

Scarecrows and Corpses

A Meadowood Mystery



Nancy M. Wade

PREVIEW

Chapter 1

Wisps of fog shrouded low-lying areas of ground as I drove toward the park and the scout jamboree being held there. The brisk October morning still held the chill from the night before, but rays of bright sunlight pierced the scattered clouds and promised to warm the land and burn away the fog remnants.

I parked in the gravel lot and hurried to my den's campsite; the bright blue pennant that we erected yesterday waved proudly as it marked our den. The boys sat around the campfire circle, finishing their breakfasts or rubbing frigid hands near the warm flames.

Ted Williams, the assistant den leader, greeted me as I approached. "Hey there, Merry. The boys are chomping at the bit to get to the corn maze before the other scouts."

I smiled and nodded in agreement. Ted was a nice guy, friendly and helpful. He was well liked around town; running his own real estate office as both an agent and developer. He had sold me my house ten years ago and since then we've been close friends, he and his wife Barbara and their son Joey. I watched as he gathered up cooking utensils, then doused the fire with water. Embers hissed as smoke rose into the still damp air.

"How'd it go last night?" I asked Ted.

"Great, no problems."

I turned to the boys in various stages of breakfast, "Pack up all of your belongings and place your backpacks inside your tents. When we get back from the corn maze, we'll take down

the tents and prepare to leave. Your parents should be here by then," I instructed my cub scouts.

Ted and I gave the boys a few more minutes to finish their chores, checked to make sure the fire was completely extinguished, then told everyone to line up by two's.

Seven and nine-year-old boys' excited and giggling voices filled the morning air. Everyone talked at once as my cub scouts marched the mile and a half from Fox Run Park to the Granger corn maze. I saw three other dens walking the trail behind us as we all headed to the fun Halloween activity.

I loved this time of year. The fall colors were breathtaking, and the air had just enough of a nip to it to make a person step lively. I think I was as excited as the boys; I always looked forward to this annual event of exploring the Granger Farm corn maze.

Acres of tall corn grew in the fields to our left; the stalks now dry and brown, ready for harvest. Ears of corn already filled three towering stainless-steel silos for winter feed and now the remaining stalks and leaves were ready to cut for cattle forage and to prepare the soil for next year's planting. Adjacent acres glistened with morning dew, glowed golden in the morning sunshine with rows of dried soybean plants that undulated in the brisk air. A brick red barn with a gambrel roof occupied the land west of the house; its wide doors were propped open with bales of hay. The weathered barn sported a faded *Mail Pouch Tobacco* sign; painted on so many rural structures. Tethered horses snickered in their stalls, hoping for apple treats from the groups of children that raced into the barn. The long pig building sat downwind, east of the main farmhouse, barn and chicken coop, its sturdy metal roofing and walls allowed a mixture of sun and shade with ample ventilation in the divided pens. I could hear the hogs snorting and grunting in their pens as I hiked toward the corn maze.

A pair of colorful scarecrows dressed in ragged clothing guarded the entrance to the maze. One had a pumpkin head with a wide, gay smile; the other scarecrow's pumpkin head

leered with carved, sinister jagged teeth. A shudder went through me as I viewed the head worthy of a Stephen King horror story.

I walked directly to the small admission booth manned by one of the farm employees and paid the fee for our cub scout den to enter the maze. Ted would wait near the exit of the maze to corral our boys as each finished. I planned to stay by the entrance, keeping a head count and in case any of the boys got turned around or came back out. The scarecrows would keep me company.

“Have fun, take your time. Call out if you get lost or can’t find your way out. Mr. Williams and I are right here to help you. Okay?” I asked as I scanned the expectant faces.

Several heads nodded and others mumbled yes as they jostled each other, eager to begin. I laughed, then checked my wristwatch for the time.

With a clap of my hands, I shouted, “Okay; one, two, three, go!”

The boys scrambled and ran into the intricate labyrinth. I listened to the rustle of brittle corn stalks as they moved along the paths, twisting and turning back and forth. I recognized the distinct voices laughing and calling out; boys I had guided as den mother for over two years. They were as familiar to me as my own sons.

All of a sudden, a scream rang out. I knew that voice only too well - my son, Billy. It was not a scream of delight, but one filled with terror. I dropped my backpack and dashed into the leafy maze. My mother’s antennae ramped up as I followed the sound. My child needed help; I didn’t think of any danger to myself as I sprinted into the unknown.

The maze turned left and right; twice I ran into a solid wall and had to turn around, seeking my way.

“Billy! Where are you? I’m coming,” I yelled.

“Here I am,” he cried.

The corn stalks muffled his voice. I stopped and tried again to get my bearings before plowing ahead. Where were the others? Was Billy hurt? I tried not to panic as I sought his location.

“Don’t move. I’m almost there,” I called.

I turned a corner in the maze and suddenly saw him crouched on the ground with his hands covering his face. My older son Johnny crashed through a wall of corn and reached his brother just as I did. He saw me at the same time.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I tried to find him, but he got behind,” Johnny said as he wiped at threatening tears.

“It’s all right. I’m here now.” I gathered both of my boys in a fierce hug then ran my hands over arms and legs, searching for signs of injury on Billy. My attention was solely on him.

“Billy, look at me,” I said, as I gently pulled his hands down from his face. “What happened?”

He sobbed and hugged me tighter, then raised his hand to point at the trail ahead. I stared intently where he directed and gasped aloud.

“Oh my God. Both of you stay right here.”

A man’s body lay crumpled face down between the rows of corn. I slowly edged closer. A metallic smell stung my nostrils. Blood flooded the ground beneath the man’s head, his face was turned and pressed into the loose dirt. I stooped to study the body. I gently reached inside the collar of a bloody flannel shirt and pressed two fingertips against his neck, seeking a pulse. I found none but tried again. The pale skin contained bluish discolorations on the neck, almost the same shade of blue as his denim overalls. I stood, shaking badly, then turned away from the ghastly sight.

My hand on my heart, I stifled a scream as Ted Williams suddenly exploded between the close corn stalks, his shirt splattered red. I stepped back in a panic and nearly tripped on a large shovel that lay nearby; it was covered in blood and dirt. What had happened here?

The noise of the other boys nearing our spot in the maze brought my focus back to the matter at hand. I hurried back to where I had left Billy and Johnny and moved them before the other boys joined us. No one else should see this gruesome sight.

“Johnny, do you think you can find your way back out to the entrance? Can you do that? Take the boys and wait for me.”

“What are you going to do?” Johnny stammered, trembling.

“I’m going to call your father. I’ll be all right. All of you scouts need to turn around,” I directed in a loud voice to the group of boys still making their way through the maze.

I heard confused mumbling and questions as to what was going on from the scouts, but they obeyed my command. Johnny clutched Billy’s hand in a steel grip that I knew would not be broken as he held his younger brother and led the group. I was never more proud of him.

My hands shook as I fumbled for my cell phone in my jacket pocket and quickly punched in my husband’s number.

“Hello.” I heard the warm, confident voice on the other end of the line.

“Douglas, come quick. We found a body,” I cried into the phone.