

REUNION WITH DEATH

A Meadowood Mystery

Book 2

Reunions are supposed to be fun and a time to celebrate memories and friendships, but not when murder and betrayal intrude as unwanted guests at the Meadowood High School 15-year Class Reunion. The victim is unknown to all but her killer. Who is she? What can Meredith Gardner do when her own husband becomes the prime suspect? Jealousy and passion clash with greed and betrayal. Can Meredith trust her former beau, Bryan Kirkland? The years have changed him; he's not the person she remembers. There's more at stake here than learning the identity of a dead woman.

Meredith (Merry) is a busy wife and mom who always finds time for community projects, leading a cub scout troop or taking care of her many Avon cosmetic customers. Her cheery, positive and can-do attitude carry her through dire circumstances; especially when dead bodies keep dropping on her doorstep. Merry once again enlists her Aunt Fran and friends to help solve this cozy mystery entangling past loves, a mysterious woman, fraud, and old classmates in their rural, mid-western town of Meadowood.

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter 1

Colleen Callahan tied a ribbon to anchor the bright yellow balloon onto the weighted base of the festive blue and gold centerpiece. The balloon floated gaily above the round banquet table, dancing lightly in the cool air conditioning. She stood back to survey the effect then moved on to the next white linen covered table with a royal blue balloon in hand and tied its ribbon to the centerpiece flower bowl.

“This is so much fun!” exclaimed Colleen as she brushed a strand of long auburn hair off a freckled cheek. Her Irish green eyes sparkled as she watched me climb atop a shaky stepladder. “Aren’t you happy you volunteered?” she joked.

“Why is it, we always seem to be the only ones roped into helping? One of these days, I’ve got to learn how to say no. Hey, can you hold the other end of this banner until I get this side secured?” I asked Colleen, my absolute best friend since grade school.

“Oh, sure thing. Hang on. . . got it,” said Colleen as she reached to grasp the paper sign proclaiming Meadowood High – 15th Class Reunion.

“Keep holding that until I get this ladder moved.” I scooted the ladder to the left and climbed up the rickety steps once again.

I stretched my five foot-four-inch frame then stood on tiptoes to pull the long banner into place and taped the corner to the upper doorframe. “Can you see if it’s level? I’d hate to hang it crooked.”

“Nope, looks great. You do good work, girl.”

“Thanks. Whew, let’s take a break. I could use something cold to drink,” I said.

“Now that you mention it, me too.”

We left the banquet room and made our way down plush carpeted hallways to the cozy coffee shop off the front lobby of the Oak Meadow Inn. Colleen approached the teenage girl behind the counter and waited while the girl finished pouring a latte that she had brewed, then served her other customer.

“Be right with you,” the young gal said as she looked up.

“No problem,” said Colleen as she scanned the menu posted on the back wall.

“Okay, what can I get you?”

“I just want something cold to drink. How about an unsweetened iced tea with a piece of lemon?” Colleen turned to Meredith, “Want an iced tea?” At Merry’s nod, she turned back to the clerk, “Make that two.”

Colleen helped herself to two long straws then carried the pair of tall icy drinks to their tiny bistro table.

“I’ve got this,” Colleen said as she grabbed her wallet and walked back to the counter. “What do I owe you, hon?”

“Two-fifty. No tax on beverages served in-house, just take-outs.”

“Thanks. Here’s three, you can keep the change,” Colleen told her as she paid and returned to Meredith.

Both women drank thirstily before they finally sat back in their chairs satisfied.

Colleen sighed, “I needed that. Didn’t realize how dry I was.”

“Mmm, totally agree. I still can’t believe how lucky we were to get the Inn’s banquet room for our reunion. I never would have considered Oak Meadow, way above our budget, but with the low rate Gary Bates quoted us, I just couldn’t turn it down. Wait until everyone sees this place! They’ll be blown away.”

“What did Gary say? Why was the room available? Some kind of last-minute cancellation?” Colleen asked.

“Yeah, there was a fancy wedding booked then suddenly the groom backed out and left the bride practically standing at the altar. Poor thing. The couple had already paid a large deposit six months ago, but the Inn’s policy denies any refund when they cancel without advance notice and within a few days of the event. So, Gary told me that since the Inn had collected that extra

money, he just wanted to quickly rent the room again. Fortunately for us, that bride's loss is our gain," I explained.

"Well, the reunion will certainly be classy this year in this setting. Luckily for us we only had the school gymnasium booked and we could switch locations easily. You know, we may not have very many people on our committee, but I think we've done a fabulous job getting the reunion organized," Colleen said proudly.

Colleen smiled at her friend. Meredith Gardner was a gal a person could always count on to join community projects or to lend a hand when someone needed help. Her bubbly and can-do personality always saw the glass as half full. Merry might be busy with her husband Doug and two young boys plus a troop of cub scouts, but she usually managed to find time to do more when called upon.

"Hmm, did you check your emails today for any more reservations? The caterer planned a menu for sixty max. I think our last head count is up to fifty-six, that's seventy-five percent of our senior class. I kind of doubted we'd get that many people interested, didn't you?"

