

Coming in 2019, the final book in Nancy Swing's trilogy of West Virginia Mysteries:

The Silver Foxes

1

"Fucker's lying."

Throughout the blond oak pews, faces turned and glowered. Lips pursed and hissed, "Shhhhhhhh."

Alice Dundee ignored the twinges of arthritis in her hips and swiveled to her left, ready to reprimand the offender.

But Tilda, on his other side, was faster. Alice's friend reached out a wrinkled hand to touch his wrist. "Language, Fred."

"Well, I don't give a good goddam. He's a fucking liar."

Alice inclined her shaggy gray head until her lips were an inch from Fred's hearing aid.

"Perhaps he is, but this is not the time. We're here for Lucy."

Out of the corner of her eye, Alice glimpsed Charlie Coleman, another of Lucy's friends from the Evergreen Retirement Community, leaning forward. He set his mouth in a straight line and nodded his head in emphatic agreement.

Alice sat back, smoothed her navy sweater-coat down her lap and focused on Rodney Cunningham. Lewiston's premier property developer was winding up his eulogy in the pulpit of the Southern Baptist Church. He was certainly dressed for the part, she reflected, white shirt gleaming against black suit and tie.

Rodney's fervor filled the air. "I always prayed Lucy and I would be reconciled, and Jesus answered my prayers." He paused to run a hand down the silver of his carefully groomed Van Dyke, as if he might be holding back strong emotions.

"Praise the Lord," said the lady just in front of Fred.

"Hallelujah," said the one behind.

Fred opened his mouth to speak, but Alice put an admonishing finger on her lips. The cloying smell of flowers banked six feet high threatened to turn her stomach, so she forced her attention back to Rodney's oration.

"I knew the Lord was with me when I went into that hospital room. And sure enough, Lucy asked me to get down on my knees."

Fred snorted, and Alice squeezed his fingers so hard he winced.

West Virginia's pale winter sun slanted through a stained glass window and bounced off the bald top of Rodney's head like a halo. "We held hands, and we prayed together." Rodney raised his arms toward the light. "Friends, I felt God take her. He released Lucy from her suffering."

"Thank you, Lord, thank you," said a man across the aisle.

Rodney clasped both hands in front of his chest and bowed his head. "My beloved wife died in the arms of Jesus."

Alice lifted her chin and looked at him through slitted eyes. The perfect picture of a man unable to go on. Probably just the effect he wanted.

Later in the church hall, Alice led Lucy's friends from the refreshment table to some chairs in the corner. "Lucy wasn't religious," Alice said. "She thought religion was a crutch for the weak."

Tilda stopped nibbling at the catered tea sandwich. "Well yes, she did say that, but maybe she didn't really believe it, especially with death near. Could Rodney be right?"

Fred banged his fist down on his wrinkled trousers. "Goddam liar." The retired dentist looked ready to pull every tooth in Rodney's head.

"Lucy was fine when I saw her that morning," Alice said. "Talked about coming home and playing bridge again." She looked around the wainscoted hall, making sure no one was near enough to hear the friends' comments.

Charlie tugged at his collar and tie, clearly uncomfortable out of his usual tracksuit and tennis shoes. "That divorce was final ten years ago, but Rodney wouldn't let go. Wanted his little chippies on the side and Lucy too."

"Kept coming over," Alice said, "getting her so upset, she'd have to take one of her pills." The former math teacher looked at each face. The friends seemed to be contemplating just where her words might lead.

Tilda voiced what their faces revealed. "Nearly worried Lucy to death." She adjusted her wire-rimmed spectacles. "Maybe that's what really happened."

"Fucker's lying," Fred repeated. The friends all looked at him, and Alice wondered if his Alzheimers was getting so bad that it wouldn't be long before he couldn't come out in public.

Charlie seemed to have lost patience. "Stop sounding like a broken record." He pointed at Rodney, standing across the room in the midst of a gaggle of admiring women. "Of course he's a liar. We all know that. Question is, what're we going to do about it?"

"Prove it," said Alice.