

A  
Rose Rountree  
Mystery



# Daisies Never Die

Judy Lawn



# *Daisies*



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*A Rose Rountree Mystery*

**JUDY LAWN**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

DAISIES NEVER DIE

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ISBN 978-1-936144-65-5

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Cover Design © Tamian Wood

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lawn, Judy, 1953-

Daisies never die : a Rose Rountree mystery / Judy Lawn.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-936144-65-5 (trade pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-936144-66-2 (electronic/multiple format) -- ISBN 978-1-61271-056-3 (electronic/epub)

I. Title.

PR9639.4.L38D35 2011

823'.92--dc23

2011035247

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank the team at Zumaya Publications, in particular Elizabeth Burton for her wonderful editorial assistance.



*The Rose has but a  
Summer reign,  
The Daisy never dies.*

— JAMES MONTGOMERY.



# Prologue

If she could just get to her chair...The letter was on the little table...Read it one more time...

She gasped in a breath, leant against the door. So dizzy...But there...

She almost smiled. Sunlight spilled in through the windows, touching gold to all the room. Her beloved paintings, the cushion she had started last week. Wouldn't finish now.

She was crossing the room...Floating...Legs all funny. That horrible rasping sound in her throat again. This is how it is, she thought as she made it to her chair. The satin cushion was as smooth and cold as her skin. She fumbled to place it against the pain at her side.

Shaking, she reached for the letter. The pages were worn smooth from so many readings, the words almost faded away. But she knew them by heart...

"My darling Edith..." Her vision blurred, and she wished she had the strength to put on her glasses. Ah! Pain! Such a sharp, sharp pain.

She slumped sideways in the chair...slowly folded forward over the armrest. The letter floated from her hands and came to rest on the embroidered footstool at her feet.





# Chapter 1

Averil Matthews hesitated outside the small village library. Through the window she saw Rose Rountree, New Zealand's well-known mystery writer, seated at the table in the research room, her gray curls neat about her head as she bent over her book.

Averil bit her lip. Asking a perfect stranger to help with Aunt's personal, private possessions had seemed like a good idea the previous evening, but now she wasn't so sure.

With a shiver, she recalled her arrival at her aunt's house late the previous afternoon. It had been cold, with rain threatening all day; and the drive up from Auckland City, where she lived, had seemed to take forever.

She hesitated before opening the gate and driving through, feeling like an intruder. It was some months since her last visit, and then, Aunt had still been alive...

Fighting back tears, and wishing she had visited more often, Averil parked the car beside the garage, climbed the steps to the front door and unlocked it.

The house felt damp, with that shut-away, musty smell old houses always have. She stood in the middle of the sitting room, unable to take her gaze from her aunt's chair. Aunt had been found in her chair...

Swallowing back her emotion, Averil finally sat down in another chair and let her gaze roam over the cluttered room. Where on earth would she start?

“Go up to William’s Point and sort out Edith’s things,” her father had said a few days after the funeral. “Do you good to get away for a while, honey. Might help you make up your mind about returning to teaching. Seeing things from another perspective and all that.”

He’d given her one of his bear hugs, and she’d almost cried. She’d wished, as she so often had these last three years, that her mother were still alive. If only they had mended their silly quarrel before her death...

“You’ll only be an hour away.” Her father had planted a kiss on top of her head. “You need a project, honey. Let this be it, hmm?”

Averil saw the wisdom of his words, and part of her was relieved at the prospect of something to do other than churn over and over in her mind the events of the last months. Yet a strange reluctance to venture out of her enforced comfort zone assailed her. She had ever done anything like this before. When her mother had died, her father had handled everything...

She had forced herself to pack a bag, lock up her little flat and drive north. All the way up she struggled with mixed emotions of anxiety for the task ahead of her, and self-disgust—she should be glad to do something for her aunt. It was all due to Aunt Edith’s encouragement and enthusiasm for teaching that Averil had got into it in the first place. She had been genuinely fond of her aunt, and saddened by her death.

Sitting in Aunt’s empty, silent house, she felt very alone.

That was when she found the letter.

Averil gave another shiver as she recalled the shock of finding Aunt’s letter. At first she thought it must have been something Edith had clipped from a magazine—Aunt was always clipping articles from magazines—or, when she saw what it was, that the letter belonged to someone else. But after reading the faded print several times, and taking in the “Darling Edith” at the top of the page, she was forced to acknowledge the authenticity of the letter.

She sagged back in the chair and stared without seeing at the sitting room. Aunt had had a lover? Years and years ago, of course, but still...

Averil was completely bewildered. She read through the letter again and again, trying to work it all out. She phoned her father and read the letter to him, but Derek Matthews knew nothing of the mysterious "Tim."

That's when she had thought of Rose Rountree. Rose lived in William's Point. She must have know Aunt reasonably well, because she had been at Aunt's funeral—the service in the little village church, not the private family interment at the cemetery in Auckland afterwards. She had even been mentioned in Aunt's will; Aunt had left Rose her books.

Rose would be able to sort it all out.



Averil came out of her reverie to blink at the winter sunshine glinting off the wet tarmac. How different the roads were here in the country, with their lumpy broken edges, not a bit like the sleekly curbed streets of Auckland City.

She glanced again in through the window then, once more determined, and ignoring the butterflies in her stomach, pushed open the library door and went in.



Rose slowly became aware that someone wanted her attention. Usually, when at the library immersed in her research, she was able to ignore the presence of others. She was conscious of them moving from shelf to shelf, quietly drawing out a book here and there, the murmur of voices, but it didn't disturb her. In fact, she found it oddly companionable.

This time, however, she felt a certain urgency emanating from someone, and a mind willing her to look up from her book.

She did so, and met the anxious, blue-eyed gaze of a young woman she had never seen before. She was proba-

bly in her early twenties, and very pretty, with delicate features, long curly red-brown hair and white skin. A light application of foundation had failed to conceal the scattering of freckles across her small nose.

"Hello?" Rose gave her an inquiring look.

"Oh, I hope I'm not interrupting you, Mrs. Rountree," the young woman said in hushed "library speak." "I wonder...that is, could I please speak to you about...something?" Her blue eyes pleaded, and she added hastily, "It doesn't have to be now. Later will be fine."

She sent a quick look over her shoulder, almost as if she might back from the room.

