

Jenn & Kelly Mystery #1

The Old Bell

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Jenn & Kelly Mystery series, you are about to embark on two adventures at once.

Your first adventure takes place at The Corner, the used bookstore owned and operated by Violet. You will learn about her town, her customers, her family, and life as a book dealer.

Your second adventure is because of some little, hardback mysteries that just appear in Violet's bookstore. She will narrate from these books to tell you the story of Jenn & Kelly as they solve mysteries and legends in their town. Violet will introduce you to Jenn & Kelly, their town, their families, and their mystery-solving talents.

The passages rotate back and forth between The Corner and Jenn & Kelly.

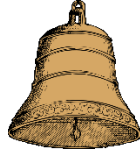
Turn the page and learn about the urban legend of Hilltop Church and the haunted bell. Is the bell haunted? The answer to that question awaits you within the passages of this book.

Thank you for reading; I trust you will enjoy this first story about Jenn & Kelly.

Ever so grateful,

Marsha Keim

First Passage



The snow was falling quietly all night painting the ground, trees, and roads a sparkly white. It glistened more brilliant than diamonds. The top layer was a perfectly flat surface for as far as you could see. Every now and then there was an evergreen adding color to the scene. A couple cardinals contrasted brilliantly with their red against the white and green. The children were very pleased to wake up to a snow day. Even some parents shared in this simple, winter pleasure.

I also like snow days; I am Violet, the proprietor of The Corner, a bookstore in a small town, in the northern part of North America. Temperatures range from the 80's – 0; with occasional 90's for highs and into the negatives in the winter for lows. Snow days usually mean a busy day for the bookstore.

I enjoy owning and operating my bookstore. Since I love to read, it seemed the logical business for me. I have heard people say if you like what you do, you will never work a day in your life, I am not working.

I give my mom credit for my desire to read, and to be near, books. All because she read to me when I was just a “wee one”. As I grew up I realized my dad was also a reader. Unlike my mom, Dad did his reading in what he called “the corner”.

Let's just say that this room was a private room, we had only one, and many times my mom, my brother, and I all begged and pleaded with Dad to hurry. Get the picture?

This is where I got the name for my bookstore. I named The Corner in memory of my dad. The store has one of my dad's "corners". I am unaware of anyone reading in it, though. Most of my regular customers know the history behind the name. For some, they thought it was a sweet memorial to Daddy; for others, they thought it was cute, almost silly.

I specialize in what some call used books but I prefer to think of them as "previously loved" books. Books that are looking for new eyes to read the words and new hands to hold the cover and pages.

My store has four reading corners for customers to sit down and enjoy some quiet time with their new-found reads. Many enjoy the atmosphere I have created with the colors and furniture groupings. Just for the record, these corners are regular corners, not the corner where my dad did his reading!

I decorated the store with fuchsia, lemon, royal blue, and salmon reading groups; one in each corner of the store. My favorite is the fuchsia area. This is where I like to sit down to read. This is also where my latest reading adventure began.

When I opened at 8:00 a.m. I found a small hardback book on the end table next to my favorite chair in the fuchsia corner. This reading area is at the back of the store and gives the most privacy when I read after hours. I was sure I had re-shelved all the books the night before since this is part of my usual closing routine.

Even though the snow started to fall just before closing, I had not rushed out of the store. This was not the first time this had happened. About twice a month I would find a book left on the end table. I knew I was not leaving them out because they were always titles I had never read and they had not been in my computer system either.

Today the title caught my attention, so instead of putting it on the shelves I began to read *Mystery of the Old Bell*. I checked the computer and this book also was not in the system.

It was a relatively small hardback book with a cover of gray geometric shapes. The texture was slick feeling; not paper, not leather, not faux-leather, sort of like plastic. The title page contained a very eerie pencil sketch of a stone church with a prominent bell tower surrounded by a burial ground. The image was all set to be the backdrop for a spooky movie. The stone church was of an old design, looked abandoned, and very inviting for some ghosts to move in, if they hadn't already done so. The location was in the center of a small hill.

They define the burial ground as a graveyard because it was next to the church. It was old, rundown, and dreary with many tombstones leaning or just plain toppled over. They were all different sizes with different engraving styles. Some were so old the lettering no longer existed. Some told stories of how the person lived and died and some listed surviving family members.

