



ANTIQUES TO DIE FOR

P. L. HARTMAN

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by

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For my fellow antiques dealers, past and present, who
unwittingly aided and abetted.

And for Bill, my fellow conspirator.

The past is always present: yet it is not what was, but
whatever seems to have been.

G. K. Chesterton

The past is always there, lurking around. If it were a snake,
it would bite you.

M. Yeager

CIDER RUN ANTIQUES

Partners

Marv and Helen Yeager
Hal and Sylvie Thompson
Jake Gennari and Annette Durand

Dealers

Ruth Arden
Sally Ann O'Neill
Laurel Fisher (Joe)
Owen Griffith (Lynn)
Cora Lehman (Bob)
Grace Dutton (Frank)
Emmy Greene (Charles)
Richard Keating
Keith Mackinnon (June)
Elaine Barr (Kurt)
Andy King (Mable)
Clair Somers

Chapter 1

The body was found at 10:15 on a May morning, a fine, fair morning as unsuitable to the horror of murder as anything could be.

A blue untroubled sky, soft and subtle, spanned from ridge to ridge. Across the valley on the hillside, the sun was picking out and intensifying the bright yellow greens of new leaves. Beside the shop where remnants of an old orchard stood, apple trees, long-forgotten varieties from another era, basked in the morning light, while their pink blossoms, sparkling from last night's rain, presented an aroma sweet and ancient. Cardinals and finches trilled non-stop and blue jays darted between branches. Even the stone building, a leftover from past centuries, took on a warm hue, the way stone can absorb and make itself comfortable in any season.

Comfort, longevity, birdsong, light and warmth, color and fragrance: into this abundance of reflective and sensory pleasures, murder intruded itself, cruelly, irrevocably. It rearranged things, thrust away complacent, familiar assumptions of the past and caused a shifting and heightening of perception. The past, the far past, the hidden world in which the hills were shaped and the trees planted, and the combination of all the other events that went into the creation of this morning's incomparable setting, receded in importance. Taking its place was a sharp awareness of the

last two years and of the very recent past, as recently as last night.

But for forty-five minutes, from the time the first person came driving up until the discovery of murder was made, all was tranquil, all was serene, except for the birds' exuberant singing. All was as it should be, and the normalcy of those forty-five minutes gave the people there time to appreciate the day, go about a morning routine, socialize briefly—in short, brace themselves, although they didn't know it, for what was to come.

At 9:30 Ruth pulled into the gravel parking lot in front of the shop and backed her car close to the door. It was loaded, the result of a week's antiques buying in New England. Boxes of ironstone china, a pair of pine chairs painted a dark green and decorated with a stenciled flower design, and a walnut demi-lune table were wedged in the back. More boxes held glassware, including a berry bowl set in pattern glass, and resting on the passenger seat, carefully wrapped in pale blue padding, was a beveled-glass mirror framed in oak. She could take some items in now, she thought, looking around the car's packed interior, but Marv had been adamant about her not unloading the heavier items by herself, and everything was heavy. No sense injuring her shoulder again as she'd done before, hauling furniture and boxes of crockery. Ruth was just as glad to wait until he got there and, anyway, last night when they talked, Marv had said he'd be in early.

"I need to shift things in my area so I can get the corner cupboard in tomorrow. I did tell you about the corner cupboard, didn't I? Poplar, the original red paint, from a farm in Bucks County. I saw it last fall and was all set to buy, but the people weren't sure they really wanted to sell. So this

past week I went back to see them just, mind you, to make sure it was as stunning as I remembered and, amazingly, they offered it to me.”

“But only after you played on their sympathy,” she had replied with a laugh. “Let me guess: did you possibly tell them it was a twin of the one that belonged to your old Granny and you had to have it?”

“Ruth! Would I do that?”

“Without a qualm.” What delightful bit of fabrication had he used this time? When it came to acquiring antiques, Ruth knew that his inventiveness could be almost inspired.

“You’re right. But, actually, I only had to convince them it was going to a good home. They capitulated when I described Cider Run in all its 200-year-old limestone perfection. Of course, I didn’t let on it was a shop. But wait till you see it, Ruth. You’ll love it.”

And that’s another thing about Marv, she thought. His enthusiasm for antiques is unquenchable and infectious.

