



Killer
at the
Kennel
A Clara Colby Mystery

The Burton
Grayson Memorial
Animal Shelter

NANCY GARNER

CRIME SCENE - DO NOT CROSS CRIME SCENE - DO NOT CROSS

POLICE

Killer at the Kennel

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CHAPTER ONE

A letter from Goldstein, Harding, and Young, attorneys at law, laid open on my island counter. Even though I'd read it three times, it made little sense. Time to call Mom.

"Hello, Clara. I expected your call."

"Mom, a letter from Grandma's attorneys arrived today. It says she left me her house, land, and animal shelter. Did you know about this?"

"Gertie told me after we returned from the funeral."

"Why didn't she leave it to Aunt Gertie, and why didn't you tell me?"

"You know how your Aunt Gertie is. I'm sure Mother wanted to leave it to you because she trusted you and you're her namesake, Clarabelle."

"I know nothing about running a shelter." I paced around the island counter, eyeing the letter.

"You'll figure it out. You have a college degree."

"I have a teaching degree, not animal husbandry."

Mom let out a little laugh. "You won't be caring for farm animals, just cats and dogs. Besides, you never taught school."

You married Henry after college and worked in his art gallery.”

“What about CeCe or Cousin Ellie?” I asked.

“Your sister would never leave New York, and Ellie doesn’t like dogs. You’ve always had a dog.”

“Having a dog doesn’t make me an expert on operating an animal shelter.”

At the sound of the front door opening, Cody, our Golden Retriever, rushed to greet my daughter.

“Hey, Mom, I’m home,” Anna called from the front hall.

“I better go. Anna’s home from school. She won’t be happy about leaving Chicago to live in rural Wisconsin.”

“She’ll be fine. You and Anna need a change. Ever since Henry died, I’ve been worried about you two. Give Anna a kiss for me. I’ll talk to you soon. Bye, dear.”

I met Henry Colby during my third year of college. My artist friend Lois had an exhibit at a nearby art gallery. While admiring one of her paintings, a man with a British accent asked if I wanted to purchase the piece. I turned to answer and instantly fell in love. Maybe Mom was right. A move might do us good.

I sat on one of the counter chairs and gathered my courage. “Anna, please come into the kitchen. I need to talk to you.”

I always believed Anna and I had a good mother-daughter relationship, but ever since Henry died, she’d grown distant. Her earbuds were in all the time. If I asked a question, I received one-word answers. Hard to tell if she was depressed or just being a teenager. Fourteen was a hard age.

Anna strolled into the kitchen, cell phone in hand. “Yeah, Mom. What’s up?” Every day, Anna resembled her father

more and more. She had his light brown eyes, caramel colored wavy hair with streaks like honey, and a long thin face with a fair complexion.

“Come sit by me.” I patted the chair next to mine. “I need to talk to you.”

“You said that already.” Anna sat on the chair at the end, leaving the middle one empty. “Can you hurry? Pat is waiting for me to text back.” She set her phone on the counter and scrolled through messages.

“Who’s Pat? Is Pat a boy?”

Anna looked up from her phone. “Mother. I’ve told you. Pa-tri-cia is a new girl in school.” She rolled her eyes. “God, Mom, you never listen.” Her phone pinged, drawing her attention back to the messages.

“Oh, yes, that’s right.” I kept talking and hoped she’d listen while scanning her phone. “Anyway, I received a letter today from your great-grandmother’s attorney. She left me her house and the animal shelter. You remember? Dad and I took you there a few times.”

“What does it have to do with me?” Her thumbs tapped a message.

“Well, we’ll have to move there for a while.”

Anna’s head snapped up, and she gawked like I’d grown donkey ears.

“I’ll have to see what shape it’s in and perhaps sell it.” I held my breath, waiting for her explosion.

“What do you mean, we’ll have to move there? I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can’t stay here by yourself, and I’ll need your help.”

Her face scrunched, and I braced myself. “If Daddy were alive, you wouldn’t be doing this to me. It’s your fault he died.

I'm not leaving, and that's final." She smacked the counter and stormed away.

Cody nearly leapt onto my lap from the boom of her bedroom door.

"Sorry, Cody. She's upset. Let's go for a walk."

Cody trotted into the laundry room and dragged back his leash. In my opinion, Golden Retrievers were the greatest dogs. They were smart, obedient, strong, loyal, even-tempered, and came in an assortment of glorious golden colors, from creamy white to deep golden red. Our Cody was dark golden with a curly coat. He became our comfort boy after Henry died. The number of tears his coat absorbed must've numbered into the thousands. Sometimes Anna and I cried together into his fur. He never left our side.

I knocked on Anna's bedroom door. "I'm taking Cody for a walk." No answer. Probably wearing her earbuds. I knocked harder and raised my voice. "Anna. Do you hear me?"

She opened the door a crack and glared. "What do you want?" A tear trickled down her face.

"Oh, Anna. Everything's going to be alright." I reached out to touch her cheek.

Anna turned her head and pushed my hand away. "Tell me what you want"—she sniffed—"and leave me alone."

I dropped my hand to my side. "I'm taking Cody for a walk. I won't be long."

"Fine," she said, and slammed the door in my face.

I shouldn't accept behavior like this, but after what we'd been through, I had my own demons to deal with. "Come on, Cody. Let's go."

After hearing the news that Grandma left me her home and

shelter, I decided to sell our house. Anna and I needed a fresh start. I was sure Anna wouldn't agree, but I needed to move on. Henry's shadow filled every room of the house. I would see him out the corner of my eye, only to realize a breeze from an open window had played games with the curtains. His scent lingered in the bed we shared, causing sleepless nights or fitful dreams. It was time to start a new chapter and honestly, how hard could it be to run an animal shelter?

When Anna saw the "For Sale" sign in our front yard, she let me have it.

"Why are you selling Daddy's home? Are you trying to make me forget him? I hate this. I hate you!"

I hoped I was doing the right thing because this constant conflict with Anna had me worn out.

Our house sold in record time and on a Friday morning in mid-October, we were ready to move. We packed my SUV with our necessities, leaving the moving company to bring everything else. Mom and Dad came to see us off.

"Travel safe, Clara," Mom said. "Annabelle, don't look so miserable. Think of it as a grand adventure."

"Grandma, how many times do I have to ask you not to call me Annabelle? What is it with this family? Why do all the girls have 'Belle' attached to their first name? Nobody calls you Loulabelle."

Family tradition called for the first-born daughter of the first-born daughter to carry the old southern family surname of "Belle." My great-grandmother marked the end of the Belle line. To preserve the name, she named my grandmother Clarabelle. Grandma, in turn, named my mother Loulabelle. Since Mom liked the name Clara, she named me after

Grandma. When I had Anna, I hadn't planned on continuing the tradition. However, my mother and grandmother guilted me into it. Only Henry got away with calling her Annabelle. He said it was adorable.

"Anna, please don't talk to your grandmother like that," I said. "Be polite."

"It's alright," Mom said. "One day she'll understand."

Anna rolled her eyes.

She understood, but because the obituary for Henry listed her as Annabelle, the kids in her sixth-grade class found out and teased her relentlessly. I didn't remember telling the funeral director to use her full name, but it happened.

Dad shut the hood of my SUV. "Alright, honey, all your fluids look good." He wiped his hands on a rag. "Is the tank full?" Dad fancied himself an amateur mechanic.

"Yes, Dad. Thanks for checking."

"You better get on the road." Dad pulled out his gold-etched pocket watch to check the time. "You don't want to drive those rural roads in the dark."

Dad was the fourth generation of Muller men to inherit the pocket watch. As the story goes, Dad's great-great-grandfather saved his captain's life during a fierce civil war battle. Several years after the war, the captain sent him the watch along with a letter expressing his gratitude. The letter currently resides in an antique gold frame that hangs on the wall in Dad's home office. A shame I didn't have a brother to continue the Muller male line.

Mom opened her arms. "Come, give us hugs and kisses." My staunch mother looked a little teary. "Bye, dear. We'll be up to visit soon." Mom kissed my cheek and hugged me a little longer than usual.

Surprisingly, Anna hugged my parents without being coerced. "I'll miss you, Grandma. Wish I could stay here with you." Oh, she was good. One last ditch effort to get out of moving.

"Don't tempt me." Mom brushed a lock of Anna's hair over her shoulder. "Better get in the car now."

"Fine." Anna hopped in, slammed the door, and promptly inserted her earbuds. This was going to be an excruciatingly long road trip.

I opened the back door. "Cody, time to go."

Normally, Cody enthusiastically jumped in, but instead, he turned to gaze at my parents.

"Cody, we have to leave," I said.

Cody trotted up to Dad and wrapped one paw around his leg. Dad patted him on the head. He then trotted to Mom and did the same.

"Bye, Cody Bear. Take care of them." Mom kissed him right between the eyes.

Cody turned and leapt into the back seat with his tail swishing.

"Guess he's ready now." I turned to my parents. "Bye, Mom, Dad. I'll call later."

I couldn't help feeling emotional, peering into the rearview mirror, watching my parents wave goodbye, along with my former home fading into the past.

Goodbye, Henry. I'll always love you.

Those lettered state roads in Wisconsin always confused me. My GPS better be on point, or we could be lost for hours. I didn't need extra time locked in a vehicle with an angry teenager.

Anna barely spoke to me. I gave up trying after the first twenty miles. She listened to her music and sent text messages while I feasted on the patchwork of fall colors. Several times, I had the urge to stop and photograph the scenery. Henry would've loved it. He used to feature my photography in his art gallery. But that part of my life was behind me. Anna and I had a new future to carve out.

Six hours after leaving Chicago, I pulled onto the long gravel driveway of our new home. The movers wouldn't arrive until Saturday morning. Grandma's furniture still occupied the house, and I hadn't a clue where to store it. There used to be a big barn. If it still stood, I could move some pieces there for the time being. She had some beautiful antiques. Maybe I could sell some. Too much to think about. At least it would keep my mind off Henry while awake. Dreams were a different story.

Anna fell asleep an hour before we arrived. I hated to wake her, but I couldn't leave her in the car.

"Anna, we're here. Wake up, honey."

"Mom, I had a horrible nightmare."

"What was it about?"

"An evil mother moved her daughter hundreds of miles away from her family and friends. Oh wait, it wasn't a dream."

"Can't you even try to be happy? Cody's happy."

Cody woofed when he heard his name.

"I'm not a dog."

I motioned toward the farmhouse. "It looks quaint, don't you think?"

Dear God, what have I gotten us into?

Overgrown bushes shrouded the weathered and peeling

white siding of the old two-story farmhouse. Half the shutters were missing, and the other half hung precariously close to falling off. Three giant oak trees towered over the house, and broad branches rested on the roof. Grandma had lived in a nursing home a year before she died. Aunt Gertrude was supposed to look after the place. Guess that didn't happen. A tree service, gardener, and house painter topped the to-do list.

Anna folded her arms and shrank into her seat. "You've got to be kidding. Is it haunted? Does it have indoor plumbing? I'm not going in there."

Anna's contrary attitude tested my patience. From previous visits, she knew exactly what the inside looked like.

"Now, Anna. Perhaps it looks a little—"

"Revolting." Her face scrunched and she pretended to gag.

"I agree. It looks a little run-down, but all it needs is some TLC."

"Clara! Anna! You made it."

My jaw dropped at the sight of my identical twin rushing down the front steps.

Anna's face lit up. "Aunt CeCe!" She worshipped my sister. In fact, since Henry's death, she'd asked several times if she could live with her in New York. "Why didn't you tell me Aunt CeCe would be here?" Anna flung open the door and raced into CeCe's open arms.

"Because I didn't know," I said to Cody.

He woofed and, in one graceful movement, leapt over the front seat and out the door.

"You too, Cody?" I muttered.

CeCe knelt on one knee, giving Cody a kiss on the head and a hug around his soft, furry neck.

“Clara!” My bubbly sister flounced over with an arm draped around my daughter’s shoulders. “What are you waiting for? Come on. Let’s go inside. It’s a little shabby, but we can fix it up.” CeCe smiled at Anna’s glowing face. “Right, Anna?”

“Sure, Aunt CeCe. Come on, Mom. Hurry up.”

At least Anna’s mood had improved, but the sight of my sister here, in Clearbrook, made me wonder if I’d driven into an alternate universe.

We may look alike, but we were polar opposites. I was reserved. She was wild. I wore comfortable clothes and sensible shoes—she preferred designer jeans with stilettos. My hair was our natural chestnut brown, whereas CeCe’s was Marilyn Monroe blonde, a change she made at seventeen, much to the dismay of our parents. And I was sorry to say, she was about twenty pounds thinner.

Cecelia, or CeCe as she liked to be called, moved to New York right after we graduated from high school. She took our mother’s maiden name because, as she put it, “What modeling agency would sign Cecelia Muller? But CeCe Grayson ... that’s a star’s name.”

