

CHAPTER TWELVE

Forty anxiously awaited Sylvia's return, pacing the floor of his barren living room late into the night. Throw rugs occasionally dampened the clomping of his shoes upon the scuffed wood floor. He held his Bible in one hand and an old derringer in the other, a lucky find from the rubble of his neighbor's burned house. Even though it lacked bullets, he felt its power in his grip.

The dark room which held him, boasted a drab, olive green sofa, a scratched coffee table with ashtray, and a standing lamp. The fringe-bedecked lampshade caught his attention, appalled to see it draped in dust and laced with cobwebs. The wood flooring, he now admitted, was minimally cleaned. No curtains adorned the front window, no pictures or hangings of any kind graced the walls. What used to impress him as his wife's thriftiness, now dawned on him as her lack of interest in their home.

Forty wondered why Sylvia never asked to take a vacation, which then reminded him of his family. The few trips they took were before his teenaged sister ran away from home. His parents hired a detective, who discovered she had married a boy, got pregnant, and then died while giving birth. He never forgot the

day the hired investigator talked with his parents. Watching the tall man in his nice gray suit, gray fedora angled a particular way, left Forty in awe. His fervent wish to be a detective was born in that moment. First, his brother died from polio, when only a small child. His mother devoted herself to her two remaining children, while his father, foreman of the fruit pickers and migrant farm laborers in Edenville, gave himself to his work. Once Forty's sister died, he feared losing their few remaining family members. Only now did he realize that he blamed his sister for the way his father treated his mother.

His parents buried his brother at the county cemetery, because his father would not allow the boy to be buried in the Catholic burial ground. The child's personal items were interred in their backyard by his mother, tokens holding special memories for her, she told Forty. Apparently, it helped her to cope with loss as she added her daughter's mementos to the eerie memorial. It grew over time into a sanctuary, of sorts, as Forty's father became increasingly abusive and as they grew apart. Flowering plants flourished, decorative items twirled in the wind and spun around, and there were bird feeders and bird baths in her garden. Little stones she found while meandering across the fields and through the woods around town, were placed in selected locations.

Forty's mother wandered further afield until, one day, she failed to return. People reported sightings of her, some far-fetched and too-far-afield, but there was one authenticated report of her seen hitchhiking on the coast highway with some hippies. Someone from Edenville investigated her absence. They wrote for *The Edenville Weekly* and wanted to do a story, a human interest piece with pictures included. One of those pictures was, unmistakably, of Forty's mother. He paid big money to the

journalist not to run the story. The photographs, which he kept, served as a potent reminder of what went wrong with his family.

His father nastily proclaimed every opinion he held, often ranting loudly, "She was no good from the start! It's all her fault!" Forty helped him discard his mother's possessions neither of them wanted. His father ordered him to "haul it all to the dump where it belongs!" His mother's Bible, Forty now clutched in his zealous grip. She was a devout Catholic, a religion his father criticized harshly, cigar held between his fingers. "Nuthin' but a bunch of damned profligates! Corrupt to their papal core! They'd be better off sinning out in the open like the rest of us heathens!" Forty feared his father, recalling this particular outburst, his father's armpits sweating heavily through his worn-out, army green t-shirt. The wetness had become ringed with salt and with grime.

Forty did the same for Sylvia's father, out of a sense of husbandly duty, though now he believed it was what the Lord called him to do. Acting as Jesus' private eye, he took it upon himself to scour each home for clues to, first, his mother's wayward end and, second, his wife's erring ways. Searching through Ev Mendoza's burned house, he hoped to find any clues connected to her housekeeper. He first saw the young man from the fire crew with her, riding in her car, going toward Ev's. Forty Sumner truly believed an investigative nature was his cross to bear. He bore it with courage and with fortitude.

"That's me!" He shouted proudly to the darkened house, "Forty! For-ti-tude!"

Emboldened by this play on words, he thrust the Bible out before him, high aloft. Unexpectedly, the truth bore down upon him until he could bear its weight no more. He fled the scene to search for his wife and the man responsible for her going astray.

First, he consulted with another authority, *Detective's Digest Special Crime Investigator's Edition for Collectors*, full of gadgets, everything for the crime buff. He read an article that held special meaning for him, so he ran upstairs where he stored past issues in boxes. It was a true-life account regarding a crime solved in the city of Fanning Beltway. Even Forty's exceptionally unbounded imagination could not grasp the unusual name. Shaking his head, he said, "Shoo-wee! That's nuts!" He read aloud what he underlined in red ink, "Fanning Beltway citizens are breathing a big sigh of relief as private investigators zero in on a rash of bank robberies carried out by the notorious—" Forty scanned the article, until he found what he was looking for, then went on, "One private investigator, hired by a local bank that would not release any details other than his name, Pierson Adleberry, is credited with connecting evidence left at their bank to one of the robbers, who was a janitor for all the banks robbed."

Forty repeated the name, "Pierson Adleberry," with a faraway look in his eyes. He whistled between his front teeth and lower lip, the way his father did while reading his own magazines.

Forty's father kept his magazine collection in boxes in a shed by the fruit packing warehouse. He instructed his son never to go in there, but Forty spied on his father often, especially during the long summer months when he and his friends grew bored. Forty recalled one day in particular, when they peered in the murky and aged shed window. Tucker went first, standing on an apple crate and peeking in the window. He hurriedly jumped down and said, "Let's go do something else!" He took Sylvia's hand and began to leave. Forty rushed to take his turn, grabbing the window sill and pulling himself up onto the wobbly crate. Only a blurred image of his father could be seen, turning his magazine another

direction and unfolding the page. Nevertheless, Forty saw and heard his father whistle, striving to imitate him ever since.