Ruth got out of her car and walked to the edge of the parking lot where she could feast her eyes on the hillside. It was almost a ritual, looking at the hills, and the other dealers as well as many customers were also drawn to look out across the valley. Here was one of the most glorious views imaginable, Ruth thought, come upon inadvertently, as a bonus to people going to Cider Run. Even though the shop was perched only a few blocks up from a busy thoroughfare, it gave the impression of being far removed from the traffic. By holding her arm just so, she could completely block out the road below and let her eyes rest on the hillside, wander to fields and farms on the lower slopes and to woods climbing the ridge on up to the ridgeline.

Retired school principal, former teacher and life-long antiques collector, Ruth had thought she'd never again move away from her native New England, from being near the coast with its stiff sea breeze, the kind that cleared the head and blew away illusions. She had felt compatible with that environment. Yet here she was, land-locked between long, graceful ridges of the Appalachians, most elderly of mountain ranges, worn down through eons and ice ages, but still formidable. And beautiful, mantled in hardwoods and mountain laurel and ever changing with the seasons.

Ruth gazed appreciatively, not only taking in the beauty of the hills in their present spring green, but thinking how daunting the mountains must have seemed, how impenetrable, when viewed by settlers making their way westward in covered wagons. From where she stood she could imagine the whole panorama, mountains rolling away, ridge upon ridge, concealing the gaps which made passage possible. But the gaps were there, and the pioneers found them. For Ruth, it was a liberating thought; things only seemed insurmountable. She felt a resonance with the courage of the settlers, to pick up and move, with all their belongings, and make their way across the mountains. And then, antiques dealer that she was, her thoughts turned to those belongings and, mainly, the white ironstone china which would have been stowed inside the covered wagons, the china that went west with the pioneers and hardly sustained a chip because it was so strong. The same kind as the century-old ironstone packed in boxes in Ruth's car, waiting to be taken into the shop. There was resonance in the ironstone too, and to handle it and use it was like being part of another time.

Familiar thoughts, pleasant thoughts, as she stood in the sunlight of a May morning.

It had been two years since Ruth's brother had convinced her to move down to the Pennsylvania town where he and his family lived. She'd had difficulty making the decision, and in the end it was antiques that tipped the scales. For several summers she and a couple of friends ran a small, briskly busy antiques shop in Maine. Busy in the summer; it was not the place for a year-round enterprise. When, as yet undecided, she first visited Cider Run, workmen were still finishing the interior renovations, but she could see how well-configured the shop was, how it would suit her. And Mary, the day she came in, let her know he wanted her to be part of it.

Now she was attuned to this environment and, standing there admiring the view, musing on the past, car stuffed with antiques, she felt very much at home. She had, she thought, at last let go of the reserve that had marked her personality, the holding back, as if something were ever ready to throw in a note of caution, telling her to suspend belief. It was true she'd had a few heartbreaks, but the basis of her self-image had been formed early and without her consent: some Viking ancestor's carelessly bestowed genes had blessed her, or in Ruth's opinion cursed her, with red hair. Being the only one so inflicted in her family and among her friends, Ruth thought herself an ugly duckling. She spent her childhood under the shadow of freckles, pale skin and bright copper curls, having to endure the nicknames and taunts that are the lot of the redhead, not able to have the golden suntans other girls had or wear the luscious colors they wore. For a child it was something almost shameful, as if it were her fault. To compensate for this disastrous flaw, she developed kindness and humor, and the backbone required to withstand her affliction. That people thought her lovely as she grew older was lost on her. And, as a result,

after she was grown up, she had been genuinely surprised when men sought her out.

But now, in her late fifties, as the red in her hair began to fade, or maybe partly because of it, she had laid much of her former ways of thinking aside. She had a new life in a new location and the location itself, today in particular, was splendid. With a final deep breath of the morning mountain air, Ruth turned and walked back to the shop, thinking to herself, it's a perfect morning; it is going to be a perfect day. Had Marv come in last night as he said he might? She noticed that the gravel had plenty of tire marks, some ruts still holding water. Busy place, Ruth mused, as she unlocked the door.

Inside the old stone building the dampness from last night's downpour lingered, bringing out even more the shop's characteristic mixture of aromas. Ruth sniffed appreciatively. Eau de antiques shop, she called it: mustiness combined with the acrid smell of oak, furniture polish and an occasional sharp tang of mildew—individual accents, blending harmoniously with each other. All in all, thought Ruth, very satisfying, very complementary, and without which it would be like a winery when there is no scent of the crush.