At her towering height, a modeling agency signed her up right away. She made quite a name for herself in the modeling world. I never thought of myself as beautiful, but when I first saw pictures of CeCe in a magazine, she looked gorgeous. I realized she had something I didn’t. Her personality lit her up from the inside. CeCe had what the Hollywood people call “IT.”

The last time I saw her was at Henry’s funeral. So why was my glamorous twin here? I supposed I’d better find out.

As a child, I loved visiting our grandparents, but CeCe hated it. Our mother grew up in this house. My grandparents purchased the 1930 four-bedroom farmhouse, along with one hundred

and fifty acres, after WWII. Grandpa grew up on a farm nearby. Grandma wasn't keen on the idea of northern farm life, being a southern city gal. They'd met at a USO dance in Charlotte, North Carolina, shortly before Grandpa shipped out and they fell hopelessly in love. Somehow, Grandpa convinced Grandma to move north and become a farmer's wife. They had three children—Uncle Gordon, the oldest, who died in Vietnam, my mother, Loulabelle, followed by Aunt Gertrude.

"Clara," CeCe called from the porch, "are you coming in or not?"

"I'm coming." I grabbed two pieces of luggage and climbed the five wide wooden front steps to my new life.

One thing I loved most about visiting Grandma was sitting next to her on the swing that hung from the wraparound porch. My legs dangled while she gently rocked us back and forth. In her soft southern voice, she told me stories about growing up in North Carolina. Poor old swing was half hanging and half resting on the porch. Another item for the fix-it list.

I found Anna and CeCe in the kitchen.

"We're already making plans on how to remodel this old place," CeCe said.

"Mom, we really need to upgrade the kitchen. Look at these appliances. I don't even know how to use that stove. And where's the microwave? It's like living in the dark ages."

"We'll talk about it another time," I said. "Please bring in the luggage, and Cody needs his food and bowls."

"I'll help you," CeCe said.

"Anna can handle it herself. I need to talk to you."

Anna's eyes narrowed. "You're not going to make Aunt CeCe leave, are you?"

“Of course not. But I need to talk to my sister. Now please, Anna, Cody’s hungry.”

“Fine.”

CeCe waited for Anna to leave. “I know what you’re going to say. Why am I interfering? But I’m not. I need to be with my family. That’s all.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you that. But I do want to know why you’re here, how you got in, and when you arrived?”

“Yesterday. Aunt Gertie gave me the keys.” CeCe opened the refrigerator. “Are you hungry? I have leftover Chinese from last night.”

“Later. Now tell me why you’re here.”

“My life’s a mess.” She shut the fridge, stepped past me, and flopped onto a kitchen chair. “Enzo went back to Italy and his wife. My agent can’t find me any new jobs. Everyone says I’m too old.” CeCe placed an elbow on the old oak kitchen table and rested her head in her hand. “We’re only thirty-seven. What am I supposed to do now?”

“Why do you have to do anything? You must have an enormous savings account.”

“It’s almost gone.” CeCe’s sorrowful eyes peered into mine. “Enzo stole from me for years with fake investments and offshore accounts. Once I lost my modeling job, he bolted. I came home to find him, and all my jewelry, gone.”

“Oh, CeCe, how horrible. I’m so sorry.” I sat and took her hand.

“I couldn’t afford my Manhattan apartment, and the last time I called Mom, she said you were moving here to take over the shelter. That’s when I decided to come and help you take care of Anna and the animals. I packed my belongings and here I am. I can stay, can’t I?”

“Of course you can. You’re my sister. I love you. But I thought you hated it here.”

“You know what they say, beggars can’t be choosers.” She flashed her paparazzi smile.

“But I don’t want Anna hurt. She admires you, and I know how you are. You show up with all your promises and, like a tornado, whirl us around and leave. If you’re staying, fine, but if you intend on leaving as soon as something new comes your way, then go now.”

My head turned at the bang of the screen door. Anna stood inside holding a bag of dog food and a tote labeled “Cody’s Stuff.”

“Mom!” She glared with narrowed eyes. “You said you wouldn’t make Aunt CeCe leave.” Anna stomped to the kitchen table and threw down Cody’s food and the tote. “If Aunt CeCe leaves, I’m going with her.” Anna planted her feet and folded her arms.

“I’m not making Aunt CeCe leave. I’m only trying to find out how long she plans on staying.”

Anna relaxed her stance, giving CeCe a compelling smile. “How long are you staying, Aunt CeCe?” How I wished my daughter admired me like she does my sister.

“For quite a while. I gave up my apartment in New York. Where else would I live? Besides, we have a lot of work to do around here if we’re going to turn this place into a palace.”

And who did she think would pay for this renovation?

“There, Mom, now you know.” Anna grinned at my sister. “Aunt CeCe is staying for a long time.”

Henry could make her grin like that and, once those braces came off, she’d dazzle all the boys. I shuddered at that thought. But with CeCe here, it might help Anna adjust to our move.

“Good. However, you two will have to work from a budget. I don’t have a bottomless pit of money.”

Cody whined and nosed his food bag.

“You better feed him before he takes matters into his own paws,” I said.

The movers arrived at eight Saturday morning. CeCe and Anna were still asleep since they’d stayed up half the night talking and laughing. Anna and I used to have girls’ nights, but since she blamed me for Henry’s death, I was the villain. It was hard not to be jealous of CeCe and Anna’s relationship when I heard her laughing with my sister instead of me.

I stuck my head into the room CeCe claimed for herself. “Wake up, you two. The movers are here.”

Down in the living room, three sweaty men stood with my couch on its end.

“Lady. Where do you want this couch? It won’t fit with this other furniture,” the ringleader said.

“Oh, yes, you need to move the marked pieces to either the barn, attic, or basement before bringing in my things. I have notes to where each piece goes.”

While CeCe and Anna were enjoying their pajama party, I ran around sticking notes on the pieces to be moved. Grandma’s chairs and couch had good bones, but with the worn upholstery and springs popping through, they needed to be reupholstered or perhaps sold to an antique dealer. I’d figure it out later.

“That’s not in the contract.” The ringleader pulled my contract from his back pocket, unfolded it, and pointed to the fine print. “We move it out of one house and into another. There’s nothing in here about moving another house into a

barn or wherever.”

“I know, but there’ll be a huge tip if you do this for me.” I took three one-hundred-dollar bills from my jeans pocket and handed it to him. “This is half. There’ll be one more for each of you when you’re finished.” I gave them my paparazzi smile, although less sparkling than CeCe’s brilliant white one.

“Make it two more each and you got a deal.”

“Okay, but that’s all I can do.” My smile faded.

The ringleader turned to the other men. “Alright, boys, let’s move.”

CHAPTER TWO

The movers left a little before three, leaving boxes lined against every wall, including the front of the fireplace. Not like we'd light a fire before a chimney sweep cleaned it. My fix-it list kept growing.

I flopped onto one of my two gray and white buffalo check armchairs across from the dark gray sectional couch where CeCe and Anna sat.

"I'm exhausted and hungry," I said. "How about we head into town, get something to eat, and visit Aunt Gertie? On the way home, we can pick up some groceries."

"I'm up for food, but not Aunt Gertie." CeCe kicked off her red stilettos. "When I asked her for the keys, she wasn't happy. She thought Grandma was leaving everything to her."

"I wish she had." Anna yawned, leaned against CeCe, and drew her legs onto the couch.

"I don't know why Grandma didn't leave it to her," I said. "We need to talk to Aunt Gertie."

"I'm only going if Aunt CeCe goes." Anna wrapped an arm around CeCe's waist.

I gave CeCe an imploring look.

“What the heck.” CeCe rested an arm around Anna’s shoulders and pulled her close. “Now that I’m living here, I’ll probably see her all the time, anyway.” She and Anna shared a tender smile.

My heart ached to cuddle my daughter.

The three of us climbed into my SUV, leaving Cody to mind the house. I hated leaving him, but we wouldn’t be long. Grandma’s house, now mine, was twelve miles west of Clearbrook. When we came through town yesterday, Anna was asleep. She was awake now.

“God, Mom, where is this town? We’ve been driving forever and all I see are farms. I hate this. There’s no place to go here.”

I glanced at Anna in the rearview mirror. She met my glance and folded her arms. Her eyes appeared watery, and her lips turned down.

“Hey, you have me.” CeCe turned to smile at Anna. “As soon as I buy a car, we can go into town whenever we want. I kind of remember a few places where the kids hung out.”

“That was a hundred years ago. I want to be with kids my age.”

CeCe’s smile dropped and her eyes grew wide. Welcome to my world.

“We’re coming into town now.” I pointed to two brick buildings to the right. “There’s the grocery store and a hardware store.”

“Great. I’ll buy a soda at the grocery store and hang out in the paint department at the hardware store.”

My guilt level rose ten degrees. “Monday morning, we’ll

get you registered for school. You'll make lots of new friends. And they can show you the happening places." I glanced at CeCe. "Remember the roller rink?"

"Yeah, I broke my ankle there. The rest of the summer, I sat on the front porch listening to Grandma talk about growing up in Charlotte. I think she hated it here, too."

I shot her a look. "You're not helping."

CeCe shrugged. "You're right, it's probably changed over the last hundred years."

Between Anna and CeCe, I couldn't decide who was more depressed.

We walked a block from where I parked on Main Street to The Main Event Diner. When I pulled open the door, three gongs assaulted our ears. I'd never seen a boxing-themed diner. Large posters of famous boxers adorned the walls, along with boxing gloves of various colors mounted above each booth. A speed ball hung next to the register. We stood there, taking in the unusual décor when a full-figured woman—probably in her early to mid-forties—approached us with menus tucked under her arm.

"Hi. I'm Veronica, I'll be your waitress." She looked to be about my height, with blonde hair cut in a 1960s style shoulder-length bob. "Are you new in town? Visiting? Staying at the Cozy Inn & Suites off the interstate?" she asked, while escorting us to a booth. Once seated, Veronica placed an oversized menu in front of each of us—featuring a boxing ring on the front and back cover. Above the image, the text read:

THE MAIN EVENT DINER
EVERY BITE PACKS A PUNCH

GUARANTEED!

“We just moved here yesterday,” I said.

The inquisition continued. “Are you the folks who took over the old Grayson place?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Gertie was here the other day telling us about how her niece was moving into the farmhouse. I heard the old place is pretty run-down. And she said you’re taking over the shelter. Have you been to the kennel? Mabel used to walk dogs there,” she said, in one breath. “Hey, Mabel, come here.” Veronica beckoned to a slender gray-haired woman wearing an identical uniform who scurried over. “Guess what?”

“Are these the folks taking over the Grayson place?” A pen stuck out from the bun piled high atop Mabel’s head.

“You guessed it,” Veronica said.

“You must be Clarabelle.” Mabel offered her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.” Blue, bulging veins were visible through Mabel’s cold, paper-thin skin. “And you must be Annabelle.” She smiled at Anna, then turned to CeCe. “And you must be ... well, I don’t know who you are.”

“This is my sister, CeCe,” I said.

“It’s nice to meet you, CeCe.” Mabel extended her hand to shake CeCe’s.

“Nice to meet you, too, Mabel.”

“Mabel, order up,” the cook bellowed.

“I have to serve my customers. I’ll talk to you all later.” Mabel scurried back to pick up her order.

“What’s with the boxing stuff?” CeCe asked Veronica.

“Murph, the owner and cook, used to be a heavyweight boxer,” Veronica said. “Gave it up when he married Ruby. They opened this place about ten years ago.”

“I like the little boxing ring holding the condiments.”
CeCe pulled the little replica closer to examine it.

“Mom, I’m hungry.” Anna stared holes into my head.

“Veronica, we’ve been working all day unpacking. We’re going to peruse the menu,” I said. “We can chat later.”

“Of course. Sorry, folks. We don’t get new people moving here very often.”

“What a surprise,” Anna muttered.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Veronica hurried over to gossip with another waitress behind the counter.

Anna wrinkled her nose. “This place sucks.”

“Enough,” I said. “Figure out what you want to eat.”

Veronica returned two minutes later with pen and pad ready. “What’ll it be, folks?”

“I’ll have the Super Middleweight meal and a milkshake,” Anna said.

“Swiss, American, or cheddar cheese, and how do you want your burger cooked?”

“American and well done.”

“And what flavor milkshake?”

“Strawberry.”

“Good choice. We make it with fresh strawberries. And what would you like, CeCe?”

“The Split-Decision.”

Veronica rattled off half sandwich and cup of soup choices. CeCe chose tuna salad and chicken noodle.

“I’ll have the Welterweight meal and a diet cola,” I said, which was a patty melt, fries, and coleslaw.

“I’ll put in your order right away.”

I had to admit, Murph’s food did pack a punch. Plus, he didn’t skimp on portions. We finished our food, paid the bill,

and started for the door when Mabel stopped me.

“Clarabelle, I’d like to talk to you about the kennel.”

“Can it wait until tomorrow? We’re on our way to visit my Aunt Gertie.”

“Mabel, order up,” Murph hollered.

