



*THE SECRET OF  
THE OLD CLOCHE*

*Agatha Christie Mystery Stories*

*by*

*Leslie Stahlhut*



**COYOTE ARTS**

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for

*Betsy Louise Noble*

1955–2013

who always let my third-grade self  
sneak off with her copies of Nancy Drew



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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Lost Relation

**A**GATHA BURST INTO the corporate headquarters of Agatha Christie World Tours waving the afternoon edition of *The Acorn Register*. “The Baileys don’t even have the decency to wait for Amelia Dettmer to be buried before they try to shut down her animal rescue!”

“Amelia Dettmer died?” Lydia Bigelow, Agatha’s mother, peered over the top of her glasses.

“The funeral is at two o’clock.” Agatha plopped the newspaper on the dining table that served as her mother’s desk.

Lydia looked over the top of her glasses again. “Oh my,” she said, then moved the newspaper aside.

For as long as Agatha could remember her mother was either sitting at this table planning tours based on the life and work of her favorite author, Agatha Christie, or she was gone on one of the junkets she had organized.



Agatha turned to look out the window of the front room where there was a large oak. As a child she had spent hours gazing out this window imagining her future — one filled with travel and intrigue — not unlike the life she lived up until a few weeks ago.

But it took just one disastrous dinner to simultaneously end her career at The Agency and her cover job as a sales rep for Global Yarns.

Agatha picked up the newspaper and reread the article looking for a new clue. Her brow furrowed.

“Don’t do that,” Lydia said sharply.

“Don’t do what? Read the paper?”

“Don’t get smart with me, young lady. You can read the paper, but don’t do that with your forehead. You’ll get wrinkles,” Lydia said.

“I’m not a ‘young lady,’ mother. I’m a middle-aged woman who needs a job while I get my new career off the ground.” Tucked away in Agatha’s suitcase was an invitation to design a crochet hat for Aneta Genova’s new collection. It was the opportunity of a lifetime.

“Well you’re not going to find it wrinkling your forehead.”

Agatha flipped to the classified section to see if anyone still advertised jobs in the newspaper. There was a small notice for a “confidential job” opening. Someone who didn’t want to be named was looking for an investigator. Maybe she could persuade whoever it was that a downsized yarn rep would be perfect for the position.

Lydia looked at her daughter. She knew she shouldn’t say anything, but she was never good at stopping herself even when she knew better. “Have you thought of dying your hair one of

those Easter egg colors like the young people do? It would cover the gray.”

Agatha let out a long sigh, glared, and got back to the topic that preoccupied her. “It says here that a ‘peculiar’ term in Amelia Dettmer’s will could end up shutting down Q-G-A-R-S-T!”

“It’s pronounced “Q-Garst,” Lydia corrected.

QGARST, short for “Quercus Grove Animal Rescue Society and Thrift,” was Amelia Dettmer’s life’s work.

The “animal rescue society” referred to Amelia Dettmer’s homestead where rescued animals were housed while they awaited placement in forever homes. The “thrift” referred to a converted Army Navy surplus store that was the fundraising arm of the non-profit animal rescue and was known for its unique and hard-to-find vintage items. But according to the article in *The Acorn*, thrift store sales weren’t QGARST’s main source of revenue.

Amelia Dettmer was.

“It will be a shame if a living relation to Amelia Dettmer can’t be found. QGARST won’t get the funds it needs to continue operations.”

“That *would* be a shame,” Lydia said.

Agatha couldn’t tell if her mother was being sarcastic or had stopped listening and thought she should fill the pause with a well-intentioned, but meaningless, acknowledgement.

“If you were looking for a relation to Amelia Dettmer, where would you look?”

“Woodlawn Cemetery,” Lydia chortled.

“Living relations, mother!”

Lydia looked over the top of her glasses as if she were looking into the past. “Do you remember Amelia’s birthday celebrations?” she asked.

“Do I ever! I think Mr. Bailey ran for mayor just to try to shut them down! You know, there’s never been a time in the history of Quercus Grove anyone by the name of Bailey was interested in anything that didn’t make them money or advance their social standing.”

“The Baileys aren’t very well liked,” Lydia said dryly.

“They aren’t very likable. Mr. Bailey only ever uses his law degree to intimidate and harass, Mrs. Bailey is a social climber of the first order, and whoever said ‘There’s no such thing as a stupid question,’ never had to sit next to their daughter Lynette. If a living relation to Amelia isn’t found, the Baileys will get all of the buildings on Amelia’s property condemned and razed before the flowers on her grave wilt.”

