

# DEAD-END DETECTIVE

AMANDA FLOWER

**A**T NINETY, MRS. BERGER WAS the oldest resident of Herrington, and she'd lived in her home on the shores of Seneca Lake for the last sixty years. She owned forty acres of prime lakefront property, and she let all of it remain wild except for the land immediately around her little ranch house. To the south was the imposing Lake Waters Retreat, a luxury resort where the rich and richer went "to get some work done," as my father said. They came from all over the country for special skin treatments, face-lifts, and other services. To protect the well-to-do clientele's privacy, the retreat was locked up like Fort Knox.

Lake Waters Retreat and builders throughout the Finger Lakes would've loved to buy Mrs. Berger's little house, flatten it to the ground and turn it into something profitable, but Mrs. Berger wasn't selling. Mr. Berger had been gone for over a decade now, and developers had given up trying to convince her.

She would tell people, eyes sparkling, "They're waiting for me to die, but what they don't know is I might outlive them all. Won't they be surprised when that happens?"

It was very possible. Mrs. Berger wasn't showing any signs of slowing down. The only thing she couldn't do was climb a tree to save her cat. Then again, she had me for that.

"Be careful getting him down. He's very upset. He might hurt himself," Mrs. Berger warned.

If I reached out and tried to grab Romy, I'd surely be scratched within an inch of my life—which was why I had a bath towel slung over my shoulder. It was a new strategy I wanted to try. I'd asked Mrs. Berger to lend me one, and she'd gone straight to her linen closet and pulled one out, no questions asked. I appreciated the vote of confidence and hoped it wasn't premature.

"Romy," I cooed. "Don't you want to come down from that tree? It can't be any fun being up there all day, can it?"

I took a breath and looped the towel over Romy's back. Before he could figure out what was happening, I climbed up to the next branch and grabbed him around the middle with the towel between us. I wrapped him up burrito-style, making sure his head was free and I was out of the way of his biting teeth. It worked! I couldn't believe it.

The climb down was much more cumbersome because I was going backward and one-handed, my left arm wrapped around the very upset Romy. I was six feet from the ground when my foot missed a branch.

I fell and landed flat on my back, hard. Air whooshed out of me and onto Romy, who was still in his towel. He lay on my chest and stared me in the face. I pushed him off before he could bite my nose.

He hissed and flopped to the side, still trapped in the towel cocoon.

Mrs. Berger poked me with the end of her cane. “You all right, Darby?”

That was a more difficult question for me to answer than she could possibly know.

She leaned a little farther over me and met my gaze. “Your eyes look normal, so I don’t think you have a concussion.” She waved her hand. “How many of me do you see?”

“One.”

“Good. You’re fine. Mr. Berger was a neuroscientist and always told me how to look for signs of head trauma, but I can call the EMTs if you want to be sure.”

“No!”

I struggled to my feet. If she called the ambulance, the police would most likely come, because there wasn’t much other policing to do in Herrington. If the police came, there was a high chance my ex-boyfriend would be the one they’d send out, and this was the last way I wanted him to see me: flat on my back in running clothes covered in orange cat hair with a ninety-year-old woman poking me in the ribs with her antique cane.

That didn’t really say, “Hey, I got my life together without you.”

Even so, I was pretty sure Police Officer Austin Caster knew I didn’t have my life together—even without the visual evidence.

Romy struggled, his body writhing under the terry cloth fabric. I quickly unwrapped him and jumped

back with the same trepidation park rangers use when releasing a bobcat in the wild. Mrs. Berger scooped up the cat and held him to her chest.

“You’re the best detective I know. You always seem to know where to find Romy when he wanders off.”

I wished I could say she was right, that I was the best detective, but I was certain I wasn’t. Had I been better, I wouldn’t be about to lose the business I’d spent the last decade of my life building.