

Deadly Diaries

C.E. Waterman

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Dedication

This is dedicated to Dean, Niki, Jenny, and Denise,
who read my many early versions, and encouraged me
all along the way. Thank you.

Also Available

High Deceit

1

The body rested where she fell, and he stared at her, bile rising in his throat. Why wouldn't she listen? In the adjoining room, a jagged piece of a china cup sported an unbroken pink rose, smirking up at him, taunting in its simplicity. He ground it under his heel, and wiped the dust on the rug. Everything had to be perfect, nothing could be left here to identify him. He itched to leave, jumping out of his skin, but haste now would prove disastrous.

A thud echoed through the house. He froze, his heartbeat elevating. Was someone upstairs? There couldn't be. His palms began to sweat. Maybe it came from outside. If someone was up there, they would have peeked down the stairs by now, it was human nature. Which meant they could identify him. With a shaky hand, he grabbed a knife and started for the stairs. Only one way to be sure.

Footsteps tromped on the wooden front porch. He jumped, knocking against a chair. Cursing under his breath, he positioned the knife handle in his closed fist, an extension of his hand. Why hadn't she told him she was expecting company? The visitor fumbled around until the doorbell rang. Maybe they'd go away. Or if someone was on the floor above, it would draw them out. Either way, he couldn't risk any witnesses.

He forced his body to still. The bell rang again. Tiny windows next to the front door guaranteed he wouldn't reach the stairs unseen. He edged farther back, listening hard, but the ticking of a stupid cat clock in the kitchen drowned out any small sounds. Were they leaving? He needed more time. Shuffling swished beyond the door, and a key clattered in the lock. No time to finish. If a witness lurked upstairs, he couldn't do anything about it now. He moved back behind the body, put his toe against it, and shoved. It might slow them down.

~*~

Fine Designs was not as crowded as Maggie Schreiber expected for a Saturday morning, but there was still a line at the checkout counter. Balancing two elegant crystal lamps, one on each hip, she waited in line, taking in the ambience of her favorite store. Gleaming wood floors and artistic furniture placement inspired her.

The tan sofa off to her left paired with black striped pillows and orange accessories would be ideal for the ultra-modern design she'd planned for the Linden, one of the larger houses in Edward Blake's new development. Or the same sofa with blue pillows and a comfy quilt fit perfectly in the homey country setting of the Spruce. Did she dare believe in a chance to snare a major design project like Star Lake? Eleven show homes. It could vault her little business into stardom. Well maybe not celebrity status, but rent on a storefront for sure.

“Can I help you, Maggie?”

Tori, the owner, smiled at her from the open till. The three people in line ahead of her had vanished.

Maggie blinked and, with a laugh, strode forward to deposit her purchases on the counter. “I’d better pay for these and get out of here before I buy out the store.”

“In that case, stay.” Tori waved an arm, indicating the entire store. “Peruse to your heart’s content.”

Maggie reached for her purse. “I’m afraid my eyes are bigger than my wallet.”

Tori laughed and lightly stroked one silk shade. “What classy place are these babies going to?”

“They’re a surprise for Aunt Esther.” Maggie pictured the lamps next to her aunt’s overstuffed couch. They’d be perfect. “I’d also like to put a pair in a show home I’m decorating for Edward Blake.” Maggie fingered the delicate silver bauble dangling at the end of a pull chain. “Can you order more if I get the bid? I’ll want some like these, plus a few others in the series.”

“You bet.” Tori eased a lamp down and rolled it in elegantly printed tissue paper, taping the side. “When will you know?”

Scrolled purple writing repeated Fine Designs, Distinctive Furnishings on the creamy-white packing sheets. Maggie’s fingers yearned to help, but she slid her debit card out instead. “I’m submitting next week, so I should know sometime after. Edward seemed in a hurry. I guess he lost his interior designer just as they were breaking ground.”

“How weird.” Tori placed the lamp into a box filled partway with packing peanuts. “Do you know what happened?”

“No. I was afraid to ask.”

"You'll get it." Tori's voice rang with certainty. "Your designs are fantastic." She winked. "And you use such quality materials."

Maggie grinned. She couldn't help herself—she wanted to sing or dance or jump. Esther would love these.

Tori smoothed packing paper over the second lamp and nestled it into the box. "Not to change the subject, but you said these were a surprise?"

"She admired them when we were here last week, but you know how she is. I can't get her to buy anything she deems frivolous."

"I won't tell her. But I warn you I'm not good at keeping secrets, so you'd better not wait long."

"I'm headed over there now, so you're safe. They're perfect for her living room. I can't wait to see the look on her face." Maggie bounced on her toes, unable to stop smiling. "She has great taste if she'd loosen the purse strings a little."

Tori laughed. "My grandmother is the same way. She'll spend thirty dollars on gas to save ten in groceries." She snuggled the shades in next and stuffed crumpled paper around them. "Can I help you carry it to the van?"