Although Lydia found Agatha’s speech tiresome, her sentiments about the Baileys were widely shared throughout Quercus Grove. The decades-long war they waged against Amelia had been the topic of many hushed conversations.

Born on May 7, Amelia’s entry into the world was forever tied to the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Her immediate family had died when she was a child, and the animals she rescued were the only family she had or cared to have. A self-described “disaster baby,” she celebrated her birthday by hosting a party to which every animal in Madison county was welcome.

Sitting just outside the city limits of Quercus Grove and the grasp of city inspectors and zoning laws, Amelia’s property line abutted the Baileys’. Her annual birthday festivities—coupled

with her year-round rescue mission — caused her yard- and house-proud neighbors immense distress.

This pleased Amelia enormously.

The Baileys did everything they could to disrupt the celebrations, but try as they might, the law did not reach beyond their fence.

Then, several years before Amelia's death, the Baileys abruptly stopped their harassment of the elderly woman and put their energies elsewhere. Mr. Bailey focused on his law practice, Mrs. Bailey tended her roses, and Lynette became a docent at QGHM&S — the Quercus Grove Historical Museum & Society.

Agatha's own memories of Amelia were fleeting. Encountering her in the store was like finding Mary Poppins in the pet food aisle stocking up on cat chow, dog chow, flea powder, and small treats for her family of rescues.

Amelia — like the weeds Mrs. Bailey worked so hard to eradicate from her yard — maintained a firm grip on life, caring for the wayward and unadoptable pets of Madison County.

Then, a month before Agatha's unexpected return to Quercus Grove, Amelia took ill.

She stayed in her home as long as she could, but was eventually admitted to the hospital. One day, she asked the nurse for a pen and paper, and as Amelia wrote what would be her last worldly communication her heart gave out.

All agreed on the first 20 letters of her final missive:

*To whom it may concern: QG.*

But whether the twenty-first letter was an "A" or an "H" was vigorously debated in "Hot Takes," a special community engagement section on the op-ed page that the new editor, Roscoe Edwards had introduced.

The QGARST camp was certain the letter was an “A,” and Amelia was attempting to communicate an instruction about the rescue. The QGHM&S camp was certain the letter was an “H,” and Amelia was trying to point to a holding in the Historical Museum & Society that would reveal who the relation referenced in the will was.

“What do you think Amelia was trying to say in her last note? People seem to think it contains a hidden message,” said Agatha.

“Possibly.” Lydia was annoyed at being interrupted yet again.

“Maybe it was a secret about the Baileys!”

“I don’t know what there could be that isn’t already in the public record.”

“You don’t think they have any secrets?” Agatha’s work for The Agency had taught her that everyone has secrets.

“I didn’t say that, but *The Acorn* has reported on every birthday party and luncheon the Baileys have attended for the past 50 years,” Lydia said, “As for Amelia, her family’s roots in Quercus Grove and Madison County are broad and deep. Her mother and father were both certified Pioneers of Quercus Grove. I don’t know what there is to know about Amelia that hasn’t been published in the newspaper or documented in her Pioneers application.”

“That doesn’t mean there isn’t someone who doesn’t know they’re a relation.”

Your father was a Pioneer of Quercus Grove, and when I married him, the Historical Society roped me into becoming the chair of the Pioneers Committee. One of my duties was to review every application ever approved. When I read Amelia’s there wasn’t any sign of a relation who might still be living.

“So what about Lynette Bailey’s application? Is there anything interesting there?”

Agatha’s interruptions were wearing on Lydia. “The most interesting thing about Lynette’s application is that one was never submitted.”

“If a living relation to Amelia Dettmer isn’t found, it will be a disaster for QGARST. That isn’t right!”

“It might not be right but it was Amelia’s wish that a living relation be located. Now, I really need to work.”

Agatha mused on the case of Amelia Dettmer. She knew finding the motivation was key. Usually what propelled a person to act was a personal grievance. What could Amelia’s be?

Lydia tried to concentrate on her tour, but her thoughts kept straying to her only child. Why had Agatha—who had traveled the world selling yarn for twenty-five years—given it up and returned home to become a crochet designer? If she were destined to live out what remained of her life in Quercus Grove, why hadn’t she just gotten married when she finished college and given Lydia the grandchildren she deserved?