Rose had to admit her curiosity was only mildly aroused. The young woman probably had a manuscript somewhere she wanted her to look at and give an "honest opinion" on. It wouldn't be the first time that had happened. *She looks as if she might be a writer or a poet*, Rose thought, eyeing the gold-and-pink floral skirt and pink velvet top the young woman wore.

"Well, I am rather busy right now," she said kindly.

She never dissuaded would-be writers. Her early years at the craft and the drawer full of rejection slips she'd received assured her compassion.

At the young woman's meek acceptance of her statement, she added, "How about this afternoon at three o'clock? Will that suit?"

The young woman nodded slowly, her gaze still pleading; so Rose said, more kindly than before, "Is it a poem you want me to look at?"

"A poem?" The young woman looked blank, and Rose thought, *Oh, no, it is a manuscript*.

"No. It's a ...a letter."

"A letter?" Now she was curious.

"Yes, but...I'd rather not discuss it here." The young woman glanced about the room again then back, her blue eyes more anxious than ever.

"Of course. I understand." Rose closed the book she'd been reading. Moments before, she'd been completely en-

grossed. Now she couldn't remember what had been so engrossing. "These can wait."

She got to her feet, gathering up the books and giving the young woman a friendly smile. She was rewarded with a grateful smile in return and an earnest "Are you sure?"

Rose nodded and crossed to the librarian's desk.

"I'll pick these up later, Nora. Thanks."

She put the books down on the desk, gestured for the young woman to follow her; and they went out through the door.

Outside, the young woman turned with a smile and held out her hand.

"I'm Averil Matthews, Mrs. Rountree."

"Call me Rose." She smiled back, and they shook hands.

"Thank you...Rose," Averil said shyly. She bit her lip, as if not sure what to say next.

Rose decided a gently prompting was needed.

"You said you had a letter you want me to look at?"

"Oh! Yes. But it's not...I don't have it with me. It's at my...the house." Averil darted a glance along the street.

"And you'd like me to come and look at it?"

"If...that's all right?"

Rose nodded encouragement.

"It's not far," Averil blurted. "Twenty-three Bromby Avenue."

Rose was startled. Twenty-three Bromby Avenue was Edith Hereford's place. It had been shut up since her death.

She took another look at Averil.

"Are you a relation of Edith's?"

"Yes. I'm her niece—her only niece, actually. Aunt always used her mother's maiden name," she explained. "Did you...did you know my aunt well? I saw you at the funeral. At the church here, I mean."

"Yes, I did go. Although I didn't really know Edith that well," Rose confessed, feeling strangely regretful this had been the case. "I was sorry to hear of her death."

Averil murmured an almost inaudible "Thank you," and they set off along the street.

"I often saw Edith when I walked this way," Rose offered. "She had a lovely garden. We spoke on several occasions."

She didn't tell Averil that those conversations had consisted mainly of the state of the weather. Edith Hereford had been a woman who had kept very much to herself. She had not joined any of the local clubs or groups. Rose had known nothing of her family or friends.

"Yes, the garden is lovely," Averil agreed.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. At the junction between the main street and the street leading to Edith's house, a native wood pigeon swooped past them and alighted high in a pohutakawa tree. They both stopped to look.

"Aren't they incredible birds?" Averil said. "I can't get over the size of them. Or how tame they seem. Look at those snowy white bibs! And those metallic, greenish-purple feathers!" She laughed, a shade self-consciously, at her gushing description of the birds.

"Yes, they are quite unusual." Rose watched the bob, bob of the pigeon's head. "They feed on my guava trees at this time of the year."

They admired the bird a few moments longer then continued on their way.

When they reached number twenty-three, a small wooden bungalow with faded green-and-white paintwork, Averil unlatched the white picket gate. Rose, feeling a peculiar sense of intruding, followed her into Edith Hereford's garden. She'd only ever seen the garden from beyond the fence when she'd stopped to exchange pleasantries with Edith. Now, she looked about with pleasure and admiration.

Even though it was late winter, bright oranges dazzled from the midst of glossy green leaves. The first snowdrops and jonquils peeped up through the ground, and the sweet scent of daphne clung to the air. Red, white and pink ca-

mellias had scattered sumptuous petals beneath their bushes, and the breath-of-heaven was about to break into delicate pink blossom. Rose was delighted to see several monarch butterflies flitting among the flowers.

There was an extraordinary sense of peace and tranquility emanating from that garden. It glowed. She could almost imagine Edith standing amongst it all, reaching out to cup a camellia bloom.

Shivering a little, she followed Averil along the concrete path to the house.

"I'm sorry, the house is a bit stuffy," Averil apologized as she opened the front door. "Come on in."

Rose entered. She admitted to a certain curiosity as to what the inside of Edith Hereford's house would be like. Edith had been a small, neat woman and had dressed in tailored skirts or trousers, with pale blouses in summer and hand-knitted cardigans and jerseys in winter.

The crowded room with antique furniture pressing into every corner, the scatter of embroidered cushions, the standard lamps, the knick-knacks about everywhere and the many watercolor paintings surprised her. She couldn't help an exclamation of surprise.

"It is rather nice, isn't it?" Averil said shyly. "Aunt was quite artistic."

"You mean your aunt painted the watercolors?"

"And she made the cushions and tapestries."

"Well! I had no idea." Rose couldn't hide her astonishment as she looked about the room. It was easy now to see how Edith had spent her time.

The watercolors were delightful—soft, subtle studies of garden flowers, including pansies, daisies, delphiniums, violets, petunias and camellias, all, no doubt, from Edith's own garden. Again, she pictured Edith as she'd often seen her, wandering through the garden, perhaps deciding which flower to paint next. Or which pattern of flowers to embroider onto one of her cushions.

"These are exquisite." She bent to examine one. "I can see your aunt was very talented."



She wondered if Edith had kept a dairy. Had she sat in one of the antique chairs, writing prose or poetry to accompany those delightful paintings?

Rose let her gaze wander over the room again, forgetting for a moment her companion and the reason she was there. She wished now she'd known Edith better. That she'd made more of an effort to be friends, especially these last years when she herself had known the loneliness of solitude.

But perhaps Edith had been quite content with solitude. It was easy to immerse oneself in a garden or hobby. That she also knew. Edith had obviously been content—the evidence of it was all around.

