, bossy, and hateful to everybody.”

“She’s slender.”

“Bony,” answered Myrtle.

“And she’s in great shape. She must exercise every day.”

“She power walks. She pumps her arms way up and down like a chicken.”

“It’s supposed to be a great alternative to jogging, Myrtle.”

“Well, she looks like she’s trying to hightail it to the nearest bathroom.”

“Silly or not, it obviously works for her. She’s very fit,” said Elaine wistfully.

“And I’m not sure I’m buying this portrayal of Parke Stockard as evil incarnate. For one thing, she spends a heck of a lot of money to renovate the church. Word is she’s funding a new education wing for the Sunday School.”

Myrtle snorted. “A desperate and ultimately futile plot to save her immortal soul. Take it from someone who’s vastly old and immensely wise that Parke Stockard qualifies as truly wicked. She enjoys getting people’s goats.”

The hurricane of howling and thumping against the bedroom door resumed. Elaine wasn’t following Myrtle’s sudden livestock references and was trying to determine if Parke Stockard was still the subject of the conversation without revealing that she’d not been listening attentively the last few sentences.

Myrtle obsessed over minutiae in her life. But so did Elaine, whose ponderous problem for the week was Little Red’s sudden ability to remove lids from sippy cups. Elaine thought it safest to pick up on the last thread of the conversation that she could remember. “Sloan wouldn’t cut your column because of a crush, Myrtle.”

“*And* Parke’s become the *Bugle*’s biggest advertiser, which apparently obligates Sloan to be her slave for life. Some free press. Just because she’s an all-powerful developer *and* realtor. He thinks she’s a big-shot since she used to write a society column in New York. Who cares?” Myrtle’s gusty sigh cannoned through the phone line, making Elaine cringe and pull the receiver off her ear. “That column kept me busy.”

Elaine said hastily, “Well now you’ll have your church work keeping you busy, won’t you?” All Red needed was his octogenarian mother getting bored again.

Myrtle’s voice was steely. “What church work is that?”

“The Altar Guild and Women of the Church. Red mentioned it this morning.”

There was a pregnant pause before Myrtle said, “I didn’t sign up for Altar Guild. And certainly not for Women of the Church. Bunch of old biddies. Did *Red* sign me up?”

Elaine would have recognized the danger signs in her mother-in-law’s tone if Little Red hadn’t continued his noisy vigil outside her bedroom door. “Hmm.”

Myrtle fumed. “Parke Stockard *was* the best candidate for Bradley, North Carolina’s ‘Most Likely to be Murdered.’ But Red may have beaten her out.”

Josh Tucker watched as his boss at the *Bradley Bugle*, Sloan Jones, slammed his telephone down. “Good *God*,” groaned Sloan, clutching his head. “Deliver me from conversations with Myrtle Clover.”

“Still griping about her column getting cut?”

“Well, it’s not like I cut it *out*. I just reduced it. It was getting damn weird, anyway, with all the nosebleed tips lately.”

“What’s behind cutting *my* piece in the last edition? It wasn’t weird at all,” said Josh.

“Sorry about that,” Sloan said, “Fine writing, as usual. Had to squeeze in Parke’s column, though. Her full-page weekly ad took our bookkeeping out of the red. Thank God she pays in advance.”

Josh’s perfunctory smile disappeared in the deep lines in his face. Sloan went on, “And she’s not a bad writer, either. Imagine—two former New York writers on the *Bugle* staff!”

Josh lifted a beefy hand and smoothed it over his high forehead. There were times he missed New York. He'd expected his hometown to change while he was gone, but hadn't noticed any changes at all. Chili dogs were still 99 cents at Bo's Diner. The Bradley Library hadn't circulated any new titles since 1985 and Miss Hudgins still shushed the patrons. The *Bradley Bugle* still considered bridge games and golden anniversaries major local news stories. His mother still fussed over him and brought him watery chicken noodle soup whenever he sniffled. Thomas Wolfe had obviously never visited Bradley, North Carolina, if he thought you could never go home again.

"Parke sure gives the *Bugle* some pizzazz." Sloan dreamily reflected on Parke Stockard's finer qualities, basking again in the radiant smile she'd blindsided him with early that morning. Sloan had carefully combed over his wispy hair today. This task involved locating his comb—a major undertaking, considering it had been misplaced for weeks.

Josh flushed. Parke's expensive floral perfume still cloyingly invaded the newsroom, lingering in his nostrils and firing up his migraines. The scent conjured up Parke's condescending smiles. "Just as long as the copy cutting stops there. We've made an award-winning newspaper, Sloan. The *Bradley Bugle* is starting to get some real attention from the public...and not just the town of Bradley. We don't need her interference."

