

In a Rosedale Garden
A Mystery

Anne "Bunty" Loucks

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Chapter One



Return to Rosedale

The obituary notice in *The Globe and Mail* read as follows: “On November 28th, 1988, at the Toronto General Hospital, Catherine Anne Montgomery, in her 87th year, beloved wife of the late Andrew Montgomery (1945). Predeceased by twin sons, the late F/L Brock Montgomery, R.C.A.F. (1944), and the late Graham Montgomery (1955). Survived by a grandson, David Thomas Montgomery, of Vancouver, B.C. Funeral private. Interment Mount Pleasant Cemetery.”

All her days Catherine Montgomery had played the role assigned to her on life’s stage with great dignity and courage, adhering as rigidly to the strict rules of conduct and custom peculiar to her class as any member of the hereditary caste system of the Hindu religion. If at times it had occurred to her that life itself might be a meaningless farce, a kind of comic opera produced in the theatre of the absurd, she had not voiced this concern.

She was highly intelligent, but at a time and place when a woman’s vocation was in the home, she had to content herself with finding her niche in society at large by serving on various committees dedicated to the betterment of the human condition. Her husband had once aptly described her to a friend as an “earnest endeavourer,” and this she was. She worked tirelessly for her church, the Red Cross, the Girl Guides, the IODE, the YWCA and other similar organizations. In this way she had managed to fill her days, and if these activities had not adequately filled her needs, she had not confessed this to anyone. Her life had

centred on and revolved around her family and her community. These were her sacred cows.

She had a wide circle of acquaintances, but few close friends, and even they were aware of a barrier, a margin of reserve, which stood between Catherine and themselves. She was unfailingly kind and caring, always giving of her time and energy, but never permitting her friends to experience the privilege and pleasure of giving to her in return. Perhaps she took too seriously the Biblical maxim that it is more blessed to give than to receive. At any rate it seemed that people drew strength from her, but she appeared not to need either oral or moral support from those around her. It was a kind of osmosis that flowed in one direction only. In spite of this, she was not a lonely woman. She was simply supremely self-sufficient, and comfortable in her own skin, a product of the age, the privileged class, and the social and economic background into which she had been born.

The heart condition to which she finally succumbed did not manifest itself until she was over eighty-six, but the severity of the initial attack and her failure to respond to treatment, made it apparent that her life was drawing to a close. In the end, Death came as a friend. She died peacefully, in her sleep. She died as she had lived--with dignity and courage. The owl had called her name.

Although greatly saddened by his grandmother's death, the news did not come as a shock to David Montgomery. She was, after all, a very old lady and had been in failing health for some time. Her death was neither untimely nor unexpected, and he accepted it sadly as the natural course of events. He would miss her greatly and he mourned her passing, but he was philosophical enough to look upon death, coming at the end of a long and purposeful life, as an immutable law of nature, the same law that causes the tide to ebb and flow, or the moon to wax and wane.

At the age of forty-five, David had reached a half-way point in his journey through life, a kind of watershed, situated on a slightly higher plateau, from which he could look backward into the past, almost the

same distance as he could reasonably expect to look forward into the future. Born during the war, an only child, he could look back on a secure, happy childhood, and this despite the fact that his parents had divorced when he was very young. His mother's second venture into matrimony, when he was eight, was a marriage made in heaven, and he regarded his stepfather as his father in every sense.

Now he had reached The Great Divide, and from that vantage point, as well as looking backward, he could look forward with confidence to a rosy future. If, at this particular time, he had stopped to reflect on the mysteries of life, it might have occurred to him to be grateful to the Almighty for allowing us to remember the past, and in His wisdom not allowing us to see what the future holds in store for us. History, however, does not record whether or not David had stopped to reflect upon this.

By any yardstick, at the age of forty-five, he had everything going for him. He was in excellent health; he had a beautiful wife, whom he loved dearly; two handsome, teen-aged sons, who had never caused him a moment's worry; and an interesting, well-paid job, which he enjoyed—and as if this were not enough, he had money in the bank.

Not a religious man in the conventional sense of the word, he was nonetheless a man of deep conviction, incapable of cant or hypocrisy, one of those rare, honourable men to whom any deviation from absolute truth was unthinkable. Any adjudicator would, without hesitation, have given him an A for such qualities as integrity, loyalty, compassion, honesty and justice, but perhaps only a B or even a C for some of the other less important virtues, such as neatness, punctuality and patience. He had a few minor vices, but then, people who have absolutely no vices, sometimes have few virtues.