Rose crossed the room to get a closer look at a delightful set of miniatures—pansies in soft gold and lilac. On another wall was an attractive embroidery work of daisies forming a heart.

She suddenly became aware Averil was standing just inside the door of the room, twisting her hands in an abstracted way.

"I am sorry." She smiled, feeling guilty for momentarily forgetting why she was here. "I was drawn to the miniatures and the embroidery work."

Averil appeared to only half-register her explanation.

"The...the letter's over here."

She gestured at a small cluttered table beside a lovely dark-mahogany chair with a high curved back. That it had been Edith's chair was obvious—the satin cushions tucked against the armrests were old, almost threadbare. The tapestry coverings were well-worn, too—little more than strands of rose-colored embroidery thread in places. The little footstool nestled at the curved feet of the chair was in the same faded "old rose" condition. Despite this, both articles of furniture possessed an air of having been loved.

Rose was somewhat startled by her thoughts. The picture of Edith sitting in her chair, as she so often must have done, her feet resting on the embroidered footstool, was so vivid, so real, it was almost as if she were still seated there.

She had heard Edith had been found in a chair by one of the neighbors. Perhaps it had been this very one.

“Would you like to sit down?” Averil asked.

Rose shook away the pictures in her mind. Uncomfortable with the idea of sitting in Edith’s chair, she chose another off to one side and sat down. Averil took a seat close by. She ran her fingers through her red-brown curls.

“Perhaps I’d better explain before I show you the letter.”

At Rose’s encouraging smile, she folded her hands in her lap. Her gaze fluttered about the room a moment then settled on one of her aunt’s paintings. She took a deep breath.

“Aunt never married. As far as I knew. I’d always thought...I mean, Aunt always called herself Miss Hereford, so naturally I assumed she’d never been married.” She gave a small shrug then continued. “Aunt was well into her fifties when I was born—my father was much younger. There were just the two of them. Dad’s still alive,” she added hastily. “He’s sixty-five, now. He married late, and I’m...an only child.” Her gaze dropped to her hands. “Mum died three years ago,” she murmured.

“I’m sorry.”

Averil nodded without looking at her. She took another deep breath, and her unseeing gaze drifted about the room for several moments before settling once more on her aunt’s painting.

“We didn’t visit Aunt that often,” she admitted, sounding a little guilty. “I know we should have, but...well, Aunt always seemed so content with her life. She just didn’t seem to need anyone.” She turned her blue gaze on Rose again, as if willing her to understand.

Rose nodded, at once grasping her meaning. That was exactly how Edith had always seemed to her, too. Content with her life.

“I did come up more often these last years,” Averil continued. “I worried about her being on her own. She was eighty, you know.”

“I hadn’t realized Edith was that age.”

“Yes.” Averil was silent a moment. Then she turned to the small cluttered table beside Edith’s chair. “I...I found this letter. Dad said I was to come up and go through Aunt’s things. Sort out her papers and such. Decide what to do with it all.” She gave a helpless little shrug at the overcrowded room. “I just didn’t know where to start. Then, I found this letter. Dad didn’t know anything about it. I don’t really like any of this,” she confessed. “I feel as though I’m prying.”

She gave another shrug, and Rose nodded again in understanding.

“Last night I thought of you.” Averil offered another of her shy smiles. “I’ve seen you a few times when I’ve been here before, and as I mentioned, I saw you at Aunt’s funeral. I know you’ll think this strange, but...I’ve read all your books, you see, and I...know this does seem strange,” she repeated. “But I feel as if I know you and...I wondered if you would help me with Aunt’s things?” she finished in a little rush. “If you have the time, that is,” she added hastily. “I mean...if you want to...”

She trailed away, embarrassed.

Rose should have been astonished by all of this, but somehow, she wasn’t. She sat for a moment studying Averil’s flushed features, the little table beside the wing chair, the room itself; and she knew she would do as Averil had asked. There wasn’t the slightest trace of hesitation—in fact, quite the contrary. She wanted to jump to her feet and begin at once.

At the same time she wanted to sit there, in Edith Hereford’s home, and let it remain just as it was, undisturbed, with the afternoon sunshine spreading gentle fingers of light over that quiet room. There was something almost criminal in the thought of spoiling it. Disturbing the papers on the table, sorting through the writing desk that surely held precious things, opening drawers. Prying. She knew exactly how Averil felt.

Taking a deep breath and trying to keep her voice steady, she said, "I would like to help, Averil, very much. Thank you for asking me."

"Oh! Thank you, Rose!"

The smile of relief and pleasure on Averil's face seemed somehow to join with the sunlight in the room and encompass her in a warm glow. She smiled back, sensing the harmony between them. Then she became serious.

"Don't you think you'd like a solicitor to be here, Averil? To assist with important documents?"

"No." Averil shook her head, her denial emphatic. "I don't want strangers. Aunt wouldn't have wanted that, either. I feel sure."

"But *I'm* a stranger," Rose felt bound to protest. "I hardly knew Edith. We spoke a few times—"

She broke off as Averil jumped to her feet and crossed to a bookcase on the other side of the room. She pulled out a book and hurried back, smiling eagerly.

"You may not have spoken much, but Aunt had all your books. Look."

She held it out. Rose had no difficulty recognizing one of her earlier editions.

"And look what Aunt wrote here...and here." Averil flipped open pages, showing notations.

Intrigued, Rose took the book and looked down at the elegant printing. Mostly, there were just single words or short phrases—*sunlight*, *The green of the trees*, *The tui's song*, *love*. Carefully, she turned a page, and another and another. All the way through were notations in Edith's elegant hand.

"This is quite extraordinary," she murmured, still turning pages.

"Yes. So you see, you're not really a stranger at all." Averil paused, then rushed into speech again. "I guess you haven't been contacted yet, Rose, but Aunt left you her books in her will."

"Did she?" Rose looked up, more astonished than ever.

"Yes. That's why it's so...right." Averil's eyes were shining.

Caught by a strange moment of emotion, Rose could only smile while her mind fought to absorb the extraordinary revelation. Why had Edith never said anything? It was too astonishing for words!

As she examined more pages, she found herself fervently wishing Edith had told her. She imagined the conversations they would have had. The friendship that could so easily have blossomed. With a feeling of sadness, she closed the book and gave it back.