Sloan smiled fondly at the large, pedestalled trophy of an oversized plumed pen that sat in a place of honor on his paper-congested desk. "Yes, we've done well, haven't we?" Sloan beamed at Josh. His jowly face fell when Josh remained grim. Sloan pulled at his shirt collar. "Space is at a premium, you know. Parke's ad revenue is helping us out a lot, but we're not on a *New York Times* budget. Or even a *Charlotte Observer* budget. Or even a—"

"Point taken. But there's got to be something else you can cut back on. Rita's recipes?"

“I’d get reader hate mail.”

“The horoscopes Maisy Perry makes up?”

“Josh, there’re people who plan their whole day around those things. There’ll be pandemonium in the streets if Maisy doesn’t give them some guidance.”

“Well then, the ‘Good Neighbors’ column. If somebody wants to trade their grandma’s punch bowl for a few heirloom tomato plants, the *Bugle* doesn’t have to get in the middle of it, does it?”

Sloan stared blankly at him. He’d no idea Josh Tucker had gotten so completely out of touch with Bradley reality during his time in New York. “Now you’re just talking crazy. If I don’t broker deals between folks trying to trade their *National Geographic* collection for a collection of *Reader’s Digest* condensed books, I’ll be strung up in the streets. My 75-year-old neighbor, Miss Sissy? She’d be out there booing my butt every time I took my trash out. She’s the number one fan of ‘Good Neighbors.’”

“We’re back to Parke then.”

Sloan missed the dark undertone in Josh’s voice. “And like I told you, Parke is single-handedly financing the dinky amount of copy we *do* have. No, it’s got to be your articles and Miss Myrtle’s tips. You’re winning us awards,” added Sloan hastily, “but you can be edited down a little. Miss Myrtle’s column is new enough that her readers aren’t totally rabid fans yet.”

Josh crouched back over his article to signal the end of the conversation. He wasn’t going to play second fiddle to Parke Stockard in the newsroom—he didn’t care how much ad copy she bought.

Tanner Hayes spluttered wordlessly, perspiration standing in beads on his high forehead. The fact that his usually ruddy face was ashen and that he dramatically clutched his chest would have alerted insightful observers to his sudden, vicious heart attack. But Parke Stockard, for all her beauty, money, and shrewdness, wasn't particularly perceptive. Or compassionate. She thought only that his round, balding head, buggy eyes, and strangled utterances reminded her of a toad.

She lazily batted a buzzing fly his way with a manicured hand, curious to see if a long tongue would slurp it up. When it didn't, she bored with her flight of fancy and returned to the business at hand.

"Your house," she repeated loudly. Was the old man deaf or just stupid? "You need to sell it to me. Let me know when you're ready to sign on. You'll be amazed how much your property will be worth when we level your house and build three in its place. And really—your home is completely outdated." She waved her slender arm dismissively towards the old Colonial. "You won't have a hope in hell of selling it when you or your wife go to a nursing home. Which," she pointed out, "could be any day now." She gave him a hard look, spun on her heel, and walked briskly to her car.

As Parke zipped down the road in her sporty car, she angled the rearview mirror down to apply more red lipstick. This explains why she never saw Tanner Hayes lying on his cement driveway, still clutching his chest, or his wife, Althea, hurrying down the long drive to her husband's side.

It was a short drive to her own home. It was an old farmhouse with a wrap-around porch. At least, it was until she'd razed it. Now it was a fabulous Mediterranean-style villa named *Shangri-La* with real stucco, a tiled roof, and an in-law suite in the basement. The in-law suite

was sort of a dungeon, but it hardly mattered since Parke had divorced the pesky husband and equally irritating in-laws.

She began to wonder, however, if she should put her son Cecil in the dungeon suite. Perhaps under lock and key. She wasn't sure where all the money she funneled him was going, but if the unsavory tattooed friend with the odd piercings was any indication, Cecil was once again heading down the wrong road. It would be nice to avoid rehab this time. Parke wondered if they even had rehab centers in the South.

She was just pulling the massive wooden front door shut behind her when she heard Cecil's voice echoing through the granite-floored foyer from the balcony above. She whipped off her Chanel sunglasses, ready for battle. What would it be this time? \$25,000? \$40,000? Bracing herself, she put a tanned hand where she imagined her heart might be. Her son thought she looked as if she was about to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

"Yes, Cecil," she asked in a faux faint voice. It was a faded enough tone to give Cecil pause.

"Mother, I need a little money." His mind raced, calculating how little he could get away with asking.

"Yes, Cecil?" She sank dramatically into a Chippendale chair, rummaging in her bag for her checkbook.

"Just..." he stopped. "Just....five thousand."

Parke stopped short. Five thousand? Five thousand what? Surely not dollars. There had to be a catch. Five thousand pounds? Five thousand rubies? She wasn't going to give him a chance to revise it. She snatched the checkbook and a pen out of the bag and scribbled out a check, chipping a lacquered nail in the process. She slapped it wordlessly on a marble-topped

table in the foyer and swept out of the room. Cecil thoughtfully watched as her high heels tapped out of the foyer. He hoped his free-loading days weren't drawing to a close.