The tombstones that were still standing looked like little soldiers keeping watch over this poor, long forgotten place of worship.

According to the description of the book on the inside cover, this book was a mystery about an ancient church, with a bell tower, catacombs in the sub-basement, a ghost, a graveyard, and two girls trying to solve the mystery. It takes place in the town of Eagle Mills, population about 2500 and covers two times; the 1750's and 2000. During the 1750's, Eagle Mills was just a hamlet but by 2000 it had grown to be a village.

As I had predicted, the snow brought in more customers than usual once the plows cleared the roads. It was not until about eleven before the rush began. Some of my regulars were in by 9 am.

"Good morning, Violet," greeted Tiffany Hearth. Like myself, Tiffany is an avid reader. She loves to read and we have joked a lot about all the places we have visited and all the things we have done through the pages of books. She stops in nearly every day looking for a new adventure.

She just became a grandma and was excited to start a book collection, for her granddaughter.

"Hi, Tiffany, what brings you in on this snowy day?" I asked jovially with a smile on my face.

"Baby books to send to my daughter for her wee one. She likes to read to Mina like I read to her when she was little. I think that is the key to my daughter's love of books," Tiffany responded.

I shared a similar story about my childhood, my love for books, and how I too read to my children when they were little. I even read to them while I was still

pregnant. I also added how my love for reading, and re-reading, led to a strong desire to own books. I never cared to check them out of the library because I had to return them. It limited my access to the same book more than once. I had shared with Tiffany once before that I have one book series I have read multiple times. Strangely, it doesn't get boring and I still can find new details. Some of those minor points that are not relevant to the story line but added by the author to give better explanation to the situation at hand; or just to add depth to the story.

From a young age, I asked my parents to buy me books from the monthly book clubs at school. Whenever we went to places with used books, I would look for titles that interested me. This was the start of growing my personal library. There were even occasions I received books for Christmas. This was okay since I really liked to read; I never felt cheated. I even still have one book from one particular Christmas; a children's *Bible*.

Since both my parents were readers, it was always a positive answer to my requests for school book club books. Frequently, I went home with a medium-sized paper sack full of books. They were nearly all under a dollar back then. When my son brings home the flyers, the prices still make me happy. Even though they are no longer under a dollar. Plus the book fairs at school now offer ways to help get more books into students' hands.

Some of my classmates would ask to borrow my books. Just like the school library, I had sign-out cards in each of my books. This allowed me to track where they were. My classmates were always good about returning the books; on time and in good condition.

The desire to own books was key in my opening The Corner. I wanted to make it possible for others to own and enjoy books.

Books are wealth; some can truly bring money to the owner through their value, some give us knowledge to convert into wealth, and some are just a figurative wealth of information or of entertainment. They take us to places we cannot visit, will never visit, or can visit only through the pages because we must stay where we are at the time of our reading.

I remember reading a fiction book that described the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. When I visited it years later I discovered the description was spot-on, right down to the level of emotions I felt as I stood there. I teared up just like that author wrote about in the story I read. Unlike her character, I have no one named on the wall. But it creates a strong emotional reaction when standing in front of it.

One of the non-book things I like about owning a bookstore is the relationships I have built with my customers. Just like the town of Eagle Mills in *Mystery of the Old Bell*, my village is small with not very many people.

We have one stop light, one school, a grocery store, a hardware store, a couple gas stations, three churches, an ice cream stand open year-round, and one restaurant. It is about 30 minutes to the nearest town with department-type stores and a public library.

The Corner is the only book source other than the school library. So, I stay busy in the book trade. Mostly for adults, the children can get books from school. The school even offers summer hours and a summer reading program with hours

every Saturday. Our substitute teachers take turns manning the Saturday and summer hours.

Since Tiffany was the only customer in my bookstore, I could give her one-on-one customer service. We also shared many stories about titles we had both read. She was specifically looking for those hardback, children's books, with the metal-colored spines. She was in luck, there had been an estate auction the week before and I had a couple dozen titles.

"I think I had all ten of these titles when I was a little girl," Tiffany fondly remembered.

"I remember seeing them in my school library," I added to the nostalgic trip into our pasts, "and the more I think about it, I remember having a few titles myself. I even bought some for my children," I concluded. "I appreciated their durability once I was buying them for my children."