“Thank you for showing me, Averil. I still can’t quite take it in that Edith has left me her books.” She gave a rueful shake of her head.

“Yes, I know. It must seem strange.”

They shared another smile then Averil put the book down on a chair. She stood beside it, brushing her hands down the sides of her skirt. Then, as if making up her mind, she went across to the little table beside the wing chair and picked up a sheet of paper. She brought it to Rose.

“This is the letter,” she almost whispered.

Rose, pulling her mind from the knowledge of Edith’s extraordinary legacy with some difficulty, took the letter with care, as if it were something alive. She looked up into the young woman’s anxious features.

“Averil, are you sure you want me to read this?”

She swallowed, but managed a nod.

“Yes.”

Taking a deep breath, Rose fished her glasses out of her jacket pocket and put them on. The paper was fragile, the words faded—that the letter was very old was obvious. That it had been read over and over was also obvious. Rose noticed her hands, usually quite steady, were trembling. She felt the strangest sensation, as if someone had just touched her lightly on her shoulder. She shivered.

“Are you cold? I should have put the heater on.”

Rose cleared her throat. “No...I’m quite warm, thank you, Averil.” She began to read.

My Darling Edith,

Your letter was the most wonderful letter a man could get and I have read it again and again and worn it next to my heart day and night. Darling, your news! I can hardly believe it! Darling, I love you so. How I long to hold you in my arms and cover your sweet face with kisses.

As you know, we are not allowed to say anything about [REDACTED] and I guess even those words will be blacked out. We are here in [REDACTED] and are supposed to be [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I will write again when we reach [REDACTED].

Darling, I love you! How I wish I could be with you, my darling. I think of you all the time. Your face is the only thing that keeps me going. I don't hear the noise of the [REDACTED]

The [REDACTED] here is terrible and I keep thinking of that little coffee shop where we used to meet on Fridays after work. I remember how your little hand used to look in mine.

Darling, I love you so much.  
Take care of yourself now.

My love always.  
Tim

As Rose read these words a lump blocked her throat; it was quite some moments before she could look up at Averil again. She was at the French doors, looking out into Edith's garden. A solitary tear rolled down her cheek.

Rose got quickly to her feet and went to her side.  
"Oh! It's just...too sad, isn't it?"

“It almost made me cry, too.” Rose put an arm around her.

“Yes,” Averil sniffed. “War is...well, it’s frightful and so destructive, isn’t it? Why do they do it?” She scrubbed angrily at her face.

Rose gently pressed Averil’s slender shoulder. She had no answer to the question. When she’d been a young girl she had wondered, in just those same words, why. She had never received a satisfactory explanation.

“Do you think they were married?” With a determined sniff, Averil wiped her eyes. “I think Aunt was pregnant. That was her news, wasn’t it?”

“Could have been.” Rose let her arm fall lightly away, not quite as ready to jump to those conclusions. “Have you found any other letters?” she asked. “Or documents?”

Averil shook her head. “No, I only arrived last night. And it was all so...so overwhelming.” She waved her arm in a helpless gesture at the room. “This is the first time I’ve been here since Aunt died.” Her voice broke. They both let a moment pass, then she continued. “I slept in the little room at the end of the passage. I haven’t been into Aunt’s room. I...I just couldn’t.”

Rose nodded in complete understanding. Again the feeling of not wanting to disturb any of Edith’s things came over her. The feeling warred with the more practical knowledge that it had to be done, and the two people most suited to the task were Averil and herself. Then and there, she made a vow to give Averil her full support. Almost at once, she sensed Edith’s approval.

“Perhaps it might be a good idea to begin in this room,” she suggested as evenly as she could. “The writing desk, for example, will probably hold all your aunt’s important papers.”

Averil glanced at the writing desk then back to Rose.

“Yes, you’re probably right.” She drew in a quick breath. “You see...I have to know if Aunt was married, if she did have a child. Obviously, the baby...died.” Her lips wobbled, but she carried on bravely. “It would make sense, then, wouldn’t it? Her life, I mean. The way she lived so quietly—”

She broke off, turning to the window again. Tactfully, Rose made no comment. To give her time, she strolled across to the writing desk and reached to touch the wonderful old wood. It was possible that Edith Hereford had been married and had had a child. Those things were traceable. But what else would they find here in Edith's house, in this desk?

Averil gave a small cough and joined her.

"Aunt always kept the key in the top drawer." She pulled open a tiny drawer. "Here it is."

Rose moved back a bit to allow her to unlock the desk. There was just enough time to wonder if it would be as cluttered as the rest of the room before the lid creaked open.

It was. Papers and documents and letters and bills and books were stacked on top of each other and stuffed into every crevice. Pens overflowed from jars; ornaments sat on top of books and papers. A musty, dusty smell overlaid with the sharp tang of ink and glue clung to the contents.

It was some moments before either of the two women spoke. Then Averil's "Oh" said it all.

Rose took a deep breath, observed the chaos in front of her a moment longer and made a decision.

"Averil, it's getting on now. I think we should wait until tomorrow. When we're both fresh. Don't you?"

Her shoulders sagged a little, but she nodded. She shut the desk, put the key back into the drawer and turned to Rose with a determined smile.

"Yes. We'll begin tomorrow. Thank you, Rose, for...for understanding." She held out her hand.

Rose took it in hers. "I'll come down about nine-thirty in the morning. Okay?"

Averil nodded, and they walked through the house and out to the gate. They said goodbye to each other, and Rose started back along the street. When she reached the end, she decided she would take the path along the riverside to her house.



The tide was coming in. In the late-afternoon light, the river appeared dark and mysterious. Pohutukawa trees leaned their giant silver-gray branches out over the water in graceful embrace. A kingfisher, perched among the branches, spied something in the secret depths below and dived in a flash of iridescent blue.

Rose paused to survey the scene before her. Across the river, the mountain was shadowed, the sun behind it. As she watched the clouds turn pink, she experienced a thrill of excitement as she thought of her afternoon's adventure. What would the following day reveal?

She turned to unlatch the gate to her yard; and as she did so, a monarch butterfly alighted on the worn post beside her hand. For one incredible moment, she looked right into the creature's eyes. Then it was off, sailing into the air on its jaunty flight.