He and his wife, Jessica, were extraordinarily well suited to one another. They had their differences, of course, mostly concerning political ideologies, but their relationship was such that all problems within the family were solved by discussion, dialogue and, if necessary, compromise. He liked to quote Henry James, who is reputed to have

said that many people believe they are thinking, when, in fact, they are merely rearranging their prejudices.

News of his grandmother's death reached David by way of a telephone call from Alan Short, the family lawyer in Toronto. David, Jessica, and the two boys made the sad pilgrimage east for the funeral and subsequent tribal rites associated therewith. At the reading of the will, which took place following the services, David was informed that, apart from some bequests to her favourite charities, and a trust fund to provide for her housekeeper, Mary Rushton, whose association with the family went back over sixty years, he was the sole beneficiary of her estate. In addition to a large sum of money, an impressive portfolio of blue-chip stocks and corporate bonds, she had also bequeathed him her large house in the Rosedale district of Toronto. Built by his great-grandfather, at the turn of the century, it had been her home since her marriage to Andrew Montgomery in 1920. David himself had spent many years in that house at various times in his life, first of all as a small child, while his father served overseas during the Second World War, and later, while he was a student at the University of Toronto.

In some strange and inexplicable way he had always felt that the house was an essential and inalienable part of him, a part of what he was and how he perceived himself as an individual. All his memories of it were happy, and even now, twenty-some years later, the word "home" instantly conjured up in his mind the image of that house, so deeply was it embedded in his very being.

His initial reaction to the news that the old house had been left to him was that it would have to be sold, but by one of those strange quirks of fate, which sometimes alter the course of one's life, it happened that within a few weeks of his return to Vancouver, after attending his grandmother's funeral, he was unexpectedly promoted to senior vice-president of his firm. Since the head office was located in Toronto, this necessitated his immediate transfer to that city.

This startling development, coming so unexpectedly, exploded like a hydrogen bomb in the Montgomery household. Steven and Mark were devastated by the thought of leaving their friends and the familiar

neighbourhood in which they had grown up. Jessica was equally devastated, but naturally reacted in a more mature manner. She was a third generation British Columbian, a westerner through and through, with a westerner's wariness of central Canada's values, and what she perceived to be an attitude of smug superiority. David said little, and kept his own counsel, knowing that when the dust settled, they would come around to his way of thinking. He was right. Within a few weeks, the house had been sold, boxes and trunks were packed, goodbyes were said, and they were winging their way eastward.

Thus it happened that on a cold, overcast afternoon in late March, a taxi from Toronto's Pearson International Airport drew up outside number 480 Elmgrove Road in Rosedale and disgorged four passengers and assorted pieces of luggage on the sidewalk in front of the house. It was an imposing, three-storey, Georgian-style stone building, set back from the road, on a large, well-treed corner lot. Wide steps, with heavy wrought-iron railings, led up to the portico and the massive front door, painted jet black, on which hung a highly polished brass knocker. The doorway was flanked on either side by antique brass carriage lamps, and ivy covered the façade and exterior walls. To the left was a huge blue spruce tree with outspread branches, and on the right, a magnificent oak, which still retained vestiges of leaves, now brown and withered, from the previous summer. The dwarf trees and shrubs around the house bore evidence of the loving care which the previous owner had lavished upon the property, and on either side of the front steps, the rock garden, still partially snow covered, was beginning to show signs of life. Nestled close to the foundation for warmth, the snowdrops were already in bloom.

They remained there on the sidewalk for a moment, all four of them, as if frozen in time, like figures in a tableau waiting for the curtain to rise and the performance to start. The old house, looming up in the background, seemed to form the backdrop for the drama which was about to begin.

They stood motionless, looking up at the house, each of them thinking disparate thoughts, each lost in a kind of time warp. In David's

mind a palette of long-forgotten images bubbled to the surface of his consciousness. He suddenly had total recall of the day the telegram arrived, announcing that his Uncle Brock, his father's twin brother, had been killed in an air raid in London. Did he really remember the actual event, he wondered, or was it just that he remembered his mother and grandmother talking about it in later years? He could not be sure of that, but vividly recalled the day his father returned from overseas. He remembered standing on tip-toe at the front window and watching him bound up the steps in his blue air force uniform. He remembered, too, with a twinge of guilt, the very real feelings of resentment he had harboured towards the handsome stranger whose return had so disrupted his life.

Jessica's thoughts were of her first visit to the house to meet David's grandmother. Newly engaged to him, she had been understandably nervous and anxious that Mrs. Montgomery would approve of his choice. She had been instantly put at ease by the warmth of the welcome she received, and to this day she treasured the little silver vase his grandmother had given her as an engagement gift on that occasion.