Another odor joined in, the fresh air Ruth had brought in with her. But the shop didn't open until 10:00 and they were not ready for business yet, so she locked the door behind her and set about turning on the overhead lights, the computer and printer, the surveillance monitor. Then, stashing her bag behind the front counter, she began to go around the shop, switching on lamps in dealers' areas and lights in their display cases.

The entrance to the shop was by way of the original door location in the south-facing wall. When the owners

remodeled, an entrance foyer had been created, delineated by one arm of an L-shaped front counter on its left and an old church pew, some ten feet in length, on its right. The main part of the shop was laid out with fourteen separate dealers' areas. These were located along the front, south-facing wall to the right of the church pew, and along the west and north walls, with several placed back to back in the center of the room. Along the east side were the doors to the two restrooms, and also the swinging door that went in to the kitchen, and from there to the office, storage room and the back door. The shop layout made for good circulation and also gave it the feeling of wholeness. The areas seemed to flow into each other, marked off only by often-changing pieces of furniture or the display cabinets of individual dealers.

Not being at the shop for over a week, Ruth enjoyed seeing what was new, what had been brought in lately. She'd check on her own sales when she got back to the computer at the front counter, but in the meantime, she was interested in catching up on what other dealers had done while she was away. As she went from one area to the next, she was aware once again of the pleasure, the privilege, of being among such a variety and abundance of antiques and, in this brief, quiet moment in the morning, having it all to herself.

Clair had put in a whole new display of 1920s and earlier spring garden party hats in straw and fabric, adorned with leaves and flowers, ribbons and lace, and had them hanging on pegs on a white lattice rack. Nearby, head-high, was a white wicker framed mirror. A very tempting invitation, Ruth thought. Clair certainly knew her clientele.

In the Thompsons' area there was a white painted Hoosier kitchen cabinet she had not seen before. Sylvie had

put green Depression glass plates, cups and saucers on the shelves and placed green wood-handled mixing spoons and forks in the open drawer. And, nice touch, thought Ruth, she even had a couple of green McCoy bowls on the top.

Cora and Grace had a combined area. Like Ruth, they were retired from public school teaching careers; Cora had taught art, Grace first grade. In their area a dozen children's books had been placed on a maple school desk, over which was propped a sign that said SPRING READING with a watercolor of a boy and girl in old-fashioned dress reading books under a pink blossoming tree. This would be Cora's doing. Ruth saw another new item, a walnut Eastlake-style washstand holding a set of green transferware china pieces, not just the ewer and basin, but toothbrush holder, soap dish with lid, shaving mug, drinking cup and, sitting on the shelf below, yes, the chamber pot. What a find, thought Ruth. All that was missing was the footbath, but they were almost impossible to come by. This was Grace's contribution to the green-for-spring theme that several of the dealers had featured.

Ruth continued on, passing Sally Ann's area, reminding herself that she was working with her today. Sally Ann specialized in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties, a time which yielded objects in some of the brightest and most cheery colors. Her area was a mish-mash of white painted furniture, Fiesta plates and cups, floral and fruit patterned tablecloths, Bakelite and other costume jewelry, Life magazines, chenille bedspreads, clothing from the era and anything else she could get in. She also had baskets full of gaily printed hankies, which were replaced as the season suggested. Now they were all flowered, but in February there had been ones with hearts and cupids. Sally Ann's collection as a whole

gave the impression of a kaleidoscope, but Ruth was not surprised that her things sold and sold well.

Richard showed more restraint. In his area there was an early pine blanket chest, Amish probably, the top thrown back, displaying a quilted coverlet of blues and greens. So seasonal. So Richard.

An oak bookcase with a carved design caught Ruth's eye as she came to Elaine's area. The shelves held Elaine's collection of dolls ranging from the late 1800s through the 1950s. Dolls, Ruth had often thought, seemed incongruous for Elaine, with her sophisticated style and her cigarettes-and-whiskey voice. Richard had once said to her, "Dolls, Elaine? You?"

"Don't look so incredulous, Richard. I've been collecting dolls since my first Madame Alexander."

"When was that, back in the 19th century?"

"I will ignore that remark, Richard, because I have sold more dolls in one month than you have sold quilts all year."