A strange shiver went all the way through her, and for fully thirty seconds, she didn't move. Her heart raced uncomfortably, and the skin on the back of her neck prickled. In her mind's eye, she could still vividly see the butterfly's bright dark eyes. It had been like looking into a pool of infinity.

With an in-drawn breath, she unlatched the gate and stepped inside the welcoming embrace of her own property. The ground beneath her feet was solidly reassuring, as was the big old two-story house she'd lived in for nearly eight years.

She let her gaze linger on the house then move to the garden, to the trees and shrubs she knew so well. Several monarch butterflies fluttered about, searching for their late-afternoon sweet treat. As she passed, they flew up to the larger trees, ever moving, ever searching.

*They're just butterflies,* she told herself.

Deliberately brushing off her fanciful feelings, she went up the steps to the house, suddenly glad when her old gray cat came running to greet her and twine around her legs.

## Chapter 2

Rose had been home about ten minutes when there was a knock at the door; it was her friend and neighbour, Julian Wells. Julian usually joined her for a glass of wine each evening at her house, or she went along to his house in the next street.

Julian had lost his wife Margaret two years earlier, a year after Rose had lost her darling Spence. The two couples had been great friends for years. The men, who had both run law practices in neighbouring small towns, had met through their mutual business, and a friendship had developed between the two women, with their shared love of gardening, from the first.

Margaret, who had been a wonderful cook, had run a bakery in the town where Julian practiced law. Rose had worked at the local primary school as secretary, while her children were small and then after, until her writing had begun to take precedence. Rose and Spence had been first to move from their large home on the outskirts of the town where Spence worked to William's Point. Margaret and Julian, drawn by the glowing descriptions of the place from the other two, had followed a year later. Although semi-retired, Julian still went into his office several times a week.

"Hello, wondered where you were," he said as she opened the door. "I came round a while ago, but you weren't here."

This was stated in mild tones, more to tell her he'd called than to inquire where she'd been.

"Come on in, and I'll tell you all about it."

She found instant comfort in his familiar bulk and this nightly ritual of theirs. Why she should feel so at that moment she couldn't have said exactly, but there was something very dear and comforting in the way Julian came through the door, put an arm around her shoulders, kissed her cheek and produced a bottle of wine. She found she liked the rough rasp of his just-shaved cheek against hers. He smelt nice, too, all warm and masculine with a hint of Old Spice, the aftershave she'd given him for his birthday. She wanted to stay a while longer in his arms and absorb his warmth, have him kiss her properly, not just a peck on the cheek.

The wind had tangled his thick white hair, and it stood out around his head, giving him the look of a ferocious, unkempt hound. Which was the antithesis of his kind, meticulous self.

"Oh, Julian, your hair..." She reached up to restore order to his wild locks, wanting, for some extraordinary reason, to cry.



"What now?" He held her off, curious as he examined her face. The laughter lines at the sides of her fine gray eyes. Her lips—newly painted with her trademark red lipstick. Her soft skin, and her abundant gray hair that refused to do anything other than curl determinedly about her high forehead and beautifully shaped ears.

He saw a flicker of sadness chase across her features and wondered what had happened to upset her. He knew better than to push her, though, and released her gently, taking a step away to stop himself from pulling her into his arms more fully and pressing his lips to her lovely red mouth.

He'd toyed with telling her of his true feelings for some time now but had always hesitated, conscious he wanted

nothing to disrupt their close friendship and the warm affection they enjoyed. He had suggested they move in together—often—but his suggestions had always been couched in a teasing light, usually followed by some comment that he was warm and “comfortably ensconced” at her place and couldn’t see the point of returning to his cold empty house. He’d waited and watched for any indication from Rose that she might reciprocate his feelings, but so far he had not noticed any sign.

But had there been reluctance in the way she’d extracted herself from his embrace just now?



Rose saw the concern—and something else she couldn’t quite identify—in his warm hazel eyes, swallowed hard, produced a smile from somewhere and said, “It’s been quite an afternoon.”

“I’ll open this, shall I?”

“Please!”

She sent him a grateful look and sank down into her chair as he went out to the kitchen to deal with the bottle and find glasses. By the time he returned, she had herself well in hand, had attributed her moment of emotion to Edith’s letter and was able to accept the glass of wine he handed her with a smile and return his “Cheers” in almost the same sunny intonation.

Julian took the opposite chair and directed a look of inquiry at her, so she told him of her meeting with Averil, the visit to Edith’s house, Averil’s request for Rose to help her with Edith’s estate and Edith’s extraordinary legacy. She didn’t mention the letter. For some reason, she found herself unable as yet to speak of those impassioned words she had read.

“Well, that’s just the sort of thing you like to get your teeth into.” Julian looked and sounded pleased. “If you want any help with things, just sing out.” He lifted his glass in a salute.

“You are good to me, Julian.” She experienced a rush of gratitude at his offer, the way it was couched, the way he hadn’t probed. It was so like him. “Thank you. I shall probably take you up on that.”

She raised her glass in return salute, and suddenly it was easy to tell him of Edith’s letter. She felt Edith wouldn’t have minded him knowing.

“There is the possibility Edith was married. Perhaps even had a child.” At his raised eyebrows, she added, “We—that is, Averil—found a letter. She insisted I read it. It was from someone named Tim. Obviously written back in the war years.”

She gave him a brief outline of the letter’s contents.

“Of course, it doesn’t mean Edith was pregnant,” she stressed. “Although Tim’s reaction to Edith’s ‘news’ suggests she might have been.”

“Mm.” He looked thoughtful. “As you say, she might have been. Births can be traced.”

“Yes.”

“And she never mentioned this to Averil over the years?”

Rose shook her head. “No. Averil was completely baffled. Her father knew nothing about it, either. Edith had never mentioned a Tim.”

Julian frowned. “Obviously, the baby must have died. If there was one.”

He was silent then, and she knew he was thinking back to the early days of his marriage to Margaret. Margaret had lost a baby in their first years together. It had been their only child.

The sadness that had visited Rose several times that day swept over her again as she studied Julian’s faraway expression. She thought of her own dear children and grandchildren—Alistair, thirty-six, with his three boys; Maggie, single again at thirty-three with little Jody; and her youngest, Rob, who was just thirty and still fancy-free. How lucky she had been. How lucky she was.