Maggie eyed the tall carton. "That'd be great, thanks." The two of them balanced the ungainly box between them, secured it in her van, and slammed the doors. Giving Tori a quick wave, Maggie skipped to the driver's side and hopped in.

The summer sun radiated off the pavement, promising another hot day. Even here in the mountains, temperatures had been hitting the low nineties all week. She reached for her sunglasses, tuned to her favorite radio station, and all the way to her

aunt's house, she belted out the songs she knew.

She turned down the music near the empty driveway and nudged her sunglasses atop her head. Had Esther parked in the garage, or did Maggie beat her home?

Maggie parked on the street in front of the pretty white house, leaving room for Esther's car either way. A large front porch held a hanging swing—her favorite reading spot when Maggie was young. Next to it, a blue door showed through a decorative screen. She wrestled the lamps out of the back, wishing she had Tori's help. It wasn't heavy, just tall and awkward.

Unable to see where she was going, Maggie felt her way up the porch steps and groped for the doorbell. The box was too big to maneuver. Her arms didn't reach around it, and one hand flailed in space, not connecting with anything even close to the door. Finally, she pointed to a corner toward where she thought the bell should be, and shoved. The resultant ringing loosened her shoulders in relief.

Her foot tapped to the beat of the song playing in her head. What was taking so long? She tried to see her watch. Not possible. The box slid easily to the porch. Much better. She tipped her wrist—twelve o'clock, right on time. Where was Esther? Maybe she got held up at the club.

After ringing the bell one more time, Maggie dug the key out of her purse and unlocked the door. The box seemed even more awkward when heaving it up and maneuvering it through the small opening, but she succeeded and shuffled left toward the couch. Her foot caught on something solid. The box flew out of her hands and landed with a thump.

The offending obstacle turned out to be a leather-

covered ottoman Esther used as a coffee table. What was it doing in the middle of the room? And why was the TV on the floor?

Maggie rotated on her toes, a knot forming in the pit of her stomach. The drawers on the beautiful old secretary had been ripped out and their contents spilled. In the adjoining dining room, the hutch gaped open, and pieces of broken china littered every surface. Her heartbeat elevated. It must have been a burglary. Was he gone? And where was her aunt?

She moved toward the kitchen, her tennis shoes crunching on broken glass. The swing door blocked her view, and a chill raced down her spine as she approached. She should leave and call the police from a safe distance. But what if Esther was hurt? The burglar wouldn't be here after all the noise she'd made, right? She had to know. "Esther?" she called out and hesitated, listening.

He must be gone.

Her hand shook, and her heart pounded as though trying to beat out of her chest as she placed her hand on the door and pushed.

It didn't budge.

She pushed harder.

It still didn't move.

Prying her fingers around the edge of the door, she eased it toward her.

Esther was lying on her side, a carving knife sticking out of her back.

2

Maggie fought the urge to yank out the knife as she dropped to her knees. "Oh, no, please, God, no," she murmured, her voice tearful. She shook an unresponsive shoulder. "Esther?" She shook again, harder this time. "Esther!"

"Please wake up." Tears dripped from her chin as Maggie placed trembling fingers at the base of Esther's neck. No pulse.

Maggie smoothed silky white hair from a mostly unlined brow. No trauma showed in the beautiful face, at least on the side she could see. Her aunt's features were composed as though she were sleeping. Maggie grasped Esther's hand and brought it to her lips. It was cool. She sat back on her heels, the tears now gushing down her face. An ambulance. She needed an ambulance. After tenderly placing Esther's hand on the floor, Maggie stumbled into the living room, scooping her phone from her purse. First she called 9-1-1, and then her fiancé, Detective Greg Williams.

"Hi, sweetheart, what's up? Did Esther like her surprise?" His warm tones caused a lump to form in her throat.

An answer wouldn't come. A sound she didn't recognize gurgled out.

"What's the matter?" His tone sharpened. "Are

you all right?"

She cleared her throat and explained in halting tones what she'd found.

"Did you call an ambulance?"

"Yes, they're on their way."

"Are you sure you can't do anything to help her?"

A hiccup escaped. "No, she has a huge knife sticking out of her back. And no pulse."

"Then I want you to go outside and wait for the ambulance. I'll be there as soon as I can; I'm leaving now."

The swing called to her, but she wouldn't be able to sit still. Leaning against the porch railing, she tried to relax, but every sound startled her. Sirens wailed in the distance, but it was impossible to tell how far. Restless, she wandered down the porch steps, through the yard, and paced along the sidewalk. Why weren't they here yet?

A few minutes later, an ambulance screeched to the curb behind her van. The doors flew open, and a man and woman sprang from the cab.

She pointed. "In the kitchen."

The man nodded, and they ran straight into the house, slamming the screen.

