

CONFESSIONS OF A TEEN SLEUTH

I The Hidden Hardy, 1926

Readers of Carolyn Keene's version of my life's events may be surprised to learn that Ned Nickerson was not the love of my life. In fact, my heart belonged to another. I first met Frank Hardy in the summer of 1925. He and his younger brother, Joe, had come to town from Bayport, New Jersey, on the trail of a missing waitress. I was walking out of Jackson's Drug Store when I saw them pull up on their red Indian Scout motorcycles. Even soiled from their five-day journey, they were both striking. Frank was wearing khaki pants, a collared shirt, and a maroon sweater. Joe was wearing the same clothes, only his sweater was blue. They even had the same haircut, though Frank's hair was darker. Yet to me they could not have been more different. I could tell immediately that Frank was the older, more experienced of the two brothers. He held himself taller and walked with the subtle swagger of a boy older than his seventeen years. I approached them—they had parked their Scouts in a no-parking zone—and soon found myself swept up in their mystery. We found their missing waitress working the morning shift at Oscar Peterson's Bakery, and the two soon returned to Bayport. I never thought I'd see Frank again. Until that next summer when the doorbell rang.

I had just solved the Mystery at Lilac Inn and was unpacking my tasteful blue luggage when I heard our housekeeper, Hannah Gruen, answer the door. Hannah was only in her thirties then, though a youth spent smoking unfiltered Luckys had aged her prematurely. She wore her fair hair in a bun and her skirts long, though I had seen her more than once leave the house in trousers when my father was away on business. Curious as to the identity of our visitor, I craned to look around the upstairs corner and saw the back of Frank's head as Hannah took his coat. My heart leapt in my chest.

I smoothed my stylish coif, adjusted my loose knit jacket, and went downstairs.

"Frank," I announced maturely. "How good to see you again."

I extended my hand, and Frank took it, grinning.

"Nancy," he responded. "It's a pleasure. It's good to see you looking as slim and attractive as always." Then his face grew grave. "But enough pleasantries. I'm here because something has happened to Joe and I need your help."

I nodded solemnly, but even as I did my heart swelled. He needed my help. Of all the teen sleuths he knew (and rumor was he knew plenty), he had come to me.

Before we could say another word, the doorbell rang again. Hannah answered it. She turned to me, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "Nancy!" she gasped. "It's a letter for you. Special delivery!"

Hannah Gruen and Frank Hardy gathered around me as I opened the mysterious letter that had just arrived.

"Who's it from?" asked the housekeeper.

"I don't know," I answered. "There's no return address." I opened the letter carefully so as not to destroy any clues. Inside was a typewritten note:

"STAY OUT OF IT," the note warned.

I looked up at Frank, who stood gazing intently at the letter. "Maybe you had better tell me a little more about what happened to Joe," I told him.

Hannah went to the kitchen to make tea while Frank and I sat in the living room, the typed note on the coffee table between us.

"Joe has been penning mash notes to Helen Corning for months. She finally agreed to meet him if he came to River Heights," Frank explained glumly. (Helen was three years older than I so had already graduated from R.H. High and was in heady pursuit of a husband.) "But she had to cancel at the last minute," Frank continued. "I called Jake's Ice Cream Parlor where they were supposed to rendezvous, and Jake said that Joe waited for an hour and then left. This was two days ago, and he has yet to surface!"

I folded my hands neatly in my lap. "Is he a drinker?"

Frank shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "He likes to bend an elbow from time to time."

We locked eyes. I could feel a warm rush of passion swell in my bosom. "We'll find him," I told Frank breathlessly. "We'll find your brother Joe." I stood up and reached for my expensive camel hair coat, cloche hat, and aviator goggles. "Come on," I exclaimed, looking back at Frank. "There's only one place to get an illicit drink in this town: The Green Jade Café! We haven't a moment to lose!"

Frank and I sped along the country road in my custom blue Ford Roadster. We had just passed Riverside Park and the Bridle Path when I heard a piercing scream.

I froze behind the wheel. Had I inadvertently hit someone again? The judge had let me off the first time, but a second would be manslaughter for sure! My heart pounded in fright as I opened the car door to step out.

At that instant a shadowy figure arose from a pile of hay nearby. The attractive young man was wearing a full-length raccoon coat, popular in those days with the college set. "Hi, Nancy," the young man greeted me bashfully.

I removed my goggles. "Ned?"

"You know this fellow?" asked Frank.

"Yes," I pouted. "Ned, what are you doing here? Are you following me again?"

Ned looked at his shoes. "I was just worried about you," he muttered. "I phoned and Mrs. Gruen told me what was going on. I figured you were headed to the Green Jade Café so I thought I'd beat you there. But then my scooter ran out of gas. I was hiding in the hay pile when a chicken startled me. That's when you drove up."

"Who is this cat?" Frank asked me.

Ned stood up a little. "I'm her special friend," he explained. "Omega Chi Epsilon."

Frank looked at me questioningly. I shrugged.

A few minutes later Ned had strapped his scooter to my trunk and the three of us were racing toward our destination.

The Green Jade Café was in Dockville, a slum area near the Muskoka, the river that divides my hometown. A tributary of the Mississippi, the Muskoka of my youth was still crystal clear and I cruised it often as a member of the River Heights Yacht Club. Of course these days most people know the Muskoka as one of the first EPA Superfund cleanup sites in the 1980s.

The pavement in Dockville was poor, and there were rows upon rows of tenement houses punctuated by fortune-tellers and thrift shops. The residents were mostly domestic workers, recent immigrants, petty criminals, and others down on their luck. This was an area rarely mentioned in the River Heights Morning Record. (Unlike my own exploits, which were often front-page news. With photos.)

We arrived at the Green Jade Café only to find it closed. As it was early evening on a weekday, using my detective prowess, I deduced that this was suspicious.

"I guess we should just go home," suggested Ned.

But peering through the glass front door, I thought I caught the sight of movement. I tried the door. It opened.

"Nancy!" Ned gasped.

I took a step inside. Frank followed. Ned followed behind Frank.

The Green Jade Café was a speakeasy that specialized in plying patrons with fraudulent palm readings once they had imbibed several ounces of malt whiskey.

Everyone knew it existed, including Chief McGinnis, but it was allowed to operate due to the protection of several members of the city council.

Inside, the walls were painted emerald green, and a dark wooden bar loomed huge on one wall. Several chairs were scattered on the floor.

"There's been a fight!" reported Frank.

"Shh!" I ordered. "Listen!"

From deep inside the café came a distant moan.

"Jiminy crickets!" exclaimed Ned.

The three of us moved through the café toward the faint groaning noise coming from what seemed to be the kitchen area.

"There!" Frank cried, pointing to a closet at the back of the room. "The noise seems to be coming from behind that door!"

Putting my finger over my lips, I reached toward the doorknob and turned it. It was locked. I took off my hat, pulled a bobby pin from my smart hairdo and, kneeling in my slimming skirt, quickly and expertly picked the closet lock. Then I stood, took a step back, and opened the door.

A fair-haired young man was curled at the bottom of the closet, his arms and legs bound and a handkerchief tied across his mouth.