She got to her feet.

“Time for a top-up, I think.”

She knew her voice was shaky, but she knew also Julian would understand the reason for its shakiness. She picked up the wine bottle and crossed to his chair.



Later, as they moved about the kitchen, busy with dinner preparations, their conversation having roamed over many subjects as it usually did, Rose looked up from mashing the potatoes to find Julian watching her, his expression serious.

“What?”

“When are you going to let me move in with you so we can live in sin?” His voice was very deep.

“Oh, Julian!” She felt her face flush. It wasn’t the first time he’d voiced such a request, though usually in a joking manner. His arguments for such an arrangement had been short and to the point, and convincing. Their former partners would understand. Her children would understand. They needed each other.

“We’ll drive each other mad.” She took refuge behind forced jocularly, not knowing quite what to make of the fact he hadn’t moved from his position by the fridge or that his expression was still serious. “I’m old. Crabby.” She made a face at him. “You know. The eccentric writer.”

“Rubbish.” He came away from the fridge and walked purposefully toward her. He removed the potato masher from her hands, placed it on the bench and took her in his arms. “You’re a desirable woman, Rose,” he told her. “I desire you. What do you say to that?”

Such ardor at any other time from Julian might have astounded her; but after all the day had been, it seemed exactly right. His arms were warm and immensely gratifying. Before she could even think, she found her head falling onto his firm shoulder as she’d longed to do earlier.

“Oh, Julian,” she sighed.

“I shall kiss you now,” he said, and did.

It was a long time before they remembered about dinner



“Well, that’s settled, then,” Julian said some time later as they faced each other across the dining table. He refilled their wineglasses with an elaborate tilting up of the bottle.

“Nothing’s settled.” Rose gave him a little warning frown.

He regarded her in surprise.

“What was that, then?” He indicated the settee with a raised eyebrow.

Rose blushed, and her gaze fell from his. “That” had been a rather passionate interlude she didn’t know whether to be amazed and delighted at, or embarrassed by. The wine had gone to her head, she decided in confusion. She’d been emotionally charged by Edith’s letter. She had been... She was...

She looked up at him again.

“Don’t rush me, Julian,” she pleaded.

“Of course not, dear,” he agreed, calm and unperturbed, then quite spoiled it all by giving a deep chuckle. “I do love you flustered. It gives me an edge.”

Rose pretended to frown at him. “What about your house? What will people say?”

He lifted both eyebrows. “Since when did you care what people say?”

He was absolutely right. They had long been a talking point in the village.

“I can easily sell the house,” he added in bland tones. “No problem at all.”

To that, she found she had no answer.



She was up bright and early the next morning, having wakened at five o’clock and then tossed about for a while before deciding her mind was far too active for any more

serious sleep. She lay in her warm bed thinking of Edith's house, her legacy, the letter—and Julian's proposal. In the end, she got up and made tea and toast.

It was exactly nine-fifteen when she set off for Edith's house. Although the sky was patchy, the sun was doing its best to shine out from behind the clouds and there was little wind. Rose's thoughts turned to Averil as she walked along the riverbank. Did she have a boyfriend? What would she do about Edith's house?

Averil was in the garden when she arrived, dressed in blue jeans and a sloppy jumper in rainbow shades. She was snipping camellia blooms from a laden tree.

"Hello!" she called out as Rose unlatched the gate. "I thought I'd pick a few of these. Aren't they lovely?"

"Quite lovely." Rose joined her.

"Aunt has some beautiful vases, and I thought it would be a nice idea." Averil reached up to a splendid specimen on a top branch. "The best ones are always in the hardest-to-reach places, aren't they?" she said a little breathlessly, snipping the bloom and staggering off-balance at the effort.

"Steady." Rose caught her arm.

"Thanks!" Averil laughed. "There!" She held out the camellia. "Isn't it a beauty?"

"Gorgeous." Rose touched a finger to the velvety pink petals.

"Let's go in and put them in a vase."

She followed Averil into the house, experiencing a rush of pleasure as she stepped into Edith's sitting room and saw everything was exactly as she remembered it. The house, which faced north, caught both the morning and afternoon sun—the morning sun shining through the kitchen windows, and the afternoon sun coming in through the French doors. This morning, sunlight, what there was of it, bathed furniture, paintings, wallpaper and carpet with the softest gold. The room possessed a gracious charm, an ambience that reached out and drew one forward, that led the eye from one delight to another.



To mask her inner awareness and the strange quiver that went through her at such thoughts, Rose went over to the sink where Averil was filling a pink china vase with water.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked, amazed her voice sounded so normal.

“Not that well.” Averil made a little grimace. “My mind wouldn’t stop. How about you?”

“Oh, I was awake early,” Rose confessed, watching her arrange the blooms.

Averil sent her a sympathetic glance.

“Where will we put these?”

Rose looked about the room. A small dark-mahogany drop-leaf table with a lace doily seemed to beg for such a magnificent centerpiece.

“There?” Averil carried the vase across and placed it carefully on the table then stood back, admiring the picture it made.

“Lovely.” Rose thought how flowers always added so much to a room. Once more she sensed a presence, a gentle approval, and glanced at Edith’s chair, fully expecting to see her sitting there, smiling and serene. She was somewhat startled to see the chair unoccupied.

“Shall we make a start, then?”

The question drew her from her reverie. Averil was looking at the writing desk, her expression lacking enthusiasm.

Recalling the state of the desk, Rose nodded.

“Yes,” she said firmly. One of her favorite tasks was sorting out such messes. She’d never understood why this should be so, just accepted it as one of her quirks. “I suggest we take everything out of the desk, transfer it to one end of the dining room table then sort it into relevant piles. How does that sound?”

The idea had manifested during her early-morning wakefulness.

Averil brightened at once.

“Oh, that’s a good idea. I wondered how on earth we would tackle it.”

She crossed to the writing desk, got the key and opened the lid. Rose was right behind her and lost no time in reaching for an armful of papers.

“Here you are. You take a pile.” She loaded Averil up. “And I’ll follow. Doesn’t matter what it is at this stage, just put it all on one end of the table.”