“Have you been there yet?” Mabel shifted from one leg to the other while wringing her hands.

“I plan to go there tomorrow. Is something wrong?”

Mabel glanced around and leaned close. “Ever since the new director took over, I’ve noticed things.”

“Like what?”

“Mabel, quit the chit-chat and pick up your order.”

“Be right there, Murph.” Mabel shook her head. “He can be such a grouch. Could I come to your house tomorrow morning before you go to the kennel?”

“How about eleven thirty?” I asked.

“Perfect. I normally attend the early church service. See you then,” Mabel said.

As Mabel scurried away to pick up her order, I noticed several people gaping at us. An ominous feeling came over me. Or maybe I was being daft, as Henry used to say. If only he’d listened to my intuition, he might be alive.

Aunt Gertie lived two blocks down Fourth Street off Main. I parked in front of her white frame house. Overgrown shrubs blocked the windows. No wonder Grandma’s house was in disrepair. Aunt Gertie couldn’t take care of her own home.

“Anna, please be polite to Aunt Gertie. She’s not like Grandma. She’s ... eccentric,” I said.

“I once heard Grandma call her goofy Gertie.” Anna giggled.

“I call her a lunatic,” CeCe said.

“You’re not helping,” I said.

CeCe shrugged.

“Aunt Gertie lived a different lifestyle,” I said. “You don’t know what she’s been through.”

“Lunatic,” Anna repeated and giggled, causing CeCe to giggle.

“Can you two compose yourselves?”

They stopped laughing, looked at each other, and began again.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, let’s go.”

Aunt Gertie answered the door wearing a tie-died muumuu. Her wiry gray hair hung to her round waist. I tried not to appear aghast, but it was difficult with her white powder makeup and ruby red lipstick. My mother, the epitome of class and style, couldn’t possibly have the same DNA as this woman standing before me. And yet, their features were similar—diamond shaped face, snub nose, round hazel eyes, and the same vocal tone. Once, I believed I was talking to Mom on the phone when it was Aunt Gertie.

“Hello, Clarabelle, Annabelle, Cecilia. Do come in.” Aunt Gertie stepped aside, allowing us to enter.

As my eyes readjusted to her dark home, I was thrust back into the 1970s. Aunt Gertie lived like a hippie from the hanging doorway beads leading to the kitchen, to an orange lava lamp bubbling away on an end table. Candles illuminated the room, giving a shadowy effect to posters of old rock stars hanging around the living room. The scent of sandalwood incense filled the house. Not one glint of daylight shone through her heavy dark red curtains. Wood floor peeked through several places of her well-worn

avocado shag carpet.

“Hi, Aunt Gertie. How are you?” I leaned over to give her a hug. That was another difference between Mom and her sister. Mom stood five feet seven, where Aunt Gertie barely reached five feet.

“I’m fine. How are all of you?” Aunt Gertie motioned for us to have a seat on her threadbare orange and brown plaid couch. A multicolored crochet afghan hung over the top. “Annabelle, my, how you’ve grown. Last time I saw you, you were half the size. Looks like you’ll be tall like your mom.”

“Hello, Aunt Gertie. It’s nice to see you again,” Anna said.

“Cecelia, nice seeing you again. Although I saw you a couple days ago.” She eyed CeCe’s stilettos. “How do you walk in those shoes? Aren’t you tall enough?”

“I walk perfectly fine, Aunt Gertie. Weren’t you wearing that same dress the other day?”

They were at it already. Better change the subject. “Aunt Gertie. How’s Ellie doing?”

“Ellie’s fine. She’s married.”

“I know. We were at the wedding.”

“Oh, yes. You and your husband, Henry, the British fellow. As I recall, you married him so he could stay in the United States.” She peered over her glasses.

“I married him because I loved him.” Good thing it was dark, or she would’ve seen my face flush. “Anyway, we were talking about Ellie. Didn’t she just have a baby?”

“Yes. They have six. There’re the twins, Abigail, and Alecia. Then the three boys, Avery, Alex, and Arnold. Now the little one, Angela. Shame you never had children, Cecelia. Guess you were too busy with your career. How is that Italian fellow? Seems you girls love foreign men.”

“Not everybody aspires to be a baby factory.” CeCe slid forward to the edge of the couch. “Clara, isn’t it time we left? We need to feed Cody and let him out.”

“Must you leave so soon? I wanted to talk to you about the shelter.” Concern clouded Aunt Gertie’s face.

“Yes, gotta go.” CeCe made a beeline for the front door.

Anna sprang to her feet and followed CeCe.

With a look of surprise, Aunt Gertie watched those two scramble out the door.

“Never mind them. What do you need to talk about?”

“It’s about the new director, Wayne Woolley. After Mother went into the nursing home, he fired every board member. I couldn’t do anything about it.”

The sound of my SUV’s horn blasted several times. I crossed the living room to peer out the screen door. CeCe gestured for me to come.

“Just a minute,” I called to CeCe, and turned back to my aunt. “I’m sorry, please continue.”

“I thought Mother was going to leave everything to me, but she must’ve changed her mind. I would’ve fired Woolley, but now you’re the president and owner of the property. You need to do something, Clarabelle.”

“I don’t understand. Why couldn’t you do anything?”

Aunt Gertie’s landline rang.

“That’s probably Ellie. She wants me to help with the children. I’ll be leaving for Minneapolis soon. Goodbye, Clarabelle.” Aunt Gertie practically shoved me out and shut the door in my face.

What was happening at the shelter?

On the ride to the grocery store, CeCe and Anna gossiped

about Aunt Gertie.

“The nerve of that old battle-ax.” CeCe scowled and folded her arms. “Like I’d want a half-dozen children.”

“You can’t take her seriously. You lived the life you wanted. If you want to have a child, there’s still time. We’re not that old.”

“Mom, what’s her story? Why was it so dark in there? And those candles ... thought I’d die of smoke inhalation.” Anna coughed for emphasis.

“I don’t know her entire story,” I said. “Not sure if anyone does. All I know is when she was sixteen, she ran away with a boyfriend to join a commune.”

“What’s a commune?” Anna asked.

“It’s when a group of like-minded people live together, sharing everything. Most times, there’s a leader who professes to know the way to enlightenment,” I explained. “They live off the land with everyone doing their part. Whatever money they earn goes to the group. There’re no individuals.”

“They’re called hippies,” CeCe said. “They slept together, ate together, worked together, and did a lot of drugs.”

I glanced at my still sulking sister and continued. “Anyway, about ten years later, Aunt Gertie showed up on Grandma’s doorstep with Ellie, who was about six. She never explained exactly where she’d been or even who Ellie’s father was.”

“How sad not knowing your dad. I miss mine so much. He was going to take me to England last summer.”

I peeked at Anna in the rearview mirror.

She wiped her eyes.

“We could still go to England. Dad’s family would love for

us to visit.”

“I wanted to go with Dad. Now he’s gone, and it’s your fault.”

CeCe looked back at Anna. “Why do you think it’s your mother’s fault?”

I shook my head at CeCe.

After spending over an hour at the grocery store, we arrived home around seven. Near the end of the long-curved gravel driveway, I hit the brakes. Parked next to the house was an enormous beige motorhome.

“CeCe, were you expecting someone?”

CeCe shook her head. “Nope.”

I parked behind the RV. Cody trotted up, with Mom and Dad close behind.

“Grandma, Grandpa!” Anna jumped out of the car and ran up to my parents.

They pulled her in for a hug.

I got out, leaving CeCe sitting in the passenger seat. “Hi. What are you guys doing here? Is this behemoth yours?”

“I told you we’d be up to visit soon. We wanted to surprise you.” Mom grinned like a Cheshire Cat.

CeCe finally stepped out of the vehicle. “Hi, Mom, Dad. I’m glad to see you guys.” She hugged our parents.

“Cecelia, what are you doing here?” Mom asked.

“When you told me they were moving here, I decided to come and help Clara.” CeCe went around the SUV, popped open the back, and grabbed some grocery bags.

Mom followed her. “But what about your job? And Enzo?”

CeCe turned to me. I’d seen that look of “Help me!” countless times.

I looped an arm through Mom's arm. "Let's go into the house and you can tell us what's going on."

"I'll make coffee," CeCe said. "Anna, help me bring in the bags."

Mom's gaze followed CeCe as she rushed up the steps.

Once settled on the couch, Mom asked, "What did you do with Mother's furniture?"

"They're in the attic, basement, or barn. I had the movers do it before they brought in mine."

"Must have cost you a pretty penny," Dad said.

"A fat tip motivated them to do the work. Now, tell me why you bought a motorhome."

"You know your dad retired a year ago. We were bored. Plus, we always talked about traveling on the open road. No timetables, nothing to hold us back. So, we decided to take a second honeymoon and see America."

"In a motorhome?"

"We plan on traveling across the U.S. An adventure," Mom said.

CeCe carried in a tray with coffee cups, spoons, creamer, and sugar. Anna followed close behind with a carafe of coffee.

"What about your house?" I asked.

"We sold it," Dad said.

CeCe stopped dead in her tracks, causing Anna to smack into her. She nearly dropped the tray and if Anna hadn't had a top on the carafe, CeCe would've worn the coffee.

"Why in the world did you sell your house?" CeCe set the tray on the coffee table.

"Here, Anna, I'll pour the coffee," Mom said. "As I was telling your sister, Dad and I are leaving on a second

honeymoon.”

“In an RV?” CeCe asked.

“Yes, we’re going to travel across America,” Mom said.

“But when you get back, where will you live?” I asked.

“We’re thinking of building a house here. Grandma left you fifty acres with the house and shelter,” Mom said.

After Grandpa died, Grandma sold off all the land except fifty acres surrounding the house. She had hoped some of her family would move here and build homes. Guess Grandma got her wish, even though it happened posthumously. Poor Grandma, we were so far away in her declining years.

“If we stayed in Chicago, we’d miss our family. Besides, I grew up here and your father doesn’t care where we live, long as he has something to do. Right, dear?”

“Thought I’d help with the shelter,” Dad said. “I want to do something different and what a worthwhile cause.”

For forty years, Dad worked as a pharmacist. For the first twenty years, he owned and operated Muller’s Drugs, complete with a soda fountain. CeCe and I loved stopping there after school. He let us have ice cream sodas with the strict warning, “Never tell your mother or we’ll all be in trouble.” But Mom always knew because inevitably either CeCe or I would spill some on our clothes. Then came the onslaught of big pharma. Dad couldn’t compete and sold to one of the big chains. The last twenty years, he worked for them.

“That’s great, Dad, and I think there’s something up at the shelter,” I said. “We were at Aunt Gertie’s today, and she gave me the impression the new director was doing something nefarious. She said if Grandma had bequeathed it to her, she would’ve fired him.”

“You shouldn’t believe anything my sister says. Ever since

she came back from living in the commune, she's been a paranoid schizophrenic. Gertie believes everybody is after her. She hides in her little house. When she goes out, she wears hats and sunglasses, even at night." Mom sipped her coffee.

Dad poured himself a second cup.

"Don't drink too much coffee, Tucker. You won't sleep tonight."

"Maybe I don't want to sleep." Dad shot Mom a sly grin.

"Oh, Tucker." Mom giggled like a schoolgirl.

"Well, that's my cue. I'm going to bed. Goodnight, Mom, and Dad. I'm glad you guys are here. See you both in the morning." CeCe gave them a hug and kiss.

"Cecelia, dear. I think we need to have a talk. Don't you?" You couldn't pull the wool over Mom's eyes, not even a little.

"Yes, Mom. But tomorrow. Okay?"

"Alright. Goodnight, Cecelia."

My eyes fixed on Anna lying on the floor next to Cody—her head cradled in the crook of her arm. Her eyes were half-open. Anna was growing up too fast, and it saddened me to think Henry wasn't here to witness all the changes and milestones in her life. She let out a deep, loud yawn.

"Anna, you should go to bed, too," I said. "It's been a long day, and you look exhausted."

"Fine." Anna pushed to her feet. "Night, Grandma, Grandpa. How long are you guys staying?"

"At least a week or two," Mom said. "We want to help you get settled before we leave."

"That's good. With you guys and Aunt CeCe here, it won't be so boring." Anna gave my parents a hug and headed out of the room.

Cody sprang to his feet and trotted after her.

“Goodnight, Anna.” I waited for her to leave the room before continuing. “Aunt Gertie wasn’t the only one to say something about the new director. A waitress at The Main Event Diner also thinks something is up with him. She’s coming here tomorrow morning at eleven thirty to talk about it. I’m glad you’re here, Dad. I’d like you to hear what she has to say.”

“Don’t worry, honey. We’ll get to the bottom of it.” Dad checked his watch. “Lou, it’s late. We should hit the hay. If you know what I mean.” Dad winked at Mom and made a double-clicking sound.

Mom giggled again, and blushed. “Oh, Tuck, go out to Birdie. I’ll meet you there shortly. I want to help Clara clean up the dishes.”

“Birdie?”

