



MURDER *at the*
COURTHOUSE

A. H. GABHART



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

A. H. Gabhart, *Murder at the Courthouse*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gabhart, Ann H., 1947–

Murder at the courthouse / A. H. Gabhart.
pages ; cm.— (Hidden Springs mysteries ; #1)
ISBN 978-0-8007-2676-8 (pbk.)
ISBN 978-0-8007-2729-1 (hc.)

I. Title.
PS3607.A23M87 2015
813'.6—dc23

2015020725

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Published in association with the Books & Such Literary Agency.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my husband, Darrell



1

Miss Willadean Dearmon found the body on the courthouse steps at exactly 8:59 a.m. Miss Willadean appeared at the courthouse every weekday morning at that exact time, barring holidays, major illnesses, or snow over her boot tops. As far as anybody knew, she didn't actually have a schedule written out, but were her day divided out on paper, that's what it would say. *Courthouse steps 8:59 a.m.* Out of bed at 7:30, bran cereal and whole wheat toast with a smidgen of orange marmalade at 8:00 while listening to the local news to see if anyone she knew might have passed on during the night. A fresh dab of rouge on her cheeks and a liberal coating of her favorite cherry-red lipstick at 8:35. At exactly 8:47 she closed her front door behind her, patted her pinkish-gray hair into submission, and headed toward Main Street. On the first of nine chimes from the Christian Church bell tower, she stepped through the courthouse entrance as the office doors were swinging open for business.

Not that Miss Willadean had any business to transact. She didn't own a car and could only pay her property taxes once a year, but she liked to stop by the county clerk's office

before many customers showed up so she could exchange a few words with Neville Gravitt. She told friends it was her Christian duty to brighten up the poor man's day since his wife succumbed to cancer two years back.

But this Tuesday morning in the second week of May when Miss Willadean climbed the courthouse steps, a man sat slumped against one of the stone columns that held up the porch entrance. The possibility the man might be dead never entered Miss Willadean's mind. After all, this was Hidden Springs, Kentucky. People died in hospitals or at home in their beds or easy chairs. Once, a preacher had a heart attack and died in the pulpit of a church out in the country. But folks didn't sit down and die on the courthouse steps. It just wasn't done.

So when the man didn't pay a bit of notice to her, Miss Willadean assumed he had overindulged in strong drink. That was enough to tighten her mouth into a thin, straight line of disapproval, but added to that was the fact she'd never laid eyes on this particular man before in her life.

Miss Willadean prided herself on knowing everybody in Hidden Springs. Everybody. She not only knew them, she knew their middle names, their children's and grandchildren's names, what street or road they lived on, where they worked, and if they skipped church on Sunday. Folks said Miss Willadean probably even knew what brand of toothpaste you used. Little escaped Miss Willadean's notice or, once noticed, remained a secret for long.

The discovery of this stranger was no exception. She paused only a second to glare at him before she hurried on up the steps. Her sensibly low heels clattered on the polished tile floor as she rushed down the hall straight to the sheriff's office without even slowing to peek in at Neville Gravitt.

Deputy Sheriff Michael Keane looked up from his desk as Miss Willadean came through the door, her arms flailing as though she had to fight her way through the air in front of her.

“Miss Willadean.” Michael jumped up to hurry toward her in case she stumbled in her headlong rush into the office. A mottled red was inching up her corded neck, and her eyes were bulging, not to mention the fact that she was at their office at least five minutes earlier than usual. “What’s wrong?”

She sputtered a few words that didn’t exactly connect with one another, and Michael worried she might be having a stroke.

“Easy, Miss Willadean.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “Sit down and we’ll get you some water.” He glanced around at Betty Jean Atkins, who stopped filling the coffeemaker and reached for a bottle of water.

Miss Willadean refused to move toward a chair. Instead, she jabbed a finger toward the front of the courthouse and found her tongue, which never stayed lost very long.

“I don’t want any water. I want something done about that . . . that drunkard out there on the steps. Imagine, inebriated at this time of the morning. He didn’t even have manners enough to speak to me.” She bristled and yanked down the corners of her pink knit suit jacket. “Acted as if he didn’t know I was there.”

“Who’s that, Miss Willadean?” Michael asked.

“Well, I’m sure I don’t know. A stranger if ever I did see one. Who in Hidden Springs would be found in that condition on the courthouse steps this time of the morning?”

Michael could think of several possibilities, but he didn’t

name them. The less said around Miss Willadean, the better. She had a network of friends who could spread rumors and gossip faster than he could walk the two blocks from one end of town to the other.

“I’ll go take care of it.” Michael kept his voice low and even. Sounding in control made his job easier. Plus, it didn’t hurt that he stood a couple of inches over six feet and had steady blue eyes that somebody once said made lying to him impossible. He didn’t know about that, but he did know that calm worked best in most situations.