“Now,” she said some minutes later from beside the laden table. “Accounts and power bills, et cetera, here; personal letters, bank statements, books and don’t-knows there, there, there and there. We’ll just put it in piles for the moment and sort through each one later. The ornaments can all be put to one side.”

She sat down. After a moment’s hesitation, Averil dragged out a chair and plumped down into it. She stared at the piles of papers and books and things on the table and groaned.

“We’ll be here forever! I should never have bothered you, Rose.”

“Nonsense. You’ll be surprised at how quickly we’ll get through it. The first step and all that.”

Averil gave her a weak smile and picked up a paper.

“Power bill,” she stated, sounding at once more cheerful as she placed it on the table.

Rose smiled and began on her own pile.

Averil was soon muttering, “Books over here. Bills... letters...don’t know...There, finished.” She reached for another pile.

Rose was a little slower with her sorting. It was almost impossible to resist a quick scan of personal letters. There were quite a few from “Your dear friend, Heather,” and she resolved to ask Averil if she knew of Heather when an appropriate time presented itself. She accepted she was unconsciously seeking a letter that began “My darling Edith!” even though she knew, with a conviction that was absolute, she would not find one. She tried not to let this sadden her as she sifted through the papers.

Amongst the clutter were several chequebooks, which she placed in a separate pile; it would all have to be thoroughly examined by a solicitor later. As she was wondering whom Edith's solicitor was—and when she would hear of her bequest—she came across a letter from Messrs. Manser, Evans & Co., Family Solicitors, Princeton Street, Auckland. She recognized that refined letterhead at once and felt a thrill at the recognition—her Rob had been with the firm since gaining his Master of Law Degree. Eagerly, she began to read.

Dear Miss Hereford,

Thank you for your recent enquiry into the making of your will. We will be pleased to see you on Wednesday the 25th of March at our offices here in Auckland Central. We will be happy to be of assistance to you in this matter. Thanking you for your enquiry.

Yours faithfully,  
Peter Evans

The date at the top of letter was 1988.

“Oh!”

Averil looked up at Rose's exclamation. “What is it?”

“A letter from your aunt's solicitor, following a request from your aunt to make a will.” She let the letter flutter down onto the table and looked eagerly over at Averil. “You'll never believe this!” She was unable to keep the excitement from her voice, “My son Rob works for the firm.”

“Really? Isn't that a coincidence!” Averil's blue eyes were wide.

“Yes, isn't it? You might have already met Rob.”

Averil shook her head. “No, I don't think so. It was the senior partner we saw. I can't remember his name now.”

“Of course.” Rose put aside her small disappointment. “As it should have been with your aunt being a client for so many years.”

Averil nodded. “I didn’t want to get into the will thing at the moment, but Aunt left small bequests to people neither Dad nor I know. The firm is tracing these people.”

“Oh?” She sat up straighter, her interest piqued. People’s wills often revealed the unexpected, she knew from past experience.

“Mm...” Averil sounded vague, so Rose didn’t press her for more information. Plenty of time for that, she told herself firmly, picking up another item from her pile.

“I’ll put these books away in the bookcase,” Averil said several moments later. “We’re running out of room.”

Rose nodded. She’d glanced quickly through several of the books that had been in her pile—slender, worn volumes of poetry. Here and there on the pages were flowers Edith had painted.

“I love thee to the depth and breadth and height...” Rose put the book quickly to one side, swallowing back her emotion, feeling as though she had intruded on a love scene. Words of apology had almost fallen from her lips. She hadn’t looked after that, just got very busy with legal documents and bills.

She was studying one of these when Averil announced she was putting on the jug.

“Good idea.” Rose smiled.

“Milk and sugar?”

“Just milk thanks, Averil.”

Minutes later, Averil set a pretty flowered cup and saucer down beside her.

“There you are.”

“That looks nice,” Rose sat back a little. She waited while Averil returned to her chair and had sipped her tea before saying, “I’ve found several letters from someone called Heather.”

“Oh, yes, Aunt’s great friend.” Averil put her cup down. “They were at school together, I think. Or perhaps they went

through teacher's training college together? Something like that, anyway.

"Heather lived down in Wellington for years, and I guess that's when their correspondence began. She used to come and stay here with Aunt quite often. Especially later, when she moved up to Auckland. That was about the same time as Aunt moved here, I think."

She chuckled. "I remember Aunt telling me how miffed Heather had been at her for moving away just when Heather had decided to take the plunge and move to Auckland. Isn't that typical of how things happen?"

She picked up her cup again.

"I don't think Heather's been up to stay for ages. She developed bad arthritis and couldn't travel. I never actually met her, which is weird, I guess, when you think of it." She broke off to frown. "I don't think she was at Aunt's funeral. Not that that means anything," she added hastily. "I mean, she wouldn't have been able to come, would she? Not with her arthritis."

"Perhaps not. I wonder if she's still alive."

"I was wondering that, too. Heather was one of the people Aunt named in her will." She leaned over to sift through the letter pile and picked out one from Heather. "I know she lives in Mairangi Bay on Auckland's North Shore. I guess the lawyers will contact her fairly soon."

Rose nodded and sipped her tea. She studied Averil more closely, liking the way they had worked quietly and steadily together. She wondered about her again, and decided it was time to extend their acquaintance.

"How long are you able to stay, Averil?" she asked. "It may take us several days or even longer to get through everything. Are you on holiday or allowed time off work?"

She set her cup down again.

"Actually, I can stay for quite a while." She sent Rose a small smile. "I'm...not working at the moment."

She paused, and a guarded expression came into her blue eyes. At Rose's polite inquiring look, she seemed to collect herself. She hesitated another moment.

"I'm taking time off work." She looked briefly down at the table then back up to Rose, must have been reassured by what she saw in the other woman's eyes and stated quietly, "I've not been well."

Rose experienced an unpleasant jolt of alarm.

"Oh, Averil, I'm sorry to hear that. Nothing too worrying, I hope?" It suddenly occurred to her how thin the girl was beneath her voluminous jumper.

A long moment of silence went by in which Averil made no reply, just stared at the table. Again, Rose wondered what had happened. She was aware Averil wanted to tell her, but shyness and uncertainty held her back.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, Averil," she said gently. "But I rather sense that you would. Am I right?"

Averil looked up at that, and her lip wobbled.