Mark and Steven, for their part, were both remembering the ghosts of Christmases past; happy holidays spent in the old house in days gone by, when Gran had still been able to cope with a houseful of guests and all the ceremonial observances of the yuletide season. These had been memorable occasions, and standing there on the threshold, both boys felt a sudden twinge of sadness and loss, as though a dark cloud had momentarily eclipsed the sun.

Jessica was the first to break the silence.

"Come on, you lot," she said gaily. "Let's go inside and get a fire going in the living room. You boys bring the luggage in. I hope you've got the key, David." She linked her arm companionably through her husband's and together they mounted the steps.

Did they have a feeling of foreboding? Did some sixth sense warn them that their lives were about to be irrevocably changed by their decision to live in the old house? Afterwards they would all agree that

they had felt an eerie sense of apprehension at that moment, but at the time there was nothing to indicate the future course of events.

It was with a sense of excitement, a feeling that they were about to start a new chapter in their lives, that David inserted the key in the lock, but before he could turn it, the door swung open, and in the afternoon dusk of the late winter's day, a dark figure was silhouetted in the doorway of the old house.

Chapter Two



Mystery Girl

Momentarily startled by the shock of having the door of what he had thought to be an empty house suddenly opened from the inside, David was relieved to see Mrs. Rushton, his grandmother's long-time housekeeper. She peered at them nervously for a moment but then recognizing them, opened the door wide.

"Mary, I didn't expect to find you still here," he said, giving her a bear hug, which lifted her tiny, gnome-like frame six inches off the floor.

"Oh, Davey," she answered breathlessly, partly because of the bear hug and partly because she had hurried to the door. "I got such a fright when I heard the key in the lock. I didn't think that you'd be here until tomorrow. Come in, everybody. Here, boys, bring the luggage inside." She hugged them all in turn.

"You were the one who gave us a fright, Mary," Jessica quipped in mock reproof. "I thought you had to go to Wiarton to look after your sister this week."

"I didn't want you to come into an empty house, and anyway, my sister's feeling much better," she said, as she hobbled about, taking their coats and turning on lights. "I'll go up there next week when you're a bit more settled. Now you make yourselves at home, and I'll see about some dinner for you." She disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

To David, wandering from room to room as dusk turned to dark outside in the wintry twilight, the old house seemed haunted by echoes of the past. He felt acutely and comfortingly aware of his grandmother's presence, and he knew that she would wholeheartedly

approve of his decision to make his home here. They had always been close. She had been his Rock of Gibraltar during the period of his parent's divorce, and had always been there to help him over the rough spots. She had had a few rough spots of her own to contend with, he mused, but she had accepted the death of her husband, and borne the tragic loss of both her sons, and had never lost her abiding faith in God, or even questioned his essential goodness. He smiled to himself, remembering how he used to tease her about being a hard act to follow.

Her bedroom, when he came to it on his sentimental journey through the house, was just as he remembered it from his childhood. He allowed himself to indulge in a sudden, unashamed exercise in nostalgia, recalling how he used to creep into his grandparents' bed on Sunday mornings, recollecting snatches of what his grandfather had dubbed "nursery versery," and fairy tales they had told him. Despite the war, or perhaps even because of it, his childhood had been idyllically happy, an unbroken progression of halcyon days.

Sitting there on the edge of the old four-poster bed, reminiscing about those early years, he permitted himself, for a few brief moments, the luxury of wallowing in blatant sentimental remembrance of things past. A collage of memories, each one partially superimposed upon another, flooded his mind and suddenly, in a kind of flashback, he was a child again, standing just outside the door of this very room. His grandmother was sitting in an armchair beside the bed, her head down, and her hands covering her face. Fragmentary bits of a long-forgotten conversation floated to the surface of his mind; the sound of her voice, deeply distressed, sobbing, "Graham, what has happened to you? Why are you so changed?" His father stood at the window, with his hands in his pockets, his back turned to his mother. Suddenly he swung around, his face contorted with suppressed fury, and stormed out of the room, almost knocking down the terrified child. The front door slammed shut, reverberating through the house.

Later that evening when Mrs. Rushton and the boys had gone to bed and David was alone with Jessica, he struggled to put into words whatever it was that he had experienced earlier that evening in his

grandmother's bedroom. As a rule he was extremely articulate in expressing his feelings, but in this instance he felt incapable of explaining exactly what had happened.

