

## ***Cemetery Whites***

By Connie Knight

*Probably the most common bearded iris grown in the South is *Iris x albicans*, better known as "Cemetery Whites." They are a naturally sterile hybrid and are extremely hardy, often marking abandoned homesites and old cemeteries, where for several weeks each spring they command the attention of all passersby.*

*--William C. Welch and Greg Grant, "The Southern Heirloom Garden"*

## CHAPTER ONE

*Tuesday, March 16, 2010*

An ancient Oldsmobile chugged down the dry dirt road, raising a red dust cloud. The driver, an elderly woman with wispy gray hair gathered into a knot at the nape of her neck, wore a loose-fitting cotton flannel dress and a long cardigan sweater. She shared the front seat with a dapper-looking middle-aged black man, dressed in khaki slacks and a white polo shirt. His tweed jacket and a large leather briefcase occupied floor space under his feet. In the back seat rode the driver's thirty-three-year-old grandson, wearing blue jeans and a red T-shirt that showed off his muscles. His curly blond hair escaped from the edges of his baseball cap, and a denim jacket draped across his shoulders.

The driver, Henrietta Hargrove Harrell, knew her way around the dirt roads of DeWitt County. She had lived there her entire eighty-five years. Someone he knew in San Antonio had told that to Professor Thomas Harrison, so on his trip to Yorktown, he located her and knocked on her door. He introduced himself, gave her his card, and asked her to drive him to the Hargrove Family Cemetery. Seeing the graveyard would fit into some historical research of his, he said.

"I'd just ask you for directions, but I know from past attempts that it's hard to find your way around these country roads. I'm afraid I couldn't manage it. I'd drive around in circles all day."

Henrietta—Great-Aunt Hettie to the Hargrove clan—had looked at him with measuring eyes then nodded her head in agreement. She would pick him up at his motel at eight o'clock Tuesday morning.

But just in case—just in case—she brought Donny Hargrove along in the back seat, and a Colt .45 in her purse. Already loaded and ready to go if needed.

Driving along, there was little conversation among the three. Hettie concentrated on driving, Donny dozed in the back seat, and Professor Harrison paid an occasional compliment to the early wildflowers blooming along the road. It was the middle of March, his spring break from teaching at San Antonio State University. He felt optimistic about his project of the day.

None of them noticed the little gray car that followed them. The red dust cloud behind the Oldsmobile obscured it. When Hettie pulled up next to the chain-link fence surrounding the Hargrove Family Cemetery, the gray car, far in the rear, slowed almost to a stop. Then, near the far edge of the cemetery, a clump of brush on the edge of the road offered a place to park. To park and hide. The driver pulled in and switched the engine off. Through the brush, he could glimpse Hettie, Donny, and Professor Harrison getting out of the car. Harrison wore his jacket and carried his briefcase along.

Hettie opened the gate of the chain-link fence and led the way in. She turned to Thomas Harrison. "Now which graves did you want to see?"

"The old section," he said. "Some of the oldest graves are those of Thomas Watson Hargrove and his wife, Elizabeth Dennison. Settlers in the DeWitt Colony of 1825, isn't that right? He'd be your great-grandfather, wouldn't he? The ancestor of many children in this area today, and of some who have moved on to other counties, other cities."

"That's right." Hettie led the way through the large array of tombstones. Stone paths wound around clusters of shrubs and small trees. The path finally led to a group of old graves with small headstones crusted with lichens. The names and dates on them were hard to read.

Hettie pointed to two stones near a live oak tree. A large patch of white irises, known as Cemetery Whites, were in bloom at the foot of the grave sites.

"Are these the ones you want to see?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Gleefully, Professor Harrison placed his thick briefcase on the ground, unzipped it, and removed something from it. Zipped it back up. Then he unfolded what he had removed.

It was a tri-fold camping shovel. As Hettie and Donny watched, Professor Harrison unfolded the shovel, clamped the pieces together, and began to dig at the foot of Thomas Hargrove's grave.

Hettie and Donny were astonished, but they weren't the only ones watching. The driver of the gray car had crept closer, to see the group better. He could hear what they said.

"What are you doing?" Hettie cried. "You can't dig up my great-grandfather's grave. Stop this minute! I'm telling you to stop!"

Professor Harrison looked at her in anger. "I've been waiting for this for years. It's nothing that will hurt you, but it's important to me. Just leave me alone; it won't take long." He went back to work with his shovel.

"Stop, I say!" Hettie reached into her purse and pulled out her gun. She pointed it at Professor Harrison.

He laughed in derision and raised his shovel to knock the gun out of her hands. Donny stepped forward and reached for the shovel, but he bumped into Hettie and knocked her down. Her gun went off. Professor Harrison fell backwards, landing on the ground. A blotch of red blood soaked the front of his polo shirt and spread rapidly.

"Grandma, are you all right?" Donny reached out to Hettie and helped her get up from the ground. He picked up her gun and put it back in her purse.

Hettie stood up shakily. No broken bones. She looked at Thomas Harrison, only a few feet away. Blood gushed from his chest, and his eyes were open and blank.

"He's dead. Oh, Donny, he's dead."

"We've got to go, Grandma. We've got to get out of here." Donny took Hettie's hand and pulled her down the stone path, through the gate, into the Oldsmobile's passenger seat. Donny took the driver's seat, grabbed the keys from Hettie's purse, and gunned the old car down the road. At the next intersection, he turned left, and headed down a circular road that led back home.

He looked at Hettie. "Are you all right now?"

Her face was pale, her heart pounding. She whispered, "I'm okay." Then she added, "Let's get home. When we're there, we'll have to figure out what to do."

"You'll come up with something, Grandma. You always do."

"Not for things like this."

They barreled on home.

At the cemetery, someone else stepped up to Professor Harrison, who lay sprawled in the Cemetery Whites iris patch. The shovel was

still in Harrison's hand. His own gun was still in the hand of the observer.

"Well, she didn't mean to hurt you and neither did I," the observer told the professor. "You asked for it, though. You should have shared with me."

He put his gun back in the pocket of his corduroy jacket, picked up Professor Harrison's zipped-up briefcase, and judged its weight.

"There must be a lot of paperwork in here," he said to the corpse. "Well, I'm not sticking around to look it over. I'll take it with me. But I'll be back again—when you're gone."

He turned his back on Harrison and walked slowly back to the gray car.