"You don't have to worry I would tell anyone else," Rose continued. "I'm quite able to keep a confidence."

"Yes...I know you would," she said in a little rush, her gaze back on the table.

Rose waited another moment then gently probed.

"Was it an operation you don't feel you can mention?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that." She glanced up then away again. "Although I do feel reluctant to talk about it. People...don't understand these things..." She swallowed. "I went through a bad patch a few months back and, well, everything just got on top of me." She pressed her fingers together. "I ended up having to leave my job, or at least, take time out..." She trailed off.

Rose felt an instant sympathy. She reached out to cover Averil's hand with her own.

"I'm sorry, Averil. People can be insensitive."

"I know," she whispered, eyes still downcast. Tears filled her eyes, and she sniffed.

"Sorry," she muttered, digging in her pocket.

Rose relinquished her hand and let her find her handkerchief and blow her nose. She knew it would be wrong to get up and put her arm around those thin shoulders. Much as

she wanted to, she knew it would probably unleash tears; and at this point, such a thing would only embarrass the girl. Far better to say nothing and let her recover and tell things in her own time.

So, she sat patiently, and presently Averil dried her eyes and produced a watery smile.

“Sorry,” she said again, tucking her handkerchief back into her sleeve. “I’m recovered now, or almost. It was months ago.”

Her smile this time was almost natural.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Rose smiled back. “These things do take time, and it’s best not to rush them.” She thought that sounded rather like a platitude, so she added, “Didn’t mean to sound patronizing. It’s just that only you can really know your true feelings.”

This seemed to strike the right cord, for Averil nodded.

“Yes, that’s exactly how it is. No matter what the doctor told me, I just knew—instinctively, I guess—that I’d have to wait. That it would be up to me...to see. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, it does.”

Averil took a deep breath. “There’s so much about burn-out and stress lately in the media and all those books and everyone talking about it, and yet, when it happens to you, it just seems...well, different, somehow. Different from your preconception.”

“Yes, it does.” Rose decided a question at this stage might draw her out of that sensitive shell she’d built around herself. “Where did you work, Averil? In Auckland?”

“Yes. I was teaching at one of the primary schools on the North Shore. I thought it was a great job, and I was really excited when I got it. That was before I discovered I’d replaced a long-standing teacher who’d been fired. The others had all really liked this teacher—she’d been there for years and years—and most of the staff-room conversation consisted of why this teacher had been fired and how unfair it had been. I felt guilty for taking her place. I felt like they were getting at me.”

She shrugged. "I know it was silly, but that's how I felt. They were all very good in the end, and I could see how mistaken I'd been to think they'd resented me. But at the time, it was very real, and...stressful.

"Anyway, one day I just couldn't do it anymore. It was such a shock. I...I couldn't believe it. I was sitting in the staffroom at morning tea, and they were going on as usual, and everything seemed to...recede." She shivered at the memory.

"The headmaster was very good. He saw my face—I must have gone white or something." She grimaced. "He helped me out to the sickbay, suggested I go home, take some time off.

"The doctor said it was job stress, and delayed shock and grief at my mother's death, brought on by..." She swallowed tightly, looked up at Rose then down at her cup again. "You see, I'd not long before broken up with my boyfriend. We'd been together two years, and I'd thought... Well, these things happen, don't they?"

Rose decided to keep silent, knowing it was best to say nothing at this stage. Just let her get it all out of her system.

"Do you know the first thing Dad said to me? Well, one of the first things, anyway. He'd always thought Mark wasn't the right one for me." She bit her lip then continued. "It was funny, weird...but as soon as Dad said that, I could see at once what he meant. And it was like the mist, or whatever it was, cleared from my mind. I couldn't believe it. I've read of things like that happening."

She looked up again, and Rose could see she was much more relaxed. The tension had gone from her expression, her posture.

"I realized my relationship with Mark had been a mistake from the start. It was all one-sided. I'd let him take control, make all the decisions. Tell me what to do. And all this resentment had built up, without my being aware of it. It was transference," she explained. "You see, I met Mark not long after Mum died. I was still in shock, drifting, not really ready for a relationship; and it was easier to let him



take over. As time went by, I didn't know why I was so unhappy or...why we were quarreling all the time. Why everything suddenly seemed so wrong when I'd thought it perfect.

Rose could understand how Averil had drifted into a relationship, leaning on Mark in the beginning. Then, as she'd grown stronger and found she no longer needed such intense assistance, her sense of dismay and confusion as to why the relationship was no longer working. The confusion had added to her other stress.

"I'd led a fairly sheltered life up until then," Averil was saying. "Being an only child and all that. Mum was pretty over-protective when I was young, and, well, she carried it on for too long. I hate admitting it now, it seems so disloyal." She grimaced but carried on.

"I guess it was because I came along so late in her life that she ended up being over-protective and fussy." She paused, and a small frown creased her brow. "I didn't notice it when I was young, but as I grew older, I started to feel resentful. I couldn't wait to get away and do my own thing—you know, flitting with my girlfriends and not living at home anymore. Mum was..." She shrugged again. "Well, not very encouraging. We sort of drifted apart. And then, before we had a chance to make friends again...she died."

Rose put her hand over Averil's again, made her expression sympathetic. When Averil had really needed her mother, when they might have had a chance of becoming good friends, it was too late.

"Thanks for listening, Rose." She smiled, touching her free hand to Rose's. "Talking it out has helped me to see it all again in a much clearer light. I guess I can even feel a kind of sympathy for both Mark and myself. He didn't understand, and was quite angry when I left."

She gave a little shudder at the memory. Rose squeezed her hand very firmly then let it go.

"For some people, the role of domination is the only one they can identify with in a relationship. You simply can't

change them or get them to see your ideas or ever take you seriously.”

“Yes, that’s exactly how it was!” Relief spread across Averil’s features. “I thought I could change Mark, make him see my point of view, and I couldn’t. It was just another mistake I made. Something else that intensified all my confusion.”

“Well, at least you’ve got it straight in your mind now. And that’s the biggest hurdle over.”

“Yes, it is.” She took a deep breath. “I think we should get back to these letters, don’t you?” She picked up her cup and saucer and got briskly to her feet. “Would you like to stay for lunch, Rose? We could have it out in the garden now the sun’s come out.”

“That sounds a lovely idea, Averil.”

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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