It was, he said, choosing his words carefully, as though a videotape had been turned on inside his head, just for a moment, and then abruptly turned off again. This action appeared to trigger a response, perhaps stimulating some centre in his brain responsible for memory storage. At any rate the visual image it evoked of the scene in his grandmother's room, which had taken place forty years earlier, was in sharp focus and living colour, leaving him with a hazy impression of having almost, but not quite, grasped the significance of something vitally important in his life. It was something, an event or an incident, from his early life. It was something which he had suppressed, which had been unintelligible to the mind of a child, but which held the key to some mystery in his past. That was as close as he could come to an explanation,

Jessica's knee-jerk reaction was to say, jokingly, that off-hand she couldn't think of anyone in the whole world less likely to have had a mysterious past than he. They had both laughed about that.

But earlier that evening, standing at the foot of his grandparents' old fashioned four-poster bed, he had not laughed. He was not a man given to superstition, or belief in the supernatural, but he could not shake the feeling that he had just had a brush with the occult. He could have sworn he had heard the front door slam.

On his grandmother's dressing table were framed photographs of his father and his Uncle Brock, in RCAF uniform, taken when they had received their pilot's wings in 1941. David had never been able to tell which was Graham and which was Brock. In fact, even his grandmother had admitted that she could not always tell them apart. He remembered her saying once that they were more than identical twins, they were clones. Yet, however, much alike they were physically, it seemed that their personalities were entirely different.

His father, Graham, had been an extrovert, and Brock more reserved and introspective. In a way it was as though they were opposite sides of

the same coin. From the outset everything had come easily to Graham—friends, scholastic achievement, and athletic prowess, whereas Brock had had to strive for everything. David had learned this, not from his grandmother, of course, but from his mother. Ironically, at the age of nineteen, both boys had fallen madly in love with Elaine, but inevitably it was Graham who won her. They were married on his embarkation leave in late 1941.

His parents' wedding picture hung on the wall to the left of the bed. Impulsively he reached up and took it down. He studied it intently for a few minutes, thinking as he did so that he looked very much like his father. He had the same high cheek bones and widely spaced eyes, the same dark curly hair. He certainly did not resemble his mother's side of the family, he reflected. She and her two sisters had all been strawberry blondes, with blue eyes, fair skin and freckles. His mother had been a knock-out, all right. He remembered one of his father's friends telling him years ago that Elaine had been Campus Queen during her university days. She had been Betty Co-Ed, Lana Turner, and the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi all rolled into one. It made him sad to think of her now confined to a wheelchair and unable to communicate. Thank God his stepfather, Tony, was so devoted to her.

He examined the photograph more closely. It appeared to have been taken at the bottom of the back garden of the Rosedale house. There to the left, was the cedar hedge, and to the right, the two Lombardy poplars, much smaller in those days. His parents were standing on the spot where the gazebo now stood. That must have been added after the war, he reflected, and suddenly had a hazy recollection of old Tom Rushton, Mary's husband, building it. He had let David help by holding nails and fetching and carrying for him, but he had refused to let anyone else assist him. David remembered how proud he was to have been carpenter's mate to Tom. Of course, he hadn't called him Tom in those days. His grandparents had always insisted that he address him as Mr. Rushton, and treat him with the greatest respect. His grandfather had thought the world of Tom, who had been his sergeant in the First World War, and in fact owed his life to him.

Looking back on those early days David often thought how privileged he had been to have grown up with two such men as role models. He had learned a great deal from both of them, but perhaps because he had spent more time with Tom as a small child, it was he who had left the strongest imprint on his character. Many of his most deeply held convictions about the brotherhood of men and the dignity of honest labour had been instilled in him by Tom.

He returned the wedding picture to its place on the wall. Just below it, on the bedside table, lay his grandmother's Bible, its leather cover badly scuffed by constant use. He picked it up, and as he did so, an old snapshot, yellow with age, fell from between the pages, and fluttered to the floor. He bent down and retrieved it.

It showed a pretty, dark-haired teenager, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, wearing a Girl Guide uniform, the tunic of which was decorated with a profusion of merit badges. She was smiling proudly and holding up a framed certificate, obviously an award of some kind. In the background was a car, which David identified more or less accurately as a mid-thirties Ford V8, but there was nothing else to indicate where the picture had been taken.

There was something hauntingly familiar about her, but for the life of him he could not quite put his finger on it. He continued to gaze at the snapshot, and across the years the girl smiled back at him. She reminded him of someone he knew, but who was it? Even more to the point, who was she, and what was her connection with his grandmother?

End of sample.

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