Benton Chambers puffed a cigar (a habit cultivated because he thought that's what Southern politicians were supposed to do). After flicking off the long row of ash, he set the cigar down on a heavy ashtray and pulled open his desk drawer for his flask of Jim Beam and a glass. His pudgy fingers clamped around the flask as he poured the brown liquid into the glass and downed it eagerly, wiping a few stray drops off his bloated features with the back of his wrist.

Benton had thought his re-election to the city council would be a cakewalk. Running on the "preserving Bradley's history" platform was a guaranteed winner since everyone was furious about the Stockard woman sticking McMansions on small lots. Everybody in town was railing against her and his win looked like a sure thing.

Benton stared morosely at his drink, then laid it down and picked up the cigar again. He'd thought serving on the city council would be an easy job. How hard could it be to govern a small Southern town with a quaint and vibrant downtown, a pretty lake, and a healthy tourism industry? If only he'd known. He hadn't counted on Parke coming after *him*, pressuring him. He thought they'd had a totally different arrangement. Who knew someone so beautiful could be so toxic? Blackmailing harpy. And now he was stuck—if he suddenly changed platforms, he'd look like a fool at best and would lose the election at worst. How could he get Parke Stockard to shut up? He'd put in the time, shook the hands, shot the bull. He had the pretty wife, the friends with beach houses. He'd be a monkey's uncle if that pretty Yankee was going to take him down just when he'd made it big. His cell phone bleated and he ignored its ring after seeing his wife's number on the display. He smoked and thought while the air turned blue.

The Methodist minister, Nathaniel Dimsdale, summoned all his Christian patience to deal with the early-morning visitor in his church office. Kitty's hair was pulled up in a bun, but in her agitation, some hair had come loose, giving her a most disheveled look. Seminary covered weddings, funerals, and board meetings. He was quite sure there'd been no mention of hysterical church ladies with mascara rivers running down their faces.

Kitty sopped up her misery with two brand-new boxes of Kleenex and now Nathaniel rummaged desperately through his desk for a travel pack he knew was hiding in there. Kitty trumpeted into the last remaining tissue and Nathaniel fumbled frantically through the drawer until his long fingers grasped the travel pack. He feared Kitty might soon be in need of a hug and the gangling man felt ill-equipped to handle the puddling mess she'd become.

What had Kitty been talking about before the floodgates opened? "So summing up your concerns, Kitty?"

"I'm concerned Parke Stockard is going to hell. Although that would get her out of my hair. Parke is mean. Parke is bossy. Parke tells me they do it better in New York. Parke hates my flower arrangements. Parke says my chicken casseroles make her puke."

"I understand." Nathaniel cut off her litany of loathing and affected a spiritual glow he hoped would transfer to his wretched visitor. She opened her mouth again and he sighed. The glow hadn't worked. He'd have to resort to prayer.

"And her Cecil got my Brian into drugs. Now Brian's at reform school and Parke's son is living high on the hog. It's not *fair*." Kitty swabbed her face with one of the travel tissues, succeeding only in smearing the mascara across her cheeks. "Since Parke moved here, everything has changed. My church work is just as important to me as breathing. You know that.

The only time I feel good about myself is when I'm arranging flowers on the altar, or cutting up communion bread. I don't get that feeling at home with Tiny."

Nathaniel repressed a shudder at her husband's name. Tiny was the massive, Neanderthal-like redneck who mowed the church lawn. Yes, she needed to escape her home life as much as possible. But it presented him with quite a dilemma.

Kitty's face puckered up and a few fat tears squeezed out. "She's the prettiest woman in Bradley. But Mama always said 'Pretty is as pretty does.' Parke Stockard would be revolting if she looked like she acts." She heaved a hiccupping sigh and gave a malicious smile at the enticing thought of a disfigured Parke.

No question about it: Kitty was a valuable resource. She plugged away at humdrum church chores that no one volunteered to do. But Parke Stockard had her own good points—deep pockets. Not only did she donate new hymnals, plush carpet, and fresh paint, but she had the skills and drive necessary to energize successful fundraising campaigns. The church *could* use a fresh approach and some younger faces in the congregation...and Parke *was* channeling lots of money into church coffers. He sighed.

"Nothing was ever proven, though, was it?" he asked gently. "About Parke's son introducing your son to drugs? And it's good to get a dedicated volunteer in God's house, isn't it? You were doing so much for us, single-handedly, that I always worried about you. Maybe you could take the higher ground and befriend Parke. She's just a newcomer looking for her niche, after all. Won't you prayerfully consider reaching out to her?"

Kitty looked at him sadly. He winced, guessing she must realize the influence Parke's money exerted on him. Kitty pulled her battered pocketbook towards her and stood up. "Brian never used drugs. Never. Not until he started hanging out with Parke's son. Having a new

volunteer is one thing—having a dictator is another.” She stomped out of his office, ignoring his entreaties to sit down. Nathaniel wrung his bony hands together. There would be trouble. Of that he was sure.