"It does not matter that these are mostly for kindergarten ages, my daughter will do the reading. In just a few short years, Mina will read them herself," Tiffany projected with a happy faraway look on her face. She was already planning on Mina being a reader like her mama and grandma.

I continued to have customers off and on for another couple hours. Then I had a lull so I picked up the little book and resumed my reading while I waited for the next customer rush. All the while the snow continued to fall, it was a very relaxing scene; like in a snow globe. Fortunately, no one was shaking my scene to make the snow fall. That would not have ended well!

Second Passage



For two years now Jenn & Kelly had been friends trying to solve mysteries in Eagle Mills. Their mystery-solving adventures began not long after Jenn moved to Eagle Mills. They were in the fifth grade at the time and quickly discovered that each liked to read, write, and watch mysteries. They became almost instant friends.

Kelly was tall for her age, wore her honey-colored hair at her shoulders, and had an athletic build. Jenn was of average height, had brown hair to her waist, and was a little plump.

When Jenn got on the bus her first day she found Kelly working on a project writing out the script of her favorite mystery-solving cartoon. This was turning into a very large project, bigger than she had thought it would be. She enjoyed watching cartoons but reading was her true passion. What was giving her the most challenge was writing all the details to describe what one sees in the scenes as they project on the screen. Writing the dialogue was much easier. Just as soon as she would put one detail onto the paper, she would realize that she had missed other details. If she were typing this on a computer, making revisions would be much easier but she felt she wrote better if she was doing it with paper and pencil. Then once she had the details down, she would type it out and make written revisions to the typed material. This added extra steps but it was a system that seemed to work best for her.

Jenn could tell that Kelly was trying to concentrate on what she was writing. Kelly looked so perplexed, almost as if she had an unanswerable question. Kelly's challenge was trying to get all the details of this one scene onto paper; from memory. Jenn wanted to introduce herself and was toying with whether or not she should disturb Kelly's concentration; disturbing won out.

"Hi, my name is Jenn, what's yours?" Jenn smiled as she introduced herself. Hoping that Kelly would not mind the intrusion into her thoughts.

"Kelly. You're new, just a temporary change or moving in?"

"We just moved here. My dad's job transferred him. If Dad gives a favorable report about building a plant here we will stay," Jenn volunteered details about the reason for their move to Eagle Mills. "We came from Big City down south."

"What kind of plant?" Kelly asked. Eagle Mills is small, just a village and those that live there feel they are safer than in big cities.

"An assembly plant for farm equipment," Jenn answered with pride. "The staff would be small. Dad said it has to be that way so it doesn't harm the community," Jenn answered Kelly's unspoken fears.

"Hope you will like it here. What grade are you in?" Kelly kept the conversation going. She hoped the distraction would clear her head so she could write better. She felt better about a farm machinery plant. At least the town could use what they made there and maybe some could even work in it.

"I'm in the fifth grade. What about you?"

“I’m in the fifth grade also,” Kelly replied. “You’ll like Mrs. Green. She is a good teacher that makes learning fun and we all get along well with her.” Kelly went on. “But don’t misunderstand, she has rules and she expects us to follow them; or have consequences.”

“Only one class for fifth grade? At my old school, we had five classes for each grade.” Jenn reported.

“Only one.” Kelly stated succinctly. She liked her school even if it was small by many standards. It was a good school with good teachers and students. It was not perfect, but most of the students and parents liked it. The teachers also must like it, most had taught there for 15 or more years.

Kelly went back to her writing and Jenn started looking out the window at the countryside as the bus picked up the students. It was then that she saw Hilltop Church. She could only stare at it. The church was far from beautiful but she found she could not take her eyes off the site. It looked so familiar to her.

The church has a rundown appearance, with overgrown weeds; almost swallowing the church whole. Vines were climbing up the sides of the stone church. They were like a veil for the church to peek through. The windows were long ago boarded up. Giving the image of eyes looking through the vine veiling. Even the bell tower was not high enough to escape the ever-growing vines. Only from the correct direction, was the bell still even visible.