Miss Willadean’s eyes settled back into her head and she quit punching at the air long enough to smooth a stray wisp of hair back into place. She glared up at Michael. “I should think so. And right away. You’ve wasted enough time talking already.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

That placated the woman somewhat. She was right. He had wasted time talking. The drunk had probably staggered away by now. Routine. Then again, it could be something out of the ordinary. After all, Miss Willadean didn’t know the man. That was definitely out of the ordinary.

He gave the old lady one last pat on the shoulder. “Sit down and rest a minute.”

Miss Willadean didn’t sit down. He hadn’t really expected her to, just hoped she might. Instead, she followed him back through the hall toward the front door.

Stella Pinkston stuck her head out of the county clerk’s office to give Michael the eye. Stella said being married didn’t keep her from appreciating a good-looking man when she saw one. She peered up at him through bleached-blond bangs and gave him a suggestive smile. “What’s going on, Mike?”

Michael was crisp with her as always. “Just a drunk out front. Nothing to keep you from your work.”

She batted mascara-coated eyelashes at him as if he’d just offered to meet her upstairs in the hallway behind the courtroom when court wasn’t in session.

When the click of her high heels joined their little procession toward the front door, he held in a sigh and did his best to quell the irritation that rose inside him. He tried to carry out his duties in a professional manner, but in Hidden Springs, that wasn’t always possible. Somehow everything had a way of getting turned into a sideshow. Even something as common as a drunk.

He’d been back in Hidden Springs working for Sheriff Potter for almost a year, after spending too much time trying to enforce the law in Columbus. In that city, on the streets in his beat, bad things could happen any day or night. For a while, he thought he could make a difference. He could make the streets safer. Maybe not the whole city, but his beat. He could slow down the drug trafficking, help kids see that school might be their ticket to a better life, protect the storekeepers, do some good.

Early on, in a weak moment, he’d shared his aspirations with his partner in the city. Even now, five years down the road, he could still hear Pete Ballard’s raspy laugh. “Tell me again, kid. Which was it you graduated from? The police academy or the seminary?” Pete had been working a beat longer than Michael had been breathing.

Michael hadn’t backed down. “You don’t have to be a preacher to want to help people.”

“You’ve been looking at way too many recruiting posters. Lost kids coming up to big, strong police officers to ask the

way home.” Pete shook his head. “You better stop believing in fairy tales. One of them little darlings comes up to you nowadays, they’re liable to spit on you. Or worst-case scenario, try to shoot you. That happens, you’d better be ready to pull your trigger first.”

When Michael set his jaw and kept his mouth shut, Pete punched his shoulder. “Look, kid, no need getting your nose out of joint. All of us start out floating a little off the pavement like as how we’re the second coming or something. ’Course I never had much of a line to the big guy upstairs. Too much static on my end, I guess. Maybe your connection will be better.”

Somehow he and Pete had learned to be partners. The wet-behind-the-ears kid with big ideals and the burned-out cop who’d been kicked in the face a few too many times by the public he’d sworn to protect. But Pete never stopped trying to toughen Michael up. For his own good, Pete said. To keep him alive.

Then one day Michael found himself in pursuit of a kid caught shoplifting at a corner grocery. Pete had long since surrendered his running ability to cigarettes and couldn’t keep up. The chase ended in a deserted warehouse with Michael in shooting stance, yelling at the kid to put his hands up. The kid turned to look at him. Desperate eyes in a girl child’s face. She didn’t look over thirteen. After a long moment, she turned and ran on into the shadows.

He hadn’t fired his weapon. He hadn’t even shouted at her to stop. He let her go. Purposefully. With intent. He hadn’t done his job. Not that anybody had known that. Nobody was in the warehouse but Michael and the girl. When Pete came panting in a few minutes later, he guessed. Told Michael

that kind of thing was going to get him killed. Maybe get them both killed. And Michael couldn't say he was wrong.

So Michael had come home to Hidden Springs where he spent his days on the job breaking up a drunken fight now and again, tracking down folks who wrote checks for more than they had in their bank accounts, or directing traffic on PTA meeting nights or after high school ball games.

He liked the small-town pace. He liked being able to figure out who was going to make trouble before they had time to make it. He liked being a peace officer in a place where it seemed possible to keep the peace. Where he didn't have to pull out his gun to try to stop the craziness on the streets. Where he didn't have to think about seeing the face of a desperate child in his sights. The occasional vagrant wasn't all that big a problem. If the man was still there, he would roust him up and usher him back to the jail behind the courthouse.

Michael pushed open the door, spotted the dark red smear on the pillar behind the man slumped on the steps, and knew at once that lack of manners had nothing to do with the man not speaking to Miss Willadean.