She looked across the dining table that served as her desk. It had been in her late husband Ralph’s family for over a hundred years. It was at this table she and Agatha had addressed and stamped envelopes for Agatha Christie World Tours, the business Lydia started from scratch after her husband Ralph’s ill-fated business trip.

Maybe it was the hours they spent working together that made Agatha a world traveler. More than once they met when they were abroad. There was a quick lunch in Istanbul when one of Agatha’s suppliers canceled a meeting as Lydia was arriving for an Orient Express Junket, an amazing dinner in

Casablanca when Agatha was scouting Moroccan sources for a line of specialty yarns while Lydia did research for a tour based on *Destination Unknown*, an underappreciated novel from Agatha Christie's *œuvre*, and a quick cup of coffee at the train station in Barcelona.

Whatever it was, Agatha was past the age she could give Lydia grandchildren without stealing them from someone else. And in the moments Lydia was honest with herself, she was content with her life. Everything was comfortable. She liked being able to take off and travel at a moment's notice.

"Where do you think Amelia Dettmer's relations could be?" Agatha said, "and don't say the cemetery!"

"I don't know about any relations. All I do know is...." Lydia stopped.

"Go on," Agatha was curious to learn anything that might reveal a clue.

"One day I was at the courthouse as the result of that dreadful Officer Hughes citing me for failure to come to a complete stop. My attorney, Marcus Hill, and I were outside the courtroom where my case was about to be heard, and he was consulting with some high-flying criminal defense attorney. I think her name was Carrie, or maybe it was Karen. Anyway, she's very famous. Amelia Dettmer walked right up to her while we were in the middle of the conference and told that attorney she had a problem that couldn't wait."

"I wonder why Amelia would need a criminal defense attorney?" Agatha mused.

"As I said before you interrupted, Amelia stopped her right there in the hall. The blood was rushing through my head over the shame of my unjust ticket, so I couldn't hear most of the

conversation, but I did hear the attorney agree to come out to Amelia's house later that day."

"It would seem Amelia Dettmer had something quite pressing to attend to if she took the time to track down this lawyer at the courthouse," Agatha said.

"If I had been able to think, that would have been my thought exactly."

"So you got your ticket nearly a year ago, and that was about four years after the Baileys stopped harassing Amelia about her birthday celebrations."

Lydia peered over her glasses at her computer screen. "Look at the time!" she said, "I need to go."

"Go where?"

"Istanbul. A lovely woman I met at traffic school — Sophia Frickenstein — is coming on the junket with me."

"What junket?"

"The Orient Express!" Lydia said thoroughly aggravated with her daughter.

"When were you going to tell me about this?" Agatha asked.

"I was going to tell you when you walked in, but you wouldn't stop talking about Amelia Dettmer!"

"What do you know about this Frickenstein woman?"

"She's a Quercus Grove Pioneer on one side, Agatha. Just like you! Which reminds me..." Lydia reached in to her purse and handed Agatha a USB stick. "Here's all the information you'll need."

Agatha's eyes narrowed. "Information for what?"

"For the presentation I'm scheduled to give tomorrow, but can't because I'll be in Frankfurt." Her mother gathered up one last stack of papers.



“And where is this presentation taking place?” Agatha asked.

“At the Quercus Grove Hotel. It’s the annual Quercus Grove Pioneers Application Form Workshop. It’s the Historical Society’s best attended luncheon.”

“But I have a commission to design. And it has to be done in two weeks!”

“I’m only asking you to do two things. One is to deliver this presentation.”

“What’s the other?”

“The other what?”

“You said you were only asking me to do two things. One is the luncheon presentation. What’s the other?”

Her mother gave her a look that was both piercing and faraway, “You need to watch M. Poirot while I’m gone.”

Agatha was about to protest, but there was a knock at the door.

She opened it to find a tall, impeccably coiffed woman in a tweed suit clutching a coordinating purse.

“You’re not Lydia!” the woman greeted her.

“No, I’m not. My mother will be right with you.” Agatha replied.

“Oh, Lydia, I was so afraid I had gotten the wrong address when this stranger opened the door,” the woman said.

“No need to worry, Sophia,” Agatha’s mother assured her friend. “We’re going to have a grand time!” Then Lydia turned to her daughter, “Don’t forget the luncheon!”