The graveyard was in no better condition; some of the tombstones had fallen over. Others were leaning, some were no longer legible. The scene was one that belonged in a mystery book or on a mystery show. You could almost imagine a

swarm of bats flying out of the bell tower and a candle-carrying, stooped, shadowy figure passing in front of the one, lone window at the top of the church. The image that gives one goosebumps just thinking of it. You could almost hear the bat squeaks as they wove their way through the graveyard sentinels in search of bugs; those few tombstones that were still standing. Or even hear the specter's evil laugh as he wandered the vacant halls of the church.

Jenn interrupted Kelly's writing again to ask about the stone church on the hilltop. "What is the story about the old church back there?" she inquired.

"They built the church about 300 years ago. Each hamlet had a church with an adjacent graveyard for the resident that had passed on. Most of the churches in this area were small, wooden, painted white, and embellished with a tall steeple. Eagle Mills wanted their church to stand out and be visible for miles, so first they built it of the large stones all over the area and they built it much larger than the others did. This was how Hilltop Church came to be," Kelly began her tale.

"Teacher said that Eagle Mills was a hamlet back then because they built all the houses and farms around Hilltop Church and there were few people," Kelly went on.

"Hilltop Church did not always bury their dead in that graveyard. They buried some in the sub-basement called catacombs," Kelly recited the details as if she had written the account herself. "It was like an indoor graveyard, under the church," she further explained.

The reason she knew the story so well was because of Andrew Monroe, Eagle Mills' town historian. He had researched nearly all the landmarks and their urban

legends. Then he took the time to write the details out for the community. The school library contained copies of all his mini history books. As he published each one, he offered them for sale to the townspeople. Many bought them as keepsakes. He even quoted some of the people in the text.

Each year the teachers would pick a topic to cover during Town History Week. This was a regular part of the school curriculum and had been for nearly 30 years. The town was proud of its history and wanted to pass that pride on to the next generation. Andrew's early research contained only historical facts; the later editions also contained the urban legends.

"It was when I was in the third grade that we learned about Hilltop Church, its graveyard, the catacombs, and the urban legend of the bell," Kelly informed Jenn.

Jenn just sat and listened to Kelly fill her in on the details of this long-forgotten part of Eagle Mills' history. They had nearly an hour-long bus ride to school.

It was a towering three stories up. At the very center of the uppermost level was the bell tower.

The bus had positioned Jenn at the right spot to view it through the veil of vines. There was a dark hulking shadow of the bell. Jenn wondered if the clapper was still present and if so, what it would sound like to ring it after all these years of non-use. It was ironic she would have that thought. She would get her answer soon enough.

It was at that exact moment that Kelly told a part of the history that answered Jenn's thoughts. "There are stories of people hearing the bell still ring," Kelly recited.

Jenn returned from her thoughts in time to hear this. She had missed some of the other things while she was daydreaming. It jerked her out of her daydreaming like someone pulling her through a doorway. Violent. Quick. Efficient.

"Who is ringing the bell? How do they get to it?" Jenn inquired. "When does it ring?" she went on.

"No one knows," Kelly stated. "I do not know if there is any pattern to the ringing," she advised Jenn of more history about the stone church.

"The last time that the bell officially rang, was to call everyone to the church for a wedding but it ended in tragedy. The bell ringer fell three-stories to his death. The church family vowed the bell would never ring again," Kelly told the tale in her best spooky storyteller voice. "So, they removed the clapper to ensure its silence," she concluded.

Jenn sat spellbound, waiting anxiously for more details with her eyes all bugged out. But Kelly did not share any further details.

"During library, check out the book *Hilltop Church* and read the full historical account. What you won't find are any details about the mysterious ringing of the bell. The book will, however, fill you in on all the other details about Hilltop Church and the bell," Kelly directed Jenn during their bus ride. They rode the rest of the way in silence regarding the bell legend.

Kelly opened her notebook and began writing on pages that were slightly curled and had a multitude of depressions on the lines. Jenn tried not to be rude and look at what Kelly was doing but her curiosity got the better of her. She liked to write and thought there was an author hiding somewhere inside her just waiting for the right topic to bring it out.

“Is that an assignment you are working on? When is it due? I hope they will give me enough time to finish it,” Jenn stated nervously. It was several pages long. Jenn liked to write but not when under the pressure of a short deadline.

