

**Murder Times Three-**  
**A Waverly Place Mystery**

**gordon blitz**

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## Chapter 1

### Then

Ned sat at the head of the cherrywood dining room table with his two middle-aged adult children, Conner and Millie, on both sides of him. Besides Ned's library, the dining room was the warmest room in Waverly Place. The high gloss finish reflected the sun through the window as they finished eating, silently. Ned's reddish skin, from an outbreak of roseola, blended with the color of the table. Ned considered both his children damaged inside and out; Millie, with a large birthmark port stain--a good match for her poisonous personality, and Conner's self-consciousness about his harelip—never smiling, laughing, or opening his mouth.

Ned broke the quiet and asked Millie, "Are you still reading those political autobiographies daily? I can't imagine why you bother."

"Yes, Dad, thanks to you I don't have a political career. You pretty much shit on my supreme self."

When Ned said, "Where do you come up with these words like 'supreme self'?" Millie ignored him and continued eating.

Conner was next to receive words from Ned.

"Are you eating enough, Conner? My goodness, your face looks emaciated. What is going on with you? Your head and neck are so thin. It makes you look distorted. And stop touching your lip. You aren't doing yourself any favors by thinking you are hiding your harelip; it only makes it more noticeable."

Conner was fingering his disfigured lip. He felt his father was on the attack and so Conner quietly said, "I am on a special diet that is supposed to help me build muscles. I want to meet someone when this pandemic is over."

Millie laughed, "You really think muscles are going to help you with a face like that? And you never smile. Are you afraid to expose your teeth? When was the last time you laughed? And I am sick of you speaking so softly. Open your mouth when you talk!"

Conner replied, "I just don't like to smile. I know I have crooked teeth."

Millie said, "Then why didn't you get them fixed along with your harelip?"

"I was afraid of the surgery, and Dad said I didn't need it. And if I had braces it would just be another thing kids would have made fun of."

Millie looked at Ned and said, "I never understood how you could have let your son go around the way he looked when it could easily have been corrected. And Conner, what is this deal with you looking tan all the time? It looks like you're wearing makeup. And you're an adult; you should get your teeth fixed."

Ned said, "Shut up, Millie. Your brother is good-looking enough. I don't see men lined up to date *you*. Maybe your reputation as a *biter* is a turnoff. And you're getting a tummy too. You should give some of that fat to your brother."

It felt like the birthmark port stain on Millie's neck was on fire and only using her hands could stop the itching.

"Yeh, Dad, maybe I should bite you and you would shut up."

"Why am I not surprised? You are still like your mother. You know, I'm tired of you guys' bitching. I thought things were going to change when you moved back home. Conner, can you go find Asher and tell



him to take away the dishes? It's making me nauseous looking at these dirty plates or maybe it's just looking at both of you."

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Riley wanted to take his laptop and throw it out the window of his study. Isn't that what authors did in movies (*The Shining*) and television (*Sex in the City*) when they had writer's block? Rip the paper out of their Remington typewriter and destroying their flawed creation! Why did he think that using his years as a fraud investigator to write a bestseller based on his cases would be effortless? This career change after retiring had been a disaster.

He hated the word *retire* because the reality was his boss telling Riley, "I know you've been dealing with the death of your mother, but your work has gotten sloppy. It's been a year since she passed. You seem distracted. And I know I'm not supposed to talk about age, but this job is very physical. You're over sixty. Have you thought about retiring? You know we are offering early retirements with a cash bonus, plus paid healthcare for the rest of your life. Think about it. I know it's a cliché, but you should be enjoying your *golden years*."

But Riley put off a decision until the department began downsizing, and his health started failing. Despite his seniority of thirty years, he got caught in the headwinds of layoffs and missed the early retirement perks.

Riley had become an expert procrastinator. His brain found comfort in telling himself: *You need another cup of coffee. You have been sitting too long and need a break. Oh God, you have something in your eye—better call your ophthalmologist.* The only exercise that came close to inspiring his writing was his walk on Ashton Road.

In a sea of condominiums on Ashton Road, the lonely single-family grand mansion, Waverly Place, built in another time, was out of place

with the buildings surrounding it. Waverly Place cried, “*Don’t let me be swallowed up.*” Unlike the other buildings that overpowered the sidewalk-aligned oak trees, Waverly Place was set back in a dense forest. Leaves carpeted the grounds year-round and smothered the grass. Yet the shredded leaves kept the soil moist and roots warm and prevented weeds from germinating, ultimately becoming organic compost.

Riley enjoyed the sounds of the crackling as he walked past Waverly Place on Sunday mornings. The accomplishment of sauntering unaided made Riley forget how his body had become brittle like the leaves. His doctor had said, “You have early osteoporosis; lifestyle changes, diet, exercise, and a yearly injection will stop any further bone loss and may, in fact, reverse some of the effects.”

As Riley had aged, he felt like his skin was covered with crust, all dried out. No matter how much moisturizer he applied to his eyebrows, elbows, and feet, dried patches returned with a vengeance. When he turned sixty, he had lost his sense of smell, but that musty-sweet odor of decaying fallen leaves remained embedded. Along with not being able to detect aroma, Riley’s taste buds were on permanent holiday. Weight loss was the only beneficial outcome because the joy of eating was gone. The memories of the smells associated with his mother, the oatmeal milk honey soap she used, had faded.

He hoped his walks would jump-start his creativity. The Ashton Neighborhood Association (ANA) had become a guardian angel to the crown jewel, Waverly Place, which had withstood land developers. Built by the architect, Laura Flanagan, a West Ashton resident, the rustic cabin-looking house covered with distressed wood gave it a natural, rough and aged appearance. Ned Waverly had bought the place in 1960, its first and only owner for close to 60 years. As Riley passed the house, he heard Ned’s voice.

“Hey, Riley. Can you come back, I wanted to ask you something.”