Maggie continued her pacing until Greg's truck rounded the corner. The police lights in his grill flashed, and his siren whined to a whimper as he slid to the curb in front of her van. Relief washed through her as he and his partner jumped out. And then the tears came.

"I'll be right back," he called as they sprinted past her. A few minutes later, he came out alone and folded her in his arms.

"Are you all right? You're not hurt?" Greg rocked

her until her sobs subsided to hiccups. Then he leaned back and gazed into her face. "Will you be OK for a bit?"

She nodded, and he gave her a final squeeze before jogging to the house. His truck provided a barrier from the elderly neighbors watching from their porch across the street. They were nice people, but she didn't want to talk to them right now. More police arrived, including her best friend's husband, Mark, and his partner, Peter.

"Are you all right, Maggie? Are you hurt?" Peter asked.

She shook her head. She wasn't all right, and physically, she wasn't hurt. "Greg and David are already inside."

Mark patted her arm and hesitated until his wife, Robin, parked at the end of what was becoming a long line of vehicles in front of the house. He waited for her to hurry over, and followed the other officers.

Robin, her best friend and former business partner, held her close.

Maggie stepped back, releasing her. "How could this happen? Pinon Heights is supposed to be a safe neighborhood!"

Robin frowned. "Let's sit in the shade. It's supposed to hit ninety today." She led the way to the porch swing and lowered herself into it. "You're not hurt, are you?"

As Maggie sat, she glanced down. No wonder everyone kept asking her that. Blood stained the knees of her white capris and smeared her shins. Smudges marred one tennis shoe, the dark red violent against the crisp white. "I'm OK. It's Aunt Esther's blood."

The kitchen scene flashed in her mind, and her

stomach churned. She leapt to her feet. "I think I'm going to be sick." She took a few steps and doubled over the railing before what was left of her breakfast erupted all over Esther's prized yellow roses. She straightened and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Whoa, I didn't see that coming."

Robin handed her a pack of tissues, and they moved to the grass under a tall oak. Maggie wiped her face, wishing for some water to rinse out the nasty taste. "What could have made someone kill her?" she asked. "It's not like Esther was wealthy. This is a nice area, but not ritzy."

"So it was a robbery then?" Robin tucked the rest of the tissue pack into her purse.

"Yeah. There's a huge mess inside—glass everywhere." A few blades of grass remained around the tree trunk, missed by the weed whacker. Maggie gathered them in her hand and yanked, loosening her hand and watching them drift to the mowed yard. "We were supposed to meet for lunch after her golf game. She must have surprised someone when she came back."

Compassion shone in Robin's eyes. "Thieves are getting so bold. Mark says they've hit two other houses in this neighborhood in the last three months."

Maggie winced, trying to push the picture of Esther out of her head. "Thank you for coming so fast. You must have dropped everything. I assume Mark called you?"

Robin nodded.

"Now I remember why I like him." Maggie tried to smile. "Where's the baby?" She glanced at the car as if Robin would have left him in there. The sun glinted off the windshield, masking the interior.

“Libby’s watching him. She wanted to come, but Jake should be getting home from school soon, so she volunteered to watch Tony for me.”

The mail truck passed, stopping to feed the boxes of Esther’s neighbors. Life carried on. School busses dropped off their charges, and mail delivery never stopped. She sighed.

The screen door slammed, and Maggie twisted toward it.

Peter stepped off the porch, flipped a page in his notebook, and cut through the yard. He dropped to the grass, sitting cross-legged, in front of her. He reached for her hand and gave it a light squeeze.

“First of all, I’m so sorry. You know how much we love Esther.”

Maggie bit her lip to stop its trembling.

His eyes grew gentle. “Can you answer some questions for me?”

Could she? Her stomach did another flip. She could say no. Maybe they would let her leave. The safety of her home beckoned. It wouldn’t get any easier. She just needed to get it over with. She nodded.

“So talk me through your morning, right up to when we arrived.”

A deep breath cleared her head. “I bought some lamps at Fine Designs this morning. We were supposed to meet here at noon, and they were a surprise.” Tears welled up and overflowed. Wiping them away seemed useless.

“When you drove up, was Esther’s car parked in the driveway?”

Her gaze shifted to the empty driveway. “No. I didn’t park there either because I thought I might have beaten her home. In fact, when she didn’t answer, I

went inside to wait for her.”

“So the front door was unlocked?”

She shook her head. “I used my key.”

“Can you remember if there were other cars on the street?”

So many vehicles surrounded her van now, Maggie had difficulty picturing it earlier. “The Johnsons’ red car was across the street—they’ve lived there forever.” She closed her eyes, trying to concentrate. “I don’t know the neighbors on the right. But they had a black car in front of their house, and a white one was in the Carsons’ driveway.” She opened her eyes and pointed to the left. “I’m sorry. I’m not good at makes and models.”