"I always hoped that once the invitations went out, our classmates would rally and support the idea. We had a great turnout for our tenth year. I'm more surprised that everyone's enthusiasm has already begun to diminish. What's it going to be like when we have our twenty-fifth or our fiftieth, if we live that long?" asked Colleen.

I snorted into my drink, “I don’t even want to think that far into the future. Fiftieth... heaven forbid!”

“Guess we better go finish up,” said Colleen as she stood then deposited her empty paper cup into a trash bin.

We strolled back to the banquet room, pinching ourselves at our good fortune to be holding the reunion in the town’s, heck in the entire county’s, best hotel. Oak Meadow Inn sprawled over forty-five acres of ground located just outside Meadowood’s city limits. Guests staying at the Inn dine at Kenyon, the four-star rated gourmet restaurant on the premises, or they can while away time on the lush, green nine-hole golf course or simply relax with a fishing rod at the nearby stream. The hotel claimed the privilege of hosting two United States Presidents and four Senators over the years since it’s construction in 1948. The exterior boasted rough granite stone walls with a charcoal slate tiled roof, floor to ceiling windows, and two wide brick patios that overlooked terraces graced with fragrant gardens and artful topiary trees. A lovely gazebo located off the rear terrace provided the perfect setting for wedding ceremonies.

Inside the inn, bold timbers stretched across high cathedral ceilings in the main lobby and great room where guests can gather by a tall stone fireplace in winter or enjoy comfortable sofas and a refreshing drink in warmer seasons. Bright patterned area rugs that reflected the jewel toned fabrics of the furniture and draperies softened the hardwood floors. Framed paintings by landscape

artist Debra Dawson of Denison University in Granville hung on cream-colored walls in the great room. Colorful prints of John Audubon's bird species decorated the walls of the Kenyon dining room. A peek into the Buckeye room showed scarlet and gray sports memorabilia from The Ohio State University that dated back several decades to Woody Hayes. Replicas of mascot, Brutus Buckeye, and other items hung above the bar and atop inviting bistro tables.

Warm summer sun streamed through the banquet room's sparkling clean glass window wall that overlooked the inn's gardens. It was such a pretty view; creamy white roses occupied center stage of the wide garden, bordered by rows of delicate pink and white vinca flowers. Dwarf honeysuckle bushes grew at each corner and added their fragrance to the humid air. I couldn't help but pause in our work and stare at the lush surroundings.

"Penny for your thoughts," Colleen said as she secured the last balloon.

"Oh, just admiring the view and thinking that all our hard work is paying off. When we started putting together this reunion party nine months ago, I really thought it might be a lost cause. So many people have moved away and lost touch. But now. . ."

"I know what you mean. We've had our hands full just trying to find current phone numbers and email addresses to contact all our classmates. Thank goodness for Facebook or we wouldn't

have found half of these people. Do you think every class has this problem?” asked Colleen.

I stretched my arms above my head then dropped my hands to run fingers through my tousled frosted blond hair, fluffed the short curls and lifted them off the back of my neck. My shoulders and arms ached from carrying boxes and hanging decorations. I glanced about the room and began to pack up the extra streamers and balloons.

“Probably. People are so transient these days. Wasn’t it nice of Gary to allow us to put up these decorations? I thought the inn would be stricter about damage to the walls and stuff, but I guess he’s used to dealing with people and different kinds of party arrangements. No doubt they’ve hosted other reunions or birthday parties in here, not just wedding receptions. Still, I think we’ve been careful not to stick tape on painted walls or make nail holes.” I set a box down next to the side exit door and walked back toward Colleen just as her i-phone beeped to announce an incoming message.

Colleen picked up her telephone and quickly read the text. A frown creased her brow and she raised wide eyes to me. “You’re not going to believe who just texted a confirmation for the reunion.”

“Okay, who? I can tell by the expression on your face you weren’t expecting it. So, who?” I asked.

“Bryan Kirkland just sent his R.S.V.P. Are you going to be okay with this?” Colleen asked worriedly.

Memories and images flashed across my mind propelling me back to teenage dances and lazy afternoon picnics with Bryan holding my hand on long walks through the woods. I shook my head to banish my thoughts and raised my eyes to the concern showing in Colleen’s.

“Of course, I am. Just surprised, that’s all. Bryan means nothing to me now; I haven’t seen him since our junior year when he quit to join the Army. We were just kids then.”

“You sure it’s okay? It’s odd, him turning up like this and deciding to attend the reunion when he really didn’t graduate with the class.”

“Well, I guess he considers us his class anyway since we all went to school together practically since kindergarten. Where was that last address you sent the invitation to; someplace in California?”

“Yes, as I recall, it was Fort Irwin near Barstow. I never did know if he got it, but it didn’t come back through the post office as undeliverable, so I guess he did,” Colleen explained.

“Hmm... Bryan Kirkland after all these years.”

“Are you going to tell Doug?” Colleen asked me as we left the party room and headed for our cars.

“I dunno. Why worry him unnecessarily?” I mused and prayed I was right.