“We nicknamed our motorhome Birdie,” Mom said. “You know, like snowbirds. We’re flying south for the winter.”

“Want me to make up the spare room?” I asked. “You could sleep in the house.”

“No, your mom and I prefer to sleep in Birdie.” He winked at Mom again.

“Tucker, behave yourself. At least until I get there.” There was that giggle again. I swear, I’d never heard Mom giggle like that before.

“Alright, but don’t be long, my little Loulabelle.” He kissed Mom’s cheek and patted her bottom. Dad whistled while strolling out of the living room.

They made me blush.

When the front door closed, Mom leaned in conspiratorially. “Ever since your father retired, he has acted like a teenager. It’s wonderful. I feel like a girl again.”

“That’s great, Mom. You and Dad do look amazing.”

Mom hummed while we carried the dishes into the kitchen.

“I can finish. Go be with Dad.”

“If, you’re sure?” Without hesitation, Mom dropped the towel on the counter. The screen door banged on its frame as she bolted out. The second honeymoon had already begun.

“Is it safe to come back?” CeCe entered the kitchen from the back stairs.

“Yes, they’re both in Birdie.”

“What’s a Birdie?”

“Their nickname for the RV.”

“I love them, but seeing your own parents act like lovesick puppies is disturbing.” CeCe took over drying the dishes.

“I think it’s sweet,” I said. “Mom and Dad worked hard their whole lives. It’s their turn to have fun and *get it on* before they grow old.”

“What a gross thought. I’ll have nightmares tonight about our parents *getting it on*.”

CeCe and I giggled.

CHAPTER THREE

Early Sunday morning, the music of the Eagles singing about a girl with lying eyes echoed through the hall. I took the back stairs leading to the kitchen, where I found Mom whipping up her famous blueberry pancakes.

“Morning, Mom. You’re up early.”

Mom’s hair wasn’t her usual perfect coif, nor was she wearing any makeup. She wore black stretch pants and ... was that one of Dad’s shirts?

“What a glorious morning. I haven’t cooked on this old stove in ages.” Mom lowered the volume on her music app. “I hope everybody’s hungry this morning. I’m making blueberry pancakes with fresh whipped cream.”

“Where’d you get these ingredients? I shopped yesterday, but I didn’t buy all this.”

A basket of fresh blueberries, maple syrup, blueberry syrup, flour, cream, and fresh squeezed orange juice covered the counter.

“We stocked Birdie before leaving Chicago. When you’re

on the road, you never know where you'll end up. We want to stop at out of the way places. Your father is hoping to get in a lot of fishing."

"Where's Dad?"

"He took Cody for a walk. Said he might go down to the shelter and snoop around."

"Wish he would've waited for me. I don't like the idea of Dad going there alone. I'm having one of my feelings again. Ever since I talked to Mabel, I can't shake it off."

"Don't start imagining things. You don't want to end up like Aunt Gertie, and he's not alone, he has Cody." Mom ladled batter onto the sizzling skillet. "Go wake up Cecelia and Anna. Breakfast will be ready soon."

Twenty minutes later, everyone was gathered around Grandma's old oak kitchen table. This was one item I intended to keep, along with her dining set. Anna and CeCe sat across from me on the bench along the wall.

"Everybody, dig in. It's not every day I make these pancakes."

"Mom, these are delicious," CeCe said. "I can't remember the last time I ate them."

"If you came home more often, I'd make them for you." A slight edge slipped into Mom's tone. "Later today, Cecelia, you and I will have a long chat."

"Yes, Mom."

"Anna, how are your pancakes?" Mom asked.

"They're G.O.A.T., Grandma. Mom never cooks breakfast like this." Anna slid me a sideways glance before sweetly smiling at Mom. "I usually eat cold cereal or toast."

How long did my daughter intend to punish me? She knew it wasn't my fault Henry died. I missed him, too.

“What does goat mean?” Mom asked.

“It means Greatest of All Time. G.O.A.T.” Anna rolled her eyes. One day, those sweet eyes would roll out of her head and onto the floor.

“I can’t keep up with this generation and their lingo. But I’m happy you’re enjoying the pancakes,” Mom said.

I turned to Dad. “Did you walk to the shelter?”

“Yes, but nobody was there. What time do they normally open on Sunday?”

“To be honest, I haven’t read the bylaws yet. It was overwhelming just moving us here. I planned to review them with the director.”

“If we hurry, we can still make the ten o’clock church service,” Mom said.

“Do we have to go?” Anna asked.

“You do realize God is everywhere and not just in big cities,” Mom said.

“Fine.” Anna stuffed her last bite of pancake into her mouth.

“Okay girls, let’s get these dishes done P.D.Q. And that means Pretty Darn Quick. See, I know lingo, too.” Mom dabbed a bit of blueberry syrup from Anna’s plate and dotted her nose.

“Grandma! I’m not a child anymore.” Anna practically shouted and indignantly wiped the minuscule dot of syrup off her nose.

“Anna, when did you get to be so serious?” Mom asked.

“When Daddy died.” Anna stormed out of the kitchen and stomped up the back stairs. A thunderous boom from her bedroom door rattled the Rockwell plates hanging on the kitchen wall.

“Sorry, Mom. Anna’s still having a hard time.”

“I’ll talk to her.” Dad stood.

“She may not hear you if she stuck her earbuds in.”

Dad nodded and walked up the back stairs.

“I thought the therapy was helping,” Mom said.

“I could call my shrink in New York. He could recommend somebody here,” CeCe said.

Mom met my gaze. “Would you like to say something or should I?” she asked.

“Be my guest,” I said.

“My guy is world renowned,” CeCe said. “He has lots of contacts. On one of my shoots in Paris, I had a bit of a, shall we say, meltdown? I called him and he arranged for me to see a psychiatrist that very day.”

“Cecelia, dear, this isn’t New York, Paris, or London. I’m sure he has many contacts, but I think it’s safe to say none here in Clearbrook.”

“He might.”

“Sure, CeCe. Call your shrink and if there’s somebody within a fifty-mile radius, I’ll make Anna and myself an appointment.”

“Boy, I’m just trying to be helpful.” CeCe stood to clear the table.

“Cecelia, you’ve lived in a different world from the rest of us. Yours is huge and famous. Ours is small and not famous.” Mom filled the white porcelain sink with water. Another item for the ever-growing list—a dishwasher.

“But I love Anna and hate seeing her sad and angry all the time,” CeCe said.

“Most teenagers are angry just because they’re teenagers. But Anna does need help. Perhaps you can find a counselor

through the high school,” Mom said.

Dad came back into the kitchen right after we finished the dishes.

“Did you talk to her?” I asked.

“Yes, we had a little chat. She’s hurting and blames you for Henry’s death. Why would that be?”

The three of them stared at me.

“We can discuss this another time,” I said. “Don’t we need to leave for church?”

“Tucker, what time is it?”

Dad glanced at his pocket watch. “Nine forty. We better hustle. I’ll get Anna. Clara, you start the car.”

“I’ll meet you out there,” Mom said. “I need to fix my hair and put on my face.” Five minutes later, Mom arrived looking like she walked out of a beauty salon.

How does she do that so fast?

We entered St. Peter’s Catholic Church at the last bar of the first hymn and tried not to be conspicuous. The five of us settled into the last pew near the side door. We weren’t as sly as we tried to be. Several parishioners gawked. A murmur worked its way around the sanctuary. Some people recognized Mom and waved. CeCe waved back, giving them her paparazzi smile.

I tapped CeCe on her shoulder. “I believe they’re waving at Mom.”

She leaned forward and observed Mom waving and smiling at various people. “Guess they don’t get high fashion magazines here.” CeCe sat back, appearing dejected.

When the service concluded, the congregation acted like Mom had returned from a moon landing. Everyone tried to get near her and talk to her. In her time, Mom had been

president of the student council, prom queen, head cheerleader, and had the lead in every school play. The rest of us stood there while Mom schmoozed the crowd. She bragged about CeCe's modeling career, Dad being the head pharmacist for a corporate chain, and me, the new owner of The Burton Grayson Memorial Animal Shelter.

"Dad, would you drag Mom away from her throngs of admirers?" I asked. "Mabel is meeting us at eleven thirty."

"Okay, honey. Your mother is still as charming as when I fell in love with her back in college." Dad stepped over by Mom and whispered in her ear.

Mom nodded and addressed the crowd. "I have to be going. It was wonderful seeing everyone again. I'll be here all week. Stop by so we can reminisce more. Oh, and bring your yearbooks. Mine are packed away." Mom kept turning back, waving, and calling out "Bye" as Dad took her arm and escorted her to my SUV, where we waited.

"It was wonderful seeing some of my old high school friends." Mom grinned and her eyes lit up.

"Never realized you were so popular, Mom." CeCe's voice held a hint of envy.

"In a tiny town, you're either famous or infamous. I enjoyed the famous side. And as I recall, you were popular in school, too."

"Yes. I had several boyfriends." CeCe smiled and pushed her wavy blonde hair over her shoulder.

It was true. I walked in my sister's shadow as boys flocked around her while they barely noticed me. She welcomed attention, whereas I avoided it at all costs.

"Too many for my liking," Dad said.

Poor Dad used to pace the floor, waiting for CeCe to come

home. Their arguments were epic, and right when Dad thought he'd won, CeCe would burst into fake tears and become Daddy's little girl again.

"There's a car in the driveway. Is that Mabel?" Dad asked.

"Yes, that's her," I said.

Mabel waited by our front steps.

"Anna, would you let Cody out back?" I asked. "He loves people, but sometimes he can be overly friendly."

Anna was having a hard enough time adapting to our move. If there was trouble at the shelter, I didn't want her to worry.

"Fine," Anna said.

I hurried out of the vehicle to greet Mabel. "Sorry we're late. We attended the ten-a.m. service at St. Pete's."

"Not to worry. I only arrived a few minutes ago."

Mom, Dad, and CeCe met us at the top of the steps.

"These are my parents, Lou and Tucker Muller. And you remember my sister, CeCe?"

"Yes. Hello, CeCe. Mr. & Mrs. Muller, it's nice to meet you. I'm Mabel Wright." Mabel shook hands with my parents and CeCe.

I hung up Mabel's coat and showed her into the living room. "Please have a seat."

Mabel sat in one of the armchairs. "My, from the way everyone talked, I thought this place was about to crumble to the ground. But it's lovely. A mix of modern and vintage." Mabel had a good eye. I'd kept grandma's end tables and lamps, plus her old Victrola stood in the corner.

"Thank you. Eventually, I'll remove the wallpaper and paint the room a lighter color. It needs a lot of updating, but one step at a time. Would you like something to drink?" I asked.

“No thank you. I can’t stay long. I’m working at the diner later.”

Dad sat on the couch across from Mabel. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “My daughter tells me you have some important information about the shelter.” If Dad thought Mom was charming, he hadn’t glanced in a mirror lately. My six-foot-two father still had a thick head of salty dark hair, a dazzling smile and, for a man over sixty-five, he still looked fit.

Mabel repeatedly opened and snapped shut the clasp of her purse resting on her lap.

“Tell us what’s bothering you.” Dad folded his fingers, giving Mabel his full attention.

“I hate to gossip or stir up trouble, but there’s something fishy happening. My only interest is in the welfare of the animals. I used to volunteer on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. The last time I was there, Woolley said not to come back.” She paused to pull a tissue from her purse. “I loved the animals, and I don’t think they’re being treated right. You see, I’d get attached, and when one of them was gone, I’d ask if he or she got adopted.” Mabel dabbed at her nose. “That Woolley man said to mind my own business.” A couple of tears rolled down her face. “And it’s not just me being treated this way. He sent all the volunteers packing.

“When your grandmother was here, she loved and cared for the animals. She even let us foster, especially the puppies. So many dogs come to the shelter pregnant.”

“What about the veterinarian?” Dad asked. “Wouldn’t he or she know about the care of the animals?”

Mabel began opening and closing her purse again. “That’s another thing. That Woolley man claimed to be a veterinarian.

He won't let Doc Jansky in there. Your grandmother hired Woolley because he was a smooth talker when he first arrived. He seemed so caring. Said he had big ideas to get the dogs into homes. But when your grandmother entered the nursing home, everything changed. I visited Clarabelle and told her what was happening. She didn't look well and said she took steps to ensure the animal's care."

"You must've seen Mother shortly before she died," Mom said. "The last time I saw her, she said nothing to me. I found out she changed the will when Gertie told me."

"Gertie knows about Woolley. She convinced Clarabelle to hire him after Mr. Carter, the previous director, died," Mabel said.

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"About six months before your grandmother moved into the nursing home. It was strange. Right after Mr. Carter died, that Woolley man showed up. Mr. Carter was only in his early sixties. Fit as a fiddle one day and dead as a doornail the next. I think that Woolley man had something to do with it."

"Now, Mabel," Mom said, "you can't go around accusing people of murder just because you don't like them."