“It’s OK. Picture the street. Are there any pedestrians?”

She stared at the Sunshine Interiors logo on her van, remembering her excitement when she’d parked. Another tear pooled in the corner of her eye and slid down her cheek. “I don’t recall seeing anyone, but I wasn’t watching.”

Peter nodded and jotted some notes on his pad. “Now lead me into the house. What did you see?”

Maggie thrust the image of Esther, lying in a puddle of blood, out of her mind and described what she’d seen.

“Did you hear anything?”

“No, but I was making a lot of noise.”

“Did you touch anything?”

She described what she could remember touching and answered a few more questions.

Peter scribbled on his pad and grunted as he stood. “Why don’t you let Robin drive you home? We have enough to go on for now.” He reached down and

helped her to her feet.

Robin scrambled up beside her, her dark curls bouncing. "I'd be happy to take you."

"Thanks, but I'll be OK. I just need some time alone."

Robin walked her to the van, holding the door while she climbed in. "Promise you'll call me if you need anything?"

Maggie agreed. "I'll be OK. Don't worry."

Robin furrowed her brow as if she didn't quite believe it, but she pushed the door shut and stepped back.

Maggie maneuvered past the police cars and sped off. The taste in her mouth, and the smell drifting up from her pants sent her stomach into flutters again. Rolling down the window, she gulped fresh air as she made her way home. The car seemed to drive itself into the alley behind her house and into her detached garage.

Honey jumped on her the minute she went through the door to the backyard, gluing her nose to Maggie's legs. "Down, girl." Maggie shooed the golden colored cocker spaniel off her knees. "Why don't you stay here while I get out of these?"

She hurried across the yard and slipped into the house, ignoring the sad whine when she shut the little dog outside. Resting against the door, she exhaled. For the first time since she'd walked into Esther's house, she felt safe. Familiar maple cabinets and cool black, granite countertops soothed her, but the fresh, clean scent of her kitchen was losing the fight against the stench drifting up from her clothes. She wrinkled her nose and dropped her purse on the small wooden accent table by the door. Her keys slid into their

accustomed spot in the tulip-patterned dish next to her purse.

A shower was mandatory, but before going upstairs, she grabbed a garbage bag from the pantry. Even if they came clean, she never wanted to wear this outfit again. Using two fingers, she stripped to her undies, bagged her bloody clothes and tennis shoes, and set them next to the island. The bag could wait to go outside later. Her feet slid on the wood floor as she headed for the stairs.

In the shower, she took extra time sudsing up, wishing she could scrub the memories from her mind as well. Feeling better, Maggie took the bag outside, leaving them there to take to the garage garbage can later. At Honey's whimpering, she let the dog follow her inside. Some company would be nice right about now. Hoping to sleep, she lay on her bed and closed her eyes. Her furry friend curled up beside her, offering the only comfort she knew.

Maggie's brain wouldn't shut down, replaying the morning events, culminating with Esther on the floor. Giving up, she hauled herself to her home office to clear the clutter from her desk. If she worked on the Star Lake designs, maybe she could replace the horrible images with better ones. She flipped on some soft music. Comparing fabric swatches with color chips, she kept trying until she produced the right effect and pinned her choices to the design board.

Honey yipped a few seconds before a tap sounded at the back door.

Maggie lowered the fabric sample she'd been studying, rubbed her eyes, and pushed to her feet. She shuffled around the staircase, skirted the dining room, and hurried through the kitchen.

Greg stood on the stoop, holding a large bag from Wong's Mountain Terrace. He placed the Chinese food on the counter. "I took a chance you wouldn't have eaten dinner yet."

Maggie's stomach growled as she reached into an upper cupboard for plates. "I didn't think I was hungry, but something in there smells good."

He fished the individual boxes out of the bag and arranged them on the table. "I didn't know what you wanted, so I got sweet and sour chicken, sesame beef, and egg drop soup."

She leaned back against the black granite countertop, cradling the plates against her stomach as he opened the cartons. "What did you find out? Is it the same guys from the other robberies?"

Greg upended the sack and shook out the napkins and chopsticks. "It appears so at first glance. Her car's missing—do you know if she had any trouble with it? Could it be in a shop somewhere?"

Maggie pictured the empty driveway and shook her head. "It wasn't there when I arrived, and she should've driven it home from the club this morning unless someone gave her a ride." She cocked her head and eyed his profile. "And what do you mean, 'at first glance'?"

He wadded the bag and shoved it into the trash. "Nothing. You should be able to go into the house soon. But for now, please ask if you need anything, and I'll get it for you. Once we finish, I would appreciate it if you could go in and list what's missing."

Was he avoiding the question? Maggie tilted away from the counter and set the plates on the table, scrutinizing him. "I'm still stuck on 'at first glance.' What did you mean?"