"I'm always rather sad when I sell a quilt; a little part of me is gone. I relinquish them with a sigh and a heavy heart," Richard said with a suitably mournful expression.

"Pah!" scoffed Elaine.

But Elaine had knowledge and savvy about the dolls, and also about the rest of the antiques she sold, and her customers trusted her expertise. Ruth, however, was more interested in the bookcase. I hope she has a NOT FOR SALE tag on it, Ruth thought, if she wants to use it for display. Bookcases just flew out the door in a college town like this.

In Marv's area Ruth noticed that the big mahogany four-poster bed was gone, the one that had taken up so much room and caused Helen such consternation. Still, there didn't seem to be space for the corner cupboard. He'd have to do quite a bit of reshuffling.

There was a blanket chest in Jake's area that must have just been brought in, this one a large oak Mission style, the lid closed. Ruth had to admit that Jake had excellent, understated taste. Also, he had the choice area around the hearth, for which there had been some vying among the partners. Early in the history of the building, a stone fireplace had been built into the north wall. It was still a functioning fireplace, a real link to the past. Ruth thought how it lent an authentic touch with its heavy oak mantelpiece. Now, through the chimney, she could hear birds singing in the orchard. As she bent to move a piece of furniture that was pushed too close to another, Ruth saw a museum guidebook lying on the floor and retrieved it. There was always a little tidying to do first thing in the morning, she thought. Whoever had worked the day before had also forgotten to turn off several of the lamps, but that happened frequently, dealers being in a hurry to close up after a long day.

Ruth moved on, appreciating what she saw, until she came to her own area where she stood, hands on hips, surveying her domain and planning how she'd rearrange things.

At 9:45 the white Mercedes sedan belonging to Sally Ann turned into the parking lot and crunched its way along the gravel to park, slightly at an angle, next to Ruth's car. Not a terribly good driver, not a car conducive to antiques drayage, not a pair of shoes to stand around in all day, but that was Sally Ann. "Honey, I was all set to live happily ever after with Fred, but he had to go and have that heart attack and die on me!" And leave her very well-off, so that she could travel about on buying trips, enjoy her antiques business and keep an eye out for husband number four.

To do her credit, she picked up interesting things and her colorful area was matched by the clothes she wore, her vibrant makeup, her ever-changing blonde hairdos and her outlook on life. This morning, in honor of spring and sunshine, she wore a primrose-yellow skirt with a fluttery gathered flounce at the hem and a vivid pink blouse with ruffles at the deep V-neck. There was motion in this outfit, although sometimes the motion occurred independently of the wearer.

Sally Ann backed herself awkwardly out of the car, almost spilling a large box of doughnuts and jiggling some of her coffee down the side of the cup. Then, like Ruth, as if pulled by an irresistible urge, she walked gingerly in her fuchsia pumps, carefully avoiding the puddles, over to the edge of the parking lot to look at the hills beyond.

She stood for a minute or two, thinking about her wardrobe and the infinite possibilities the day held. Would it be today that he walked through the door, altering her life forever? Would she change her style of dress as a result? It didn't seem likely, but if so, she felt up to the challenge. Then, having recognized Ruth's car and eager to find out about her trip, she turned and walked back to the shop. She fumbled in her matching fuchsia bag, found her key, unlocked the door, got herself in, relocked it, and announced, "Ruth, I'm here!"

Ruth glanced up and, catching sight of the brilliance that had just appeared in the doorway, burst into a smile and exclaimed with genuine appreciation, "Sally Ann! Springtime personified!" and saw the happy look it brought to Sally Ann's rose-blushed face.

Sally Ann had taken note of what Ruth was wearing too, and thought she was dressing much more becomingly of late. She was intrigued. Was there some new love in Ruth's

life? It looked that way. Sally Ann was convinced exciting things were happening to Ruth and was ready to share in any romantic emanations that might be in the vicinity. It would be an interesting day, she was sure.

Ruth went back to work and Sally Ann chattered away as she fussed about the front counter getting things ready for the day. “Oh, you got the lights already. Thanks, Ruth. I brought doughnuts. Did you see the Thompsons’ Hoosier? That won’t be here long! I’ll count out the change in the drawer. When are you going to tell me about your trip? I can’t wait to see what you bought! Who left this CD with the really sad music on the player? How about if I put on Hits of the Forties and Fifties and the one of Big Bands? Don’t you think it smells musty in here? It always does after a rain storm.” And so on, as she went about the shop routine.