Not wanting to dwell on the past, he tossed the magazine aside and left his house. He started to head down the alleyway toward Tucker Stewart's house, but hesitated, considering his initial suspicion regarding Jim Hart. Conflicted over what to do, he thought of Pierson Adleberry. To solve the case, Adleberry carried out a thorough investigation, questioning everyone involved, working tirelessly toward success. Recalling the words of Sylvia's Aunt Justice, "You are the Lord's private eye, Fortuitous," he decided to go to Jim Hart's house.

From the main dirt road, he hurried toward the Hart's driveway, which led through a grove of pine trees that made the night appear darker. Finding it difficult to see, he stopped. Shep and Tessie were barking. He forgot about the dogs, imagining them coming after— Oh no! Someone else was out in the night! Forty heard them running recklessly up the driveway. The moment he recognized who it was, they collided into him, knocking him to the ground, unconscious.

Beth turned on her porch light and hung out the front doorway, eyes squinting. With a vituperative scowl on her face, she yelled at the dogs to "get back here!" Her bitter voice had a growl in it, due to the lack of sweetness or niceties in herself of late. She had plans of her own and let the dogs go, like she had the house.

The next morning, while on her way to work, she encountered Forty sitting on her driveway, looking dazed and rubbing the back of his head and his shoulder. She stopped the car and, leaving the engine running, rushed to his side. "Forty!" She knelt down, put her hand on his back, and questioned him. "What happened to you?! What are you doing here?!"

“I-I’m not sure.” He shook his head as if to rattle his senses back and, panicking, began hopping and scooting around where he sat, nearly blurting out, “My gun!” Fortunately, he caught himself and instead proclaimed, “Someone was in your driveway! They must have knocked me out,” which was absolutely true.

“What?!” Beth thought it might have been her husband, but—

“I think it was someone—” He vaguely remembered the young man on the fire crew. He tried standing, but almost fainted.

Beth grabbed him. “Here, let me take you over to Spring Hill. I was just going to work.” She aided Forty into the passenger side of the car. After closing the car door and walking around to the driver’s side, she spotted the small gun and the Bible laying beside the driveway. She picked them up and, once seated in the car, started giving them to Forty, but drew them toward herself with a look of concern on her face. “Are these yours?”

He took the Bible, politely answering, “Just this.”

At the rest home, a nurse examined Forty, advising him to lie down while she arranged to drive him home. Soon afterward, they left the rest home, passing Beth’s car in the parking area. Forty made up an excuse, telling the nurse he left something in it. Retrieving the gun, he stuffed it down the back of his pant’s waistline, something he always wanted to do. Rejoining the nurse, he lied to her. “It’s not there,” he said.

Meanwhile, Beth was sitting on a tall stool at a counter while flipping through a magazine on her break, drinking a cup of strong coffee, and eating a jelly-filled doughnut from a pink box. She wondered what happened at her house last night. She knew young people were always sneaking around late at night and figured Forty—

“Wait a minute!” It dawned on her that “Forty must have thought his wife was at *our house—with my husband!*” She shrieked, “*Oh, sb—!*” If that was what Forty thought, she deduced, “*Then, he knows, too!*” She began to panic. Slamming the heel of her hand onto her forehead, she exclaimed, “What a *dope* I am!” She ran out to the car to get the gun, but it was gone! She thought Forty must have been planning to shoot— “No! It must have belonged to whoever knocked him down!” That made more sense to her and she became horrified. “If that other person had the gun—” She began to fear they may have been on their way to— “No. That’s ridiculous!”

She told her co-workers what took place. They let her use the phone this time, so she could call the sheriff. Deputy Bob Carson soon arrived at the rest home to get her story. She told him *everything*, including her suspicions about her husband having an affair with the wife of the man she found in her driveway. “Little Miss Sylvia *Cutsie-Pie*,” she derisively muttered to herself. The deputy thanked her and left.

On his way to Forty’s house, he passed the nurse on her return trip to the rest home. Once he arrived, the deputy grilled Forty about the gun. Forty denied it being his or even having it, suggesting, “The criminal may have retrieved it from Mrs. Hart’s car.” He was Pierson Adleberry once more, wanting to solve this case without that “meddling, incompetent deputy,” as he often remarked about the man.

“C’mon, Forty, you can tell me.”

Bob talked Forty into admitting, “Yes, I was out looking for my wife. She went to visit a neighbor friend. I grew worried and went over to get her, so she wouldn’t have to walk home alone in the dark.” He stood firm by his story.

The deputy believed nary a word. He knew Beth Hart well enough to know she was no liar, but had nothing on her husband fooling around with Forty's wife, other than suspicious sightings and gossip. Reluctantly, he said, "All right, Forty," smacking him on the leg and shaking it around a bit, as a goodbye to a good ole buddy. "I'm gonna give you this one." Starting to walk outside, he rubbed his face, smoothed his beard with his hand, placed his hands on his hips where his gun belt rested, and sadly concluded, "Seeing as how the only one hurt around here is you."

Stalling, he paused after going down each step of the porch, pounding a fist lightly on the banister. He surveyed the Sumner's porch and yard. "Man, what a sad-looking place."

Forty followed the deputy outside. "I-I better go lay down, Officer. And I need to call into work, too."

Deputy Carson swung around, realizing Forty was merely a victim of his wife's troubles everyone talked about, yet no one could prove. "Okay, Forty," he said. "You get some rest."