"You don't know him, Mrs. Muller. He's mean and cunning. I think he even hits the dogs." Her tissue went to work again. "I'm sorry, but I love the animals and I don't want to see them abused."

"Lou," Dad said, "call Gertie. See what she knows."

"I'll call my sister later," Mom said.

"Gertie was always at the shelter before that Woolley man came. I think he forced her out, too, but she won't say." Mabel dabbed her eyes. "I think she's afraid of him."

"Don't worry. We'll get to the bottom of it," Dad said.

“Can I volunteer again? It’s the only joy I have.” Her red-rimmed, watery eyes begged my approval.

“Of course, you can,” I said. “What time do you usually go to the shelter on Monday?”

“Early in the morning. I used to have a key until that Woolley man took it away. I let the dogs play in the yard while I cleaned cages and set out their breakfast.” Her face brightened.

“How about I meet you there at six?” I asked.

“That’s perfect.”

“I have a lot to learn about running the shelter. You can show me what you do.”

Mabel stood to leave and dumped the entire contents of her purse onto the floor. “Oh my. I’m terribly sorry.”

“Let me help you,” I said.

“Don’t bother yourself. I’m such a klutz. My husband used to say, ‘If you want something broken, hand it to Mabel.’”

Dad picked up her purse and held it open while she crawled around, picking up items and dropping them back into her bag. When she finished, he extended his hand to help her up.

“Thank you, Mr. Muller.”

“You’re welcome.” Dad handed Mabel her purse back.

“I better go. Thank you for seeing me.”

I escorted Mabel to her car. When she shook my hand, an odd sensation traveled up my arm.

Mabel grinned. “See you bright and early.” Her demeanor appeared more relaxed than when she arrived.

“Bye, Mabel. See you tomorrow.” My chest tightened as she drove away and the ominous feeling I had when I first met her intensified.

Mom, CeCe, and Dad were in the kitchen fixing lunch.

“Dad, what do you make of what Mabel said?” I asked.

“I’m not sure.” Dad turned to Mom. “Lou, you don’t think your mother would’ve hired him without checking his references, do you? He must’ve given her a resume.”

“Mother was a trusting person, plus she was elderly. I hope she checked, but he could’ve duped her and Gertie.” Mom opened the back door and let Anna know lunch was ready.

“Clara, have you found your grandmother’s files?” Dad asked.

“No. I haven’t had time. This may be more than I bargained for. I’m not sure I’m up for this. Maybe I should sell everything and move back to Chicago.”

“We’re moving back to Chicago?” Anna asked on entering the kitchen with Cody in tow.

“Possibly. I don’t know right now. Wash up for lunch.”

“But why? I thought you wanted to help the animals. Don’t you want to anymore?” Her light brown eyes widened into saucers, waiting for an answer.

“I said, I don’t know. I’m tired of arguing with you, Anna. You hate it here. You hate me. Now this shelter nonsense.” Tears stung my eyes. “I miss your father, too. Go wash your hands and stop asking me questions.” It was my turn to storm out of the kitchen and retreat to my bedroom.

Within minutes, Mom knocked on my door. “Clara?”

“Come in, Mom.”

“Are you alright, dear?”

“Not really. I’m having a ... what’d CeCe call it, meltdown?”

“That’s not your style. You’re my steadfast, responsible daughter. Cecelia has a meltdown if her nail polish doesn’t

match her dress.”

“Stop making me laugh. I want to be sad and miserable.”

Mom crossed the room and sat next to me on the bed. She wrapped one arm around my shoulders. “I’m sorry, dear. It’s too much to have two daughters melting down simultaneously.”

“Is CeCe melting down?”

“If she isn’t in the middle of a meltdown, she wouldn’t be here.” Mom smiled knowingly.

“You do know your daughters.”

Mom nodded. “Now, shake it off and come down for lunch. Anna’s worried about you.”

“Poor Anna. She has another reason to hate me.”

“Anna doesn’t hate you. She’s confused and misses her father. Not now, but I want to know why she blames you for Henry’s death.”

“I’ll tell you and Dad about it before you leave. When Anna’s at school.”

“Alright, come back down and have lunch.”

“Be down in a minute.”

Mom kissed my forehead and left the room.

What was I going to do about Grandma’s shelter? Perhaps Mabel was exaggerating about Wayne Woolley. But then, Aunt Gertie said she would’ve fired him. There were two sides to every argument. I’d speak to the man reasonably and hear what he had to say before deciding if he should be fired. Not sure I could run a shelter without a director.

I stepped into the bathroom to splash water on my face, feeling slightly better about the situation. When I re-entered the kitchen, everyone’s gaze fell on me.

Anna rushed forward and threw her arms around my waist. “I don’t hate you, Mom. I love you.” Anna hadn’t

hugged me since Henry died.

I knelt and hugged her tight. "I love you so much, Anna, and I'm sorry I yelled."

"It's okay, Mommy. I know I've been mean to you, it's just that..." Anna crumbled into tears.

"Everything is going to be okay, sweetheart." I met my daughter's gaze. "We're tough girls and we can do anything we set our minds to. Right?"

"Right." Anna sniffed.

Cody nosed his way between us, licking our tears away, causing us to laugh.

"Isn't anyone going to eat lunch?" Mom wiped away a tear.

After lunch, Dad, CeCe, and I drove the mile and a half to the shelter. My heart raced and my hands shook at the thought of meeting Wayne Woolley. Confrontation wasn't my strong suit. Hopefully, he'd be congenial.

"I'm glad you're both with me," I said.

"Don't worry. If he gives you any trouble, Dad can hold him while I clobber him with my stiletto."

I gave CeCe an incredulous look. "And why are you wearing stilettos to a dog kennel?"

"You never know who you might meet. But seriously, I once fought a man off with a shoe."

Now Dad looked incredulous. "Guess I worried about you for nothing all those years."

CeCe shrugged. "A girl has to be able to defend herself."

Dad turned into the empty gravel parking lot. "Why isn't anyone here? It's after one."

The three of us stepped up to the double glass doors. Dad pulled on each handle. Neither door opened.

“Clara, do you have the keys?” Dad asked.

“Yes. Just a second.” I took the master keys from my bag and unlocked the door. The stench smacked me in the nose the second I stepped into the lobby.

CeCe threw a hand over her mouth and nose. “Oh, my God.”

“Dad, I’m scared. I hate to see what the inside of the kennel looks like,” I said.

“Those animals need us. I’ll open the door slowly. If there’s a loose dog, we don’t want to get bit.”

At the front desk, we turned left down a corridor where three small, private viewing rooms were located on the left side. These rooms were designated for prospective adopters to get to know their future pet. The main kennel door was situated in the center of the hallway to our right.

CeCe and I stood to the side as Dad carefully opened the door and peered inside. The acrid smell intensified, but no dogs were loose. We stepped into the kennel, and I couldn’t believe my eyes. The squalid conditions made my stomach recoil, and I pinched my nose. CeCe gagged.

“I don’t think anybody’s been here for a few days,” Dad shouted, to be heard over the din.

Ten kennels lined each wall of the room. However, there must’ve been fifty dogs with two or three in each kennel. Some had open wounds.

Down the center, partially dividing the room, stood a workstation with a sink, counter, and cabinets. On the opposite side was a hose and faucet, flushable toilet bowl, and utility sink. A separate room behind the main kennel held over a dozen crates with even more dogs.

“These poor animals. What should we do?” I asked.

Dad peered around the room, shaking his head. "This is horrible." He turned to me. "Find dog food and bowls. They'll be less aggressive if we feed them first. Cecelia, look for gloves and masks. I'm going to take some photos and hook up a hose." I'll bet CeCe wished she'd worn sensible shoes.

CeCe found gloves, paper towels, and paper gowns, but no masks. We improvised by tearing up some gowns to cover our noses and mouths. I found plastic tubs filled with dog food and under a cabinet were dozens of metal bowls.

We started at kennel number one, holding three small dogs. Dad cracked open the door and slid in a bowl for each dog. After the dogs in the main kennel were fed, we moved to the other room.

"What do we do now?" CeCe asked.

Each kennel along the outside wall had dog doors to a small fenced outdoor area that opened to a large play yard. The dogs in the rest of the kennels and crates needed to be taken out on leashes.

"I'll go in and open the door to their outside area," Dad said. "While they're out, we can pick up the poop and mop the kennel floor. When we finish with them, you two can walk the others while I clean their cages."

"It'll take all day and most of them need baths." I couldn't wait to give Wayne Woolley a piece of my mind. How could he leave these poor animals in this wretched condition?

"You're right, Clara," Dad said. "Call your mother and have her phone those people she knows. Maybe some of them will come and help us."

Mom must've called in every favor because an hour later, people poured into the kennel to help us mop and bathe the dogs.

CHAPTER FOUR

Apparently, word had spread like wildfire that Clarabelle Colby, granddaughter of Clarabelle Grayson, had taken control of the shelter. As I surveyed the crowded room, I spotted Veronica, the waitress from the diner. She met my gaze and gestured for me to join her.

Next to Veronica stood a tall, slender man who looked to be in his early forties, with dark brown hair graying at the temples.

“This is our veterinarian, Dr. Nicholas Jansky,” Veronica said.

“Hello, Dr. Jansky. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’m happy you’re here, Mrs. Colby,” he said while shaking my hand. “I’d like to offer my services. Some of these dogs are in horrible condition.”

“I accept. We can discuss your fees another time. Please start wherever you feel you’re most needed.”

“Then I’ll get to work. And no fee, at least for now.”

“Thank you.”

Around six, Mom and Anna showed up with food and

beverages and laid it out in the conference room. I wasn't sure there'd be enough because more people kept arriving.

"Mom, Anna, thank you for bringing the food. How did you get here? You couldn't have walked and carried all this," I said.

"We came in Birdie," Mom said.

"You drove the RV?" CeCe asked.

"Yes, Cecelia. Don't look so shocked. Your dad couldn't be the sole driver on a tour of America."

"You never cease to amaze us." I gave Mom a hug. "I'll let everyone know."

I returned to the kennel, where people were milling about, chatting, or engaging with the dogs. Others were outside in the yard playing with them or on a walk. It was heartwarming to see the animals looking so much happier than when we first arrived.

I stood next to the exit and took a deep breath. "Can I have everyone's attention?" The room fell silent, except for a few woofs and yips. Over a dozen pairs of eyes fixed on me. I folded my hands to steady them and cleared my throat. "I want to thank everyone for coming to help. I know it's Sunday, and you probably had things to do, but it's much appreciated. My mom, whom most of you know, and my daughter, Anna, brought food and beverages. Please help yourselves." My hand trembled as I motioned toward the conference room. Beads of perspiration sprouted on my forehead and above my lips. I cleared my throat again, shoved my hair behind my ears, and stuck my hands in my pockets. "As you can see, there are a lot of dogs here—more than I expected. I'm going to need lots of help. There are seven sheets of paper on the front desk—one for each day of the

week. If you can volunteer, please sign the paper. Be sure to leave your phone number and times you'll be available. With your help, we can give these dogs the care and love they deserve. Lastly, I'm open to any suggestions on getting them adopted. Oh, and I need new board members. Thank you, again."

CeCe nudged me with her elbow. "Boy, Clara, I thought you were the quiet twin."

I blew out a breath and lifted my hair from behind my ears.

"Great speech, Mom. Can I walk a dog?"

"Not by yourself," I said.

"I'll go with her," CeCe said.

"Okay, but only around the building."

"Aunt CeCe, which one should we walk?"

"How about that one?" They leashed up a black standard poodle and headed out the side door.

A while later, I found a group of children standing wide-eyed, listening to Dad tell the story of how his gold pocket watch came into our family. I loved watching Dad describe the battle and how his ancestor saved his captain. He could get quite animated. I waited for a break in the story before I interrupted.

"Excuse me, Dad, have you seen Dr. Jansky?"

"He was in the medical room a little while ago."

"Thanks, Dad." I made my way around the building and found Dr. Jansky examining the teeth of a large yellow Labrador. I leaned on the doorframe. "How's Old Yeller doing?"

Dr. Jansky straightened, giving me a concerned look. "Old Yeller is a female and pregnant."

"More dogs. That's all we need."

“I’m afraid it’s more serious than that. Several of them are pregnant and a lot of them appear to be purebred. I think Woolley ran a puppy mill from this kennel.”

“A puppy mill?” I raised my hand to my forehead, feeling a little faint.

“Mrs. Colby? Are you alright?” Dr. Jansky’s deep brown eyes intently gazed into mine.

“I’m a little lightheaded.”

“When did you eat last?” He folded one arm across his middle and drew down on his scruff with his other hand. His head tilted while he ran a finger across a square jaw. Dr. Jansky’s scrutiny gave me the feeling I was being examined.

“Lunch. We’ve been here since twelve thirty.”

He flashed a glance at his watch. “It’s eight. My professional advice—eat some food your mother brought.”

“I will, but before you leave, tell me how to proceed with their healthcare.”

A booming male voice echoed through the building. My head whipped toward the main kennel, and I bolted. In the middle of the room, a beefy bald man, with tattoos covering every visible area of skin except his face, stood there, shouting. “I want everyone out of here. Who let you people in?” Our volunteers backed up as he circled the room, continuing his rant. “You have no right to be here. I’ll call the police.”

Dad stepped forward to face off with this menacing, red-faced man. “I’m Tucker Muller. My daughter is the new owner of this kennel. Who are you?”

I squeezed my way through the crowd and stood next to Dad.

“Wayne Woolley, director of this kennel, and I want you

people out now.” He raised his tattooed arm and pointed toward the exit.

Dad stood his ground. “We’re not going anywhere. You’re the one who’s leaving, or I’ll call the police and have you arrested for animal abuse.”

Woolley’s hands balled up into fists and I feared he’d punch Dad. Mabel was right about him, and I’d made up my mind to fire this man the second I stepped into the lobby. Nobody would treat my grandmother’s shelter like this.

I straightened my back and mustered my courage. “I’m Clara Colby. I own this kennel, and I’ve heard about you. Your reign as dictator is over. You’re fired. Get off the premises immediately.”

He aimed a finger at my face. “I have a signed contract with your grandmother. I’ll sue you.”

“Go ahead. My father took pictures of this place and the condition of the dogs when we first arrived. And where have you been? These animals were starving.”

His face grew redder. “I took some dogs to an adoption event in Minneapolis. The volunteers should’ve been taking care of them.”

“Give me the names of those volunteers.”

He glanced around. “Mabel Wright. She was in charge.”

“I talked to Mabel, and she told me you wouldn’t allow her or any of the other volunteers in here anymore. And I can see why. You didn’t want anyone to know how you treated these animals.”

He raised his fist, and I braced for the blow.

Dad pulled me aside. “Lay one finger on my daughter and I’ll kill you.” My gentle, sweet father leaned into Woolley, who outweighed Dad by fifty pounds. “Lou, call the police. I want to

press charges against this man.”

“Yes, Tucker.”

I hadn’t realized it before, but Woolley had two other men with him. One looked like an overgrown lanky teenager with his face covered in acne. The other resembled Woolley, but less stocky and older. Perhaps his brother? The one who looked like his brother stepped directly behind Dad and shoved him into Woolley. I watched in horror as Woolley punched Dad in the gut.

“Oomph!” Dad gasped, folded his arms across his middle, and fell forward.

Woolley gripped Dad’s arms holding him up. In a low growl Woolley spoke into Dad’s ear. “Press charges and you’re a dead man.” He released Dad’s arms, letting him drop to the floor.

Mom shrieked, “Tucker!” She rushed to his side.

“Daddy.” CeCe fell to her knees on his other side.

Anna followed CeCe, but I pulled her behind me.

Woolley turned on the crowd. “You saw him. He lunged and threatened to kill me. I had to defend myself.”

I stood there, trembling, and glaring into his cold black eyes. “Get out and never come back!”

Woolley leaned forward and stuck a finger dangerously close to my nose. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer. I have an ironclad contract.”

I refused to back down. “And you’ll be hearing from the police.”

He faced the crowd again. “All you people better leave. These are my dogs, and you’re trespassing.” Woolley turned back to me and took a step forward.

Defiantly, I matched his hard stare.

“I’ll be back, Clara.” His lips curled into a sardonic grin, and he blasted out a maniacal laugh.

The reek of whiskey and sweat turned my stomach.

“Let’s go.” Woolley and his entourage stormed out.

I knelt next to my father. “Daddy, are you alright?”

“Where did he hit you?” Dr. Jansky asked and knelt next to me.

“Under my ribs,” Dad said in a shaky voice.

“I’m calling the paramedics,” Mom said.

“Lou, I’ll be okay.” Dad tried to sit up but curled back to the floor with his arms folded over his abdomen.

“Dr. Jansky, should he go to the hospital?” I asked.

“You should get checked out, Mr. Muller,” Dr. Jansky said. “There could be internal bleeding.”

“Don’t argue with me, Tucker,” Mom said. “I’m calling.”

“She worries too much. Clara, Cecelia, help me onto a chair.”

“Coming through. Everybody out of the way.” Veronica shoved a chair through the crowd. “Here ya go, Mr. M. That Woolley is an evil man. I’d be careful if I were you, Clara. He’s bound to retaliate. A man like that doesn’t just go away. My ex was like that. Luckily, he died. I’ll get you a glass of water, Mr. M.”

“Thank you, Veronica,” Dad said.

With CeCe on one side and me on the other, we helped our dad onto the chair.

“The paramedics are on the way.” Mom smoothed Dad’s hair and rubbed his arm. “How are you feeling, dear?”

“I’ll be alright, Lou. Please don’t worry.”

“I’ll worry if I want to. I love you, Tucker.” Mom’s eyes watered.

Our volunteers surrounded Dad looking concerned.

“Everybody, I’m fine. It’s late. You should all head home,” Dad said.

“Here you go, Mr. M.” Veronica handed Dad a paper cup filled with water. “Mr. M’s right. The animals are good for tonight. If you signed up to volunteer for tomorrow, just come on in.” She faced me. “When we changed shifts, Mabel said she would be here early tomorrow morning.”

“I’m meeting her at six,” I said.

“Ever since Mabel’s husband and son died in a car accident, she’s had a hard time,” Veronica said. “Not long after their deaths, she started volunteering here. Said it gave her life a purpose.”

“Poor Mabel. I understand about needing a purpose,” I said. After Henry died, I poured myself into mothering Anna. I needed to know where she was every minute of the day. “Veronica, would you like to join the board?”

“You want me?” Her eyes widened. “For real?”

“Yes. I think you have the right stuff, and I’d love to have you.”

“Well, ain’t that something.” Veronica straightened and lifted her chin. “I’m gonna be on a board of directors.”

“Does that mean yes?” I asked.

“You bet. When’s the first meeting?”

“I’ll let you know.”

The paramedics arrived and checked Dad, but he felt better and refused to go to the hospital against Mom’s pleading.

“Lou, stop. I’m fine. He just knocked the wind out of me.” Dad leaned over and kissed Mom. “Let’s go home and get some rest.”

“Mom, take Anna home. I want to stay and lock up,” I said.

“Clara, you will not be here alone. I won’t have it. Not with that man out there lurking.”

“Not to worry, Mrs. Muller. I still have several dogs I want to check. I’ll stay and lock up with Clara,” Dr. Jansky said.

“I’m staying, too,” CeCe said. “While Dr. Jansky checks the dogs, Clara and I can search for a copy of this contract Woolley mentioned.”

“Dr. Jansky, make sure the girls get safely into their car.” We’re thirty-seven and Mom still calls us girls. “I don’t want them walking outside alone.”

“I will. Now, I believe I left off with Old Yeller.” Dr. Jansky smiled.

Was there a Mrs. Jansky?

Grandma used to take in cats and kittens, but now those rooms were empty. Heaven only knows what he did with them. Probably turned the little things loose. No money in kitten mills. Eventually, I’d get them running again, but first I needed to deal with the dogs. Maybe I could use the cat rooms to house some dogs until the shelter was under control. I took a deep breath and reminded myself to focus on one thing at a time. First, find the contract.

CeCe and I searched every file cabinet and cupboard in the place—nothing.

“I don’t know, Clara. It could be up at the house. We haven’t had time to search through grandma’s files.”

“Can you and Mom look around the house tomorrow? After I meet with Mabel, I need to register Anna for school.”

“Sure,” CeCe said.

“Afterward, I want to call the volunteers who said they were interested in joining the board. The sooner we set up a board of directors, the sooner we can get these dogs adopted.” I looked

around. "We should clean up the conference room and put the food away before we leave."

"Clara." CeCe Said.

"Hmm?"

"Why haven't you asked me to join the board?"

"Oh. Well, I'm never sure how long you intend to stay. If you want to be on the board, you need to make a commitment to come to every meeting and contribute to the shelter."

"My modeling days are over. I need to be here with you and Anna. Besides, I like the scenery." CeCe's gaze followed Dr. Jansky as he passed by, carrying a terrier mix.

"Okay, you're on the board. Did you see a checkbook or savings book for the shelter?"

"No. That rat man probably robbed this place blind, just like Enzo."

"I'll add the bank to my list of places to visit tomorrow." And I thought running a shelter would be easy.

Dr. Jansky stepped into the conference room. "I'm done for tonight. We're going to need several whelping boxes in a quiet, warm location. There are at least three dogs ready to give birth in the next few days."

"Would the cat rooms work?" I asked.

"Long as we section off each dog. Many of them are microchipped. Probably stolen and brought here for breeding."

"Stolen? My God! We need to get them back to their owners. I think I'm going to be sick."

"You should probably call the police," Dr. Jansky said.

"I'll call tomorrow. I'm exhausted." Woolley's words echoed in my head. "Press charges and you're a dead man." What was I going to do? "Thank you for your help today.

How do I set up a whelping box?"

Dr. Jansky grinned. "I'll come back tomorrow evening and help set them up."

"You're so nice." CeCe flashed her paparazzi smile. "Without you, I'm sure we would've been lost today."

"Thank you, Miss—"

"CeCe. CeCe Muller."

"Thank you, CeCe. I used to be the vet here for your grandmother, a lovely woman. Such a shame Woolley scammed her. This was a wonderful place before he took over." Dr. Jansky shook his head and slipped into his jacket. "Are you both ready to leave?"

"Almost. Just want to finish up here and turn off the lights," I said.

"I'll meet you outside," Dr. Jansky said.

CeCe watched him walk out the front door. "What a handsome man. Are you going to ask him to join the board? I wouldn't mind doing business with him."

"I hadn't thought about it. I'll ask, but he might be too busy. And don't get any ideas. You don't even know if he's married or has children."

"He never mentioned having to get home to his wife."

"Make sure before you flirt, or his wife may come after you."

CeCe rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mother Clara."

"Just be sure is all I'm saying." I covered the leftover sandwiches and placed them in the fridge. "Will you check the back door to be sure it's locked? And remind me to add locksmith to my list. I don't want Woolley in here anymore." I switched off the light. "I'll meet you by the front door."

I walked through the kennel to be sure the dogs were set

for the night. They all appeared to be content and were curled up on their little beds. “Goodnight, guys. I’ll never let anyone abuse you like that again.” I switched off the light and walked to the lobby.

“All locked,” CeCe said. “Let’s go home. I need a shower and food.”

I sighed. “I’m too exhausted to eat. I just want a hot shower and go to bed.”

Five a.m. Monday morning, I smacked the snooze and smacked it again one more time. After the second buzz, I dragged myself out of bed. My body ached and my stomach growled. “All right. Hush, I’ll feed you.”

While I waited for the coffee to finish, I fried two eggs and popped a piece of bread in the toaster.

Mom entered through the back door. “Morning, Clara.”

“Hi, Mom. How’s Dad?”

“He’s sore. That was awful. I never thought inheriting the shelter would be this dangerous. I think you should sell it all.” Mom made a sweeping motion with her arm.

I’d never seen my mother frightened. She appeared disheveled, with dark circles rimming her eyes, and a furrowed forehead reflected her worry.

“When I saw your father punched...I...I...” Mom covered her face as tears trickled from her hazel eyes.

I wrapped my arms around her. “I know, Mom. It was awful. I’ll call the police today.”

Mom’s head snapped up and she stepped back. “NO! You can’t. You heard what he said to your father. If anything happened to him, I’d die.”

I understood how Mom felt. After Henry died, I wanted to

die, too, but I had Anna and somehow learned to survive.

“Nothing is going to happen to Dad. Why don’t you two leave on your second honeymoon. CeCe and I can handle the shelter.”

Mom vehemently shook her head. “No way are we leaving our daughters and Anna here with that lunatic on the loose.”

I set a cup of coffee in front of Mom and sat next to her with my plate of food.

“Thank you, dear.”

I shoved a helping of eggs into my mouth. “I’m meeting Mabel at the shelter.”

“Clara, don’t talk with food in your mouth.”

I swallowed and sipped some coffee. “The lunatic is probably long gone.”

“Be careful. Take Cody with you.”

“I’ll leave Cody here to keep you safe.”

Mom’s eyes popped wide. “You think he’ll be back, don’t you?”

“No, but Cody can see you’re sad. He’ll cheer you up. I asked CeCe to check through Grandma’s papers and try to find the contract he mentioned. Will you help her?”

“Of course.”

“Also, make sure Anna is up and ready for school. I’ll be back around seven thirty to take her to get registered.”

“I’ll make sure she’s up and fed.” She rested a hand on my arm, her eyes filled with concern. “Please, Clara, be careful.”

“I will.” I squeezed her hand and kissed her cheek. “See you later.”

Storms had rolled through overnight, and the dark sky lingered. Next to the front door stood Grandma’s brass umbrella shaped stand. Another item I wanted to keep.

Several umbrellas rested inside. I chose a black one that reminded me of the one Gene Kelly used in the movie *Singing in the Rain*.

I stepped onto the covered front porch and popped open the umbrella. A steady rain continued, but the severe storm warning had ended. Driving in thunderstorms always made me jumpy. On the short drive to the shelter, I considered Mom's concern about calling the authorities, but what choice did I have? Puppy mill, dognapping, the man was evil. He had to be reported. Anna's sweet face floated through my mind and how much she fought me on moving here.

Dear God, what have I gotten us into?

When I pulled into the lot, I spotted Mabel's car parked near the front door. The rain intensified, and I grabbed Gene Kelly's umbrella. I dashed for the entrance, expecting Mabel to follow but realized she wasn't in her car.

I stuck the key in the door, but it wasn't locked. Immediately, a chill ran through my entire body. Mabel's purse sat on the counter. But where was she, and how did she get in?

"Mabel?"

Barks and howls intensified.

I drew in a breath and called again. "Mabel!" An overwhelming feeling of doom gripped my chest. Where was she?

I held the umbrella like a sword and stepped toward the kennel room. I focused on the door handle. Every fiber of my being said, run, run now. But I couldn't. I needed to open that door. I watched my trembling hand reach for the handle. It was like a horror movie where the camera zooms in on the person's hand and you want to shout at the TV, "What are

you doing? Don't open the door!" But my hand wasn't listening.

I cracked open the door, screamed and leapt out of my skin when three dogs charged forward. "Okay, okay. They escaped their kennel, that's all." I gulped air, trying to calm myself. The three little dogs were mutts, and they kept jumping up my legs.

"Sorry, guys. I can't pick you up right now." I took one step into the kennel. "Mabel?" I said in a low voice. Still no answer.

The barking pierced my ears. Several kennel doors stood open, and some of the pregnant dogs were missing. My brain tried to make sense of what I was seeing. Maybe Mabel took them to the yard. In the rain? Not likely. I crept down the aisle on the verge of hyperventilating. The second-to-last kennel door was open, and Old Yeller was gone. The last kennel housed three large dogs, but no noses poked through the chain-link door. I couldn't look. But I had to.

"Mabel?" I took one step and then another. My eyes scanned everywhere except inside the last kennel. I attempted to convince myself it was nothing—just look, it would be okay. I took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and turned my head toward the kennel.

"MABEL!" The scream coming from my throat echoed throughout the room, silencing the dogs.

The room spun. I was close to passing out. My stomach lurched. I bolted to the sink and threw up.

"Get it together." Mabel was dead, and I needed to call the police. I leaned the umbrella against the wall and pulled my cell from my back jeans pocket. My sweaty, shaking fingers fumbled, and I dropped it. In horror, I watched my phone

skitter across the floor and under the kennel door right next to Mabel.

“Oh, my God. What do I do now?” I stood there frozen, staring at her lifeless body. She lay on her left side in a fetal position. Her arms were tied behind her back with a leash.

“Desk phone. There’s a desk phone.” I dashed to the lobby and picked up the receiver. No dial tone. Either Woolley never paid the bill, or someone cut the wire. I needed to get my phone.

“Keep it together. You’re okay. Just go in there and get your cell phone.” It helped me to talk aloud.

The three little dogs cowered in a corner inside the main kennel. My screams must’ve frightened them. Okay, open the kennel door. Touch nothing. Focus on the phone. Oh God, I peered at her face. The killer stuck a milk bone in her mouth. I fought the urge to throw up again.

I needed my phone, but my hands shook harder than a leaf in a windstorm. Finally, I got hold of it. Two seconds later, it rang. I fell backward against the wall, tossing the phone in the air. It landed next to her face. I reached for it. Oh God, they put a dog collar around her neck! I grabbed the phone and flew out of the kennel. The caller ID read “Mom”.

“MOTHER! Oh, Mother. Someone killed Mabel.”

“Clara, get out of there!”

A blow, followed by a sharp pain to the back of my neck, sent me reeling forward onto the floor.

CHAPTER FIVE

My eyes fluttered open. The three little dogs surrounded my head, licking my face and whining. I pushed onto my knees. The back of my head throbbed, and everything appeared fuzzy. My umbrella lay on the floor next to me with a broken handle. The lobby door flung open, and Dad charged in.

“Clara! My God. Are you alright?” Dad knelt next to me. Intense anguish clouded his face.

“Daddy, be careful. Somebody hit me on the back of the neck.”

“Let’s get out of here. The police are on the way.” Dad took my arm and helped me to my feet.

The room spun, and I swayed.

“Can you walk?” Dad asked.

“Yes.” I leaned on him as he rushed me out of the shelter and into Birdie. I sat on the small couch behind the driver’s seat. “Dad, it’s horrible.” My voice shook. “Poor Mabel. Why would somebody kill her?” I gingerly touched the back of my head and felt a bump.

“I don’t know. The authorities will figure it out.” Dad sat

beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Where's your phone? We need to call your mother."

"I must've dropped it when I blacked out. Can't you use yours?"

"I can't find mine, and my watch is missing too."

Sirens wailed, and the roar of several vehicles barreling onto the gravel parking lot gave me a sense of relief.

"Thank God, the police are here," I said.

Rapid footsteps crunching on gravel approached the RV. Three sharp raps on the door gave me a start. "Come out slowly with your hands in the air," a voice commanded.

I turned to Dad.

"It's okay, they're only being careful. We'll do what they say." Dad cautiously opened the door. "We're coming out. There's only myself and my daughter. No need for alarm."

Several sheriff's cars, a fire truck, and paramedics surrounded Birdie. A state trooper sped into the parking area, siren blaring. Two officers pointed guns at us as we stepped out.

"Put your hands behind your head," one of the two said.

"We called the police," I said. "Why are we being treated like criminals?"

"Shut up and do what you're told," the other officer said.

Dad slowly raised his hands and placed them on the back of his head. "Clara, do what the officer says."

I glared at the officer and placed my hands behind my head. The officers spun us around and handcuffed us behind our backs.

"Someone hit me on the head."

"Settle down. We'll get your statements later," one of the two officers said.

After he frisked me, he shoved me into one of the police vehicles. The other officer led Dad to another car. What the heck kind of police department was this? I could have a concussion. But did they care?

We sat in the vehicles while Barny and crew stormed the shelter. Finally, a man in a dark gray suit opened the door, helped me out, and removed the handcuffs.

"It's about time. I'm injured." I rubbed my wrists. "I want to see the paramedic." Tears burned my eyes.

"Yes, ma'am." He led me to the paramedic's truck. "I'm Detective Peterson, and you are?"

"Mrs. Clara Colby. I own this shelter. Where's my dad? Your other officer cuffed him and put him in another vehicle."

"Detective Harris is talking to him. My guys didn't cuff him. Those were Sheriff Polk's deputies. I'm going to need a complete statement after you get checked out."

"Clara! Clara!" Mom called and waved from behind a yellow tape. CeCe and Anna stood next to her.

"That's my family. Please let them through."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Colby. This is a crime scene. Until we have the place secured, nobody crosses the line. Now, please let the paramedic check you out."

Fifteen minutes later, with an ice pack on the back of my head and neck, I sat in the back of another police car. Detective Peterson started asking questions, but I interrupted.

"Please let me into the shelter to take care of the dogs. They need to be fed and let out."

"I can't let you back in there until the crime scene investigators finish and the body's removed. Then you can go

back in with supervision.”

“I don’t mind being supervised if your officers lend a hand. In case you haven’t noticed, we have a lot of dogs.”

“Yes, I noticed. I could have them taken into animal control.”

“Why would you do that?”

“As you said, there are a lot of dogs here, more than this shelter can hold. And many of them look like they’re purebred. Those breeds don’t end up in rural shelters.”

“You seem to know a lot about dogs and shelters.”

“I know enough.”

My gaze shifted to the sight of the coroner removing Mabel’s body. “Poor Mabel.” The shock of the morning’s events hit me. “I feel sick. I’d like to be with my family.”

“Thought you wanted to feed the dogs.”

“I do, but can’t I go to my daughter first?”

“Alright, but don’t go far. My guys are working inside, and I still need your statement.”

“Can I take my family into Birdie to rest while we wait?”

“Do you mean the RV?”

“Yes, it belongs to my parents.”

He nodded. “I’ll walk with you.”

“Do you think I’ll make a run for it?”

He smiled. “I only want to let the deputy know it’s okay to let your family through the line.”

“Oh., thank you.” We headed toward my family when I realized the other police car was gone. “Detective, where’s my father?”

“We took your father in for questioning.”

“Why? You didn’t take me in for questioning.”

“I can’t discuss it with you.”

I picked up my pace to meet Mom, CeCe, and Anna at the line. A sizeable crowd had gathered on the other side of the yellow tape.

“Deputy, you can let these three through.”

“Clara.” Mom threw her arms around my neck, and I cringed. “My darling, I’ve been so worried about you. Are you hurt? Where’s your father?”

Anna engulfed my waist on the left and CeCe wrapped her arms around both of us.

“Let’s go in Birdie and talk. I don’t want anyone to overhear us,” I said.

“But Clara—”

“Mom, please.” We clung to each other on the way to Birdie. Once inside, I closed the curtains. “I need water.”

Mom brought me a bottle of spring water from the refrigerator. “Now, tell me, where’s your father?”

After I took a long drink of the cool water, I said, “They took him in for questioning.”

Mom’s eyes flew wide. “What? Why?”

“The detective wouldn’t tell me.”

“I don’t understand.” Mom turned pale. “I need to get to the police department.”

“You need to stay with Anna.” I took another drink of water. “When the crime scene investigators finish, I need to take care of the dogs.”

“I’ll help you,” CeCe said.

“I’ll help, too,” Anna said.

“Anna, I appreciate the offer, but I don’t want you in there right now. It’s best if you stay with Grandma.”

“But I want to be with you.” Anna’s eyes watered.

I touched her cheek and smiled, hoping to calm her. “The

detective won't let you in there." I turned to Mom. "Have you heard from Aunt Gertie?"

"I've called several times, but she never answers."

"Maybe she already left to be with Ellie," I said.

"I saw Aunt Gertie last night," Anna said.

"Where?" Mom asked.

"When Aunt CeCe and I walked Blackie, the poodle."

"CeCe, did you see her?" I asked.

"No. Anna, when did you see her? We were together the whole time."

"It was when you were picking up poop," Anna said. "A van pulled into the lot. Those three men were in there. When they opened the side of the van, I saw Aunt Gertie. It sounded like she was arguing with the man in the front seat. I waved, but she slammed the door. Then the men got out and went inside. Aunt Gertie stayed in the van."

"Are you sure it was Gertie?" Mom asked.

"I'm sure. She was wearing the same dress she had on when we went to visit her."

"Why didn't you tell me?" CeCe asked.

"You were complaining about all the poop you picked up. Then you started walking back to the shelter. I was going to tell you, Mom, but then the whole fight happened, and Grandpa got punched." Anna's face fell and tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I forgot."

"Don't cry, honey. The last few days have been crazy." I drew Anna in for a hug.

"Why would Gertie be with those men?" Mom asked.

"Clara, tell the detective. I hope she's alright."

Anna wiped the tears off her face. "She looked angry, not scared."

“Mom, call Ellie,” CeCe said. “Maybe she’s heard from her.”

We jumped at the sound of a hard rap on the door.

“Mrs. Colby. It’s Detective Peterson. You can go into the shelter now.”

“Just a moment, Detective.” I turned to Mom. “Please stay here with Anna. I’ll work as fast as I can. Then we can go to the station.”

“Alright, but I’m going to call our lawyer.”

“Good idea. Anna, take care of Grandma.”

“I will. Be careful, Mom.” Anna wrapped her arms around me again. “I love you.”

“I love you too, honey. With the police officers here, nothing is going to happen to me.”

“I’m going with you. I don’t care what anybody says.” CeCe swung open the door, stepped out, and approached the detective. “I’ll be helping feed and walk dogs.”

The detective narrowed his eyes and glared at CeCe.

“Detective, this is my sister, Cecelia Muller.”

His eyes shifted toward me. “I can’t allow that, Mrs. Colby. I haven’t taken your statement yet.”

“If you want to ask her questions,” CeCe jammed her hands on her hips and inclined her chin, “she’ll need her attorney present, and I *will* help her.”

He ignored CeCe and kept his focus on me. “Mrs. Colby. If you don’t let me question you now, I’ll take you into the station, and you can call your attorney there. Then I’ll have animal control round up the dogs and shut down your shelter.”

“Couldn’t we compromise?” I asked. “Let CeCe help me feed the dogs, then I’ll go down to the station and give you a

complete statement. No attorney.”

He scrutinized the four of us with Anna’s arms wrapped around my waist. “Alright, I’ll leave a few men here to watch you. When you’re done, they’ll bring you in.”

“Is my sister a suspect?” CeCe asked.

“Everyone’s a suspect until we apprehend the murderer. You two wait by the shelter door. I’ll send over a couple of officers, and I’ll see you later, Mrs. Colby.”

Ten minutes later, CeCe and I began feeding the dogs, giving them fresh water, and taking them out. The events of the morning had some of them cowering in the back of their kennels. Others paced in circles, panting. If only they could tell me what they knew. It must’ve been horrible for them to witness a person they trusted killed. Who could’ve murdered Mabel? My prime suspect was Woolley. But why would Aunt Gertie be with them?

CeCe glanced over her shoulder. The officer assigned to watch us was preoccupied with a German Shepherd puppy. “You can’t give a statement without an attorney,” she said. “It would be foolish.”

“I gave my word.”

“I don’t care. They took Dad into the station without telling you. We don’t know what kind of evidence they found. I’m sure Dad called an attorney by now.”

“Shh. He’s watching us,” I said.

“Are you two almost done?” the young officer asked.

“It might go faster if you helped instead of playing with the puppy,” CeCe said.

“Not my job, lady.”

“Almost done,” I said.

“Good. I’m hungry,” the officer said.

“There’s food in the kitchen. You can grab something from the fridge,” I said.

“I’m not supposed to let you two out of my sight.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.” CeCe flashed her smile. “Help yourself. We’ll still be here.”

The young officer blushed and smiled back. “You look familiar. Are you famous or something?”

“You’re an observant detective,” CeCe said.

“I’m not a detective yet, but I will be.” His smile turned into a grin. Poor man was smitten.

“I think you should get promoted immediately.” CeCe placed a hand on her hip and slightly bent forward, allowing her cleavage to pop out a bit more. “Get yourself some food. We’ll just be here cleaning kennels.”

“Well, okay. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Take your time. And get a soda, too.” CeCe gave a little wave.

Unable to take his gaze off CeCe, he tripped over the door frame on the way out.

CeCe rushed to my side the second the door closed. “Why didn’t you tell the detective about Aunt Gertie? She could be in trouble.”

“You honestly believe Aunt Gertie’s in trouble? If something was wrong, why did she slam the door shut when Anna saw her? No, I think she’s involved somehow.”

“You think she killed Mabel?” CeCe asked.

“She’s definitely on my suspect list.”

“But Aunt Gertie said she would’ve fired them.”

“It’s not what people say, it’s what they do,” I said.

“Why do you think they took Dad away?”

“I don’t know. But I’m going to find out.”

Before I let the officer take me down to the station, I gave CeCe explicit instructions. “Above all, I need you to take care of Anna. Make sure she eats something. After she’s settled, get a hold of Veronica. Tell her to make sure there are volunteers available to take care of the dogs today. Then, call Dr. Jansky. If he doesn’t already know what happened, tell him. He was going to come here tonight, anyway.” I handed CeCe the keys to the shelter. “Only give these to Veronica. I trust her.”

“What about Mom?” CeCe asked.

“Here are the keys to my vehicle. Let Mom drive you and Anna home in my SUV. She can drive it to the police station. I know Mom won’t leave until she sees Dad. We sure need another car.”

“What else should I do? And what about Birdie?”

“Dad has the keys. I guess it has to stay here for now. When you get home, search the house. Grandma must have something about Woolley. A resume, employment application—”

“A RAP sheet ... don’t look at me like I’m crazy. Grandma might’ve hired a PI and found out something.”

Maybe the hospital switched me at birth. “Okay, whatever. See what you can find.”

“Mrs. Colby, we need to go,” the officer said.

“Alright, I’m ready.”

“Call me as soon as you can. I’m worried about you and Dad.” CeCe threw her arms around my neck. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. Please don’t cry. Be strong for Anna.” I kissed my sister on the cheek and left with the officer.

An hour later, I sat in a little nondescript room facing two detectives—Peterson, whom I’d met earlier, and Harris, the

one who interviewed Dad.

“What happened yesterday?” Harris asked.

“Where’s my dad?”

“He’s in another room. Now, tell us what happened yesterday,” Peterson said.

“I need to see my father. Did he call a lawyer?”

“Mrs. Colby, this is the way it works. We ask the questions, you answer them,” Peterson said.

“Not until I see my father. And I want a lawyer.”

“We had an understanding,” Peterson said.

“I thought it over. A lawyer and my father or I’m leaving.”

Harris leapt to his feet and slammed his fist on the table. “Now you listen to me,” he said, leaning forward, presenting a menacing posture.

I shrank backward into my chair, terrified that the bulky man would reach out and grab me.

“Unless you want to spend the night in jail, you’ll start answering questions,” Harris said through gritted teeth. His lips slightly lifted as his intense gaze continued to intimidate.

I straightened and met his hard stare. “Don’t you threaten me,” I shot back, trying to sound tough. “I know my rights, and I’m not answering questions without a lawyer present.”

“Both of you calm down,” Peterson said. “This isn’t getting us anywhere,”

“I want to see my father.”

“We charged him with the murder of Mabel Wright.” Harris smirked. “He’s being processed,” he said.

“Are you insane? He didn’t kill Mabel. And do you think my own father struck me on the back of the neck?” I glared at him.

“Wouldn’t be the first time a perp injured himself or had

someone do it to throw us off.” The smug look on Harris’s face made me sick.

“This is a nightmare,” I said more to myself than them.

“We need your statement, then you can go,” Peterson said.

“Then get me a lawyer. And I want my phone.”

“It’s evidence. You can use our phone to call your lawyer.”

Peterson shifted his eyes and nodded at Harris.

After Harris left the room, I said, “I don’t have my lawyer’s number because I don’t have my phone. I’ll call my sister. She can call my lawyer.”

Harris returned with a landline phone and plugged it into the wall. “We’ll be back in a few minutes,” he said.

When Peterson opened the door, I heard Mom’s voice.

“I demand to see my husband. You can’t keep me from him. This is ludicrous. Tucker wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

I stood and followed them out the door. “Mom?”

“Clara. Oh, Clara.” Mom rushed forward.

Peterson stuck out his arm, blocking my way. “Mrs. Colby, you need to stay in there.”

“Either arrest me or get out of the way.”

He sighed and dropped his arm.

I wrapped my arms around my mother. Her body trembled uncontrollably, and her shoulders shook from sobbing.

Speaking in half sentences, Mom crumbled into me. “How could they? Tucker couldn’t. Clara. Help me.”

Being thin and a little shorter than me, I practically carried her to a chair. “Somebody call the paramedics. My mother needs medical attention.”

A female officer handed Mom a cup of water. Mom took the cup and tried to raise it to her lips but spilled some on her blouse.

I placed my hands around hers to steady the cup. “Easy, Mom. Small sips. That’s right.”

Mom’s red-rimmed eyes peered up. “I don’t know what to do.” Her sweet face aged before my eyes and tears dripped onto her blouse, adding more water spots.

“Did you call your lawyer?”

“Yes. He’s calling a colleague he knows in Madison. He should be here in a couple of hours. Clara, they arrested your father. They think he killed Mabel.”

I knelt and brushed Mom’s hair away from her face. “We’ll find out who did this. I won’t rest until Dad’s free.”

She placed a hand on her forehead. “I’m not feeling well.”

“I’ll call you a cab. You need rest.”

“I’m not leaving until I see Tucker. I’ll sit here all night if I must.” Her face crumbled again. “We were going on a second honeymoon. How could this have happened?” My strong mother was falling to pieces.

I pulled Mom into my arms again and she buried her face in my shoulder. “I love you, Mom.” I kissed the top of her head. “Be right back. I need to talk to the detective. Drink more water.”

Detectives Peterson and Harris stood inside a small office. The name on the door read Lt. Manning.

“Detective Peterson, may I speak to you?”

He turned to face me. This was the first time I even noticed what he looked like. With his suit coat off and shirt sleeves rolled up, I noticed a bit of a pouch. His oval clean-shaven face had a slight double chin. He appeared to be over six feet and I guessed his age to be around forty. His thick, light brown hair was parted on the right, and combed back. Overall, he was attractive.

“Yes, Mrs. Colby?”

What was I thinking? CeCe must be rubbing off on me. I snapped out of my daydreaming. “Please let my mother visit my father. She’s going to end up in the hospital if you refuse.”

“Mrs. Colby, I told you—”

“I know what you said but look at her.” He followed my gaze toward Mom sitting on a chair, pale, crying, and wringing her hands. I looked up at him. “Have a heart, Detective. Do you want her to collapse in your station? And all because you won’t allow her a few minutes with her husband.”

He peered at me and sighed. “Fifteen minutes. But only your mother, not you. You haven’t given me your statement.”

“Thank you.”

“Bring her to room B.” He pointed to a room across the hall. “You can stay with her until I bring in your father.”

I rushed back to where Mom sat, rocking back and forth. She peered up, with a look of hope on her face.

“Good news. You can visit with Dad for fifteen minutes.”

“Right now?”

“Yes. Can you stand?”

“I’ll try.”

I took Mom by the arm to help her up. She wobbled. “Lean on me.” I wrapped my arm around her waist.

Mom placed a hand on her forehead. “I’m dizzy.”

“You need food and rest. After you talk to Dad, I’m sending you home.”

We waited twenty minutes for them to bring Dad into room B.

Mom charged Dad the second the door opened. “Tucker. What did they do to you?”

“Step back for a moment, Mrs. Muller.” Detective

Peterson sat Dad at the far side of the table and released the right handcuff, attaching it to a bolt on the table. He then cuffed Dad's legs to the chair.

"Is this necessary?" I asked.

"Protocol, Mrs. Colby. Mrs. Muller, please remain on the other side of the table. No touching. We'll be watching." He pointed to the camera attached to the corner of the wall. "You have fifteen minutes." Peterson opened the door. "Mrs. Colby." He motioned for me to leave the room.

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you, too, Clara." His reassuring smile didn't quell my anxiety.

"Mrs. Colby, I'm taking you back into room A." Peterson used his badge to open the door. "Call your sister."

"Detective, when my mom's finished talking to Dad, may I speak with her? I'm worried she'll try to drive home. This has affected her physically."

"I'll let you see her for a few minutes, and an officer can drive her home. Anything else?"

"Yes, my dad's lawyer is driving here from Madison. I'd like him to represent me during my statement."

"Alright. When he gets here, I'll direct him to you first, then to your father. Would you like something to drink or eat? I don't need you getting ill, too."

"I am shaky, and I have a horrendous headache. A bottle of water and a sandwich would help. I'll pay for everything, but I've lost my purse along the way."

"Don't worry about that now. What kind of sandwich would you like?"

"Turkey on whole wheat."

"I'll order it now."

“Thank you. It’s very kind.”

He nodded and left.

I picked up the receiver, ready to push the buttons, but couldn’t remember CeCe’s number. The drawback of having your contacts on a cell. Once they’re programmed, you never have to remember the number again. I’d have to wait for Mom. I placed the receiver back on the phone cradle.

While I waited, I couldn’t get the sight of Mabel lying on the floor of the kennel out of my head. Her frozen terrified look with a milk bone sticking out of her mouth made me sick again. Could I even eat a sandwich? The door opened, and Mom stepped into the room. Her eyes and nose were red, and cheeks wet from tears.

I rushed to her side, engulfing her in a hug. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll be okay now that I’ve seen Tucker.” She blew her nose. “Your father, he’s so strong. He tried to comfort me when I should’ve comforted him.” She pulled another tissue from her jacket pocket and dabbed her eyes.

“Did he say why they think he killed Mabel?”

“They found his watch gripped in one of her hands and his cell phone...” She crumbled into tears.

“What about his phone?”

Mom shook her head and squeezed her eyes closed. “There was a text message telling Mabel to be there at five. And another text to Woolley with a picture of Mabel dead.” Mom’s sweet face contorted into terror. “Clara, I’m frightened.” Her body shook.

I pulled her to me and tried to calm her. “It’ll be okay. We’ll get through this. Did they set bail?”

Mom took a step back, reaching for a chair to steady

herself. “He has a bail hearing tomorrow morning. And what’s keeping that attorney?” Her hand tightened around the strap of her purse, and she flung it onto the table, landing with a resounding thud.

“He’ll be here soon. Give me the keys to the SUV so I can drive home after I’m done. Detective Peterson is having an officer drive you home now.”

She looked confused. “Why don’t I wait for you?”

“It could be a long wait. I don’t think you’re up for that.”

“But I’d rather be with you.”

“Mom, let the officer drive you. When you get home, CeCe can fix you something to eat. Then take something and rest. We have a long road ahead. You don’t want to get sick, do you? Dad needs us to be strong.”

“You’re right, Clara. I need to be strong for Tucker. But what about the attorney?”

“I can’t leave until I give my statement and I’m not doing that until the attorney gets here. Oh, and I need CeCe’s phone number. They confiscated my cell.”

Mom handed me the keys and her phone. I copied down CeCe’s number and handed it back.

Detective Peterson opened the door. “Mrs. Muller, a car is waiting to take you home.”

“Go on, Mom. I love you.”

Mom reached out to hug me again and whispered in my ear, “Find out who did this. We can’t live without your father.” She kissed my cheek and walked out the door.