Ruth, listening to her, called out, “Great! Whatever! Thanks, Sally Ann,” as appropriate, and resumed moving things to clear a space for the table and chairs waiting in her car. The teapot and almost-matching cups and saucers she had brought in shortly before she left were gone and she moved the square oak fern stand that had held them to one side, regrouping some small pots on it which had previously been sitting on the floor. And then, she thought, she could arrange some of the ironstone on the half-round table when it was brought in. White ironstone would look nice against the dark wood, and maybe she could borrow some English silver from Emmy’s area to add to the effect. Emmy—husband a professor but, unlike Mary, not retired yet and always taking Emmy off to Europe, where she buys antiques, particularly silver. In fact, aren’t they there now?

Rousing herself to wonder if Sally Ann needed her help at the front, she headed that way and saw Sally Ann go to the door and unlock it, just as some of the repeater clocks that had been wound and actually kept time started chiming the hour. At the same moment, Laurel could be seen outside the glass door, baby straddling her right hip, diaper bag slung over her shoulder, left arm encased in a truly ugly faded red velvet lampshade and left hand holding the rest of the lamp. She had partly turned, preparing to push the door open with her backside, but was spared the indignity by Sally Ann coming to the rescue and holding the door for her.

Laurel said with an apologetic smile, “Thanks, Sally Ann. I could have gotten it. This big rear end of mine should be useful for something.”

Big rear end? Nothing, thought Sally Ann, could be farther from the truth. Laurel is so slim and elegant in those silk shirts and designer jeans, and she’s married to a doctor at the hospital and what does she sell? Shabby chic! Sally Ann’s thinking was linear, albeit with breaks in the line.

But aloud she exclaimed, “Laurel, that baby has got to be the most adorable thing I have ever seen! What is Ben now, six months old? The miracle baby! Do you want me to watch him while you’re busy? He isn’t crawling yet, is he?”

Laurel laughed and set the baby down on a small Persian prayer rug in the middle of her area. “Any day now he will and then I won’t be able to trust him to stay put anymore. I’ve just got a few things to do and then we’re off, but thank you for offering.”

Ruth joined them to express her admiration for the baby. Then, since Sally Ann had already dealt with the cash drawer, she decided to return to her work while she could. With a “Call me if anyone comes in,” she went back to her area.

“Call me if you need a doughnut,” was Sally Ann’s reply, as she opened the cardboard container and put it out on the front counter.

Normal conversations, friendly conversations, a little socializing, a little busy work.

Ten minutes past ten o’clock. I’m glad there are no customers yet, thought Sally Ann, as she toddled around the shop in her high heels, sipping coffee and munching a sour cream doughnut.

“Ruth, did you see this blanket chest in Jake’s area? He shouldn’t have it closed. I’ll bet there’s that little box with the hidden compartment inside.”

Not one to let her curiosity go unsatisfied for long, Sally Ann drained her cup and put it down on the floor. She attempted to lift the lid but it seemed to be stuck. She got onto her knees and tried pushing it up. “Ooof! It isn’t locked is it? It’s hard to open. Ruth,” she called, “come and help me.”

As Ruth left her area, Sally Ann tried one more heroic tug at the lid and raised it, swiveling around as she did to beam “I got it!” at Ruth.

Sally Ann turned back to the chest, immediately let out a piercing scream and, starting to gag, scrambled to her feet and rushed for the front door. Laurel snatched up the baby and hurried to the chest, clapped her hand over her mouth and tore after Sally Ann. Ruth, thoroughly alarmed, stood frozen for an instant, then, reaching the chest, felt her stomach lurch violently. Swiftly, automatically, she picked up the overturned coffee cup and the half-eaten doughnut and fled outside to where Laurel was holding the baby so tightly he had begun to wail, and Sally Ann was retching into the shrubbery beneath the sign embellished with a picture of an

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old-fashioned cider press, gold letters spelling out *Cider Run Antiques*.

And that was when Marv drove up. He parked his truck, got out and came towards them, silver hair shining in the sunlight. He cast a sympathetic smile at Sally Ann being sick and went on to Ruth and Laurel.

Looking up into the lovely clear sky, he exclaimed, “What a perfect morning!”

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