“I like mysteries and I am trying to write the dialog and scene details of my favorite mystery cartoon. This way I can read them instead of just watching them on TV,” Kelly answered kindly. “Plus, it helps me to improve my writing skills for school,” she added. “Not to mention my spelling.”

“I like that idea!” Jenn said with excitement and relief. At least she did not have a large writing assignment awaiting her at school. “Maybe we can work together and get them published for kids like us and for those that don’t watch TV,” Jenn bubbled with enthusiasm for her new idea.

“I am relatively sure we cannot publish them because of copyright laws,” advised Kelly. She felt bad in bursting her new friend’s bubble. “This is just for me.” *I like this girl, she has a lot of enthusiasm.* She reminded Jenn to focus on her research of Hilltop Church and the bell. Jenn promised to check out *Hilltop Church* just as soon as she could.

They finally arrived at school. Kelly led Jenn down the halls to their classroom. She gave a tour guide’s description of the school as she passed the various

doorways. She stopped by the office to introduce Jenn to the secretary and principal. The day moved right along and finally Jenn was in the library.

Jenn checked out the book, *Hilltop Church*, just as Kelly had directed her to do. It seemed like only minutes later that Jenn was again on the bus, watching as the bus driver dropped the students off. Once again, she saw Hilltop Church. Now it almost looked different to Jenn. It was not just a rundown building, it had a history and Jenn knew some of it.

She was eventually dropped off, as part of her homework, she read the book. Just like Kelly said, it was not scary; just informative. There was no mention of the bell ringing with no one there. Kelly was a good storyteller and had made it much spookier than the purely historical account by Andrew Monroe.

His goal was to get the historical details in print for future generations. In some of his later works, he included any appropriate urban legends. Kelly's goal was to share a spooky piece of local history to the new girl. Both had accomplished their goal.

Jenn soon found that the details Kelly shared were accurate. The stone church, officially named Hilltop Church, was 300 years old. It was the first permanent building built in Eagle Mills, other than houses. The settlers built it large enough so they could use it as a multi-purpose building; the main floor was the church, they used the second floor as a school, and the basement was the store. Andrew seemed to cover all the details except the urban legend. He only mentioned the existence of catacombs with no further details regarding who they buried there; or when they stopped using it.

Jenn was curious what the catacombs contained, or should I say “who” the catacombs contained? Jenn figured the bell ringer must have earned the right for entombment in the catacombs rather than burial in the graveyard.

For over 150 years Hilltop Church provided Eagle Mills with a place to worship, have weddings, and funerals. Not to mention the occasional ice cream social that was so popular. Also its early years as a store and school. There was always a bell ringer to call the community to the various events.

There are many generations of families memorialized by the carvings on each stone sentinel in the graveyard of Hilltop Church. Both the church and graveyard have seen better days. The bell tower is still intact but almost covered in vines.

About 150 years ago, according to Andrew’s book, there was a wedding that the bell ringer was to announce to the townspeople of Eagle Mills. Midway through the 12 tolls, his foot became wrapped in the coiled rope and as the bell swung back it pulled him off balance and upward. As the bell swung down, the rope slackened, releasing his foot and he fell all the way to the basement. Three complete stories were between the bell tower and the basement. Just as Kelly stated to Jenn, the bell ringer did not survive the fall.

The following day they buried him, and all the residents of Eagle Mills decided they would never use the bell again. So, it went dormant. But just to make sure no one used it again, they promptly removed the clapper and the rope.

As time passed, the congregation of Hilltop Church either died off or moved away. Some left over trivial disputes about service details. Things that mattered then but not so much today. No matter how many new people settled in Eagle Mills,

there were no new people at the old church. They were all drawn to the new church in the center of town. They soon abandoned the stone church.

A small delegation of neighbors tried to care for the building and graveyard but eventually that too stopped. Over the years they had boarded over the broken windows and kept the grass and vines trimmed.

As Jenn continued reading, she felt very sad for the forgotten piece of religious and community history.

“Someone needs to get Hilltop Church listed on the National Register of Historic Places,” Jenn said to no one. Her plan was to find out how to get the church onto the register.

Before she realized it, the evening had arrived and Jenn had to get ready for bed; 5:30 a.m. arrives so fast. With great sadness, she said goodnight to Andrew’